

REPORT OF FACT FINDING REVIEW

Randolph Community Middle School

Randolph Public Schools

Executive Summary

There are a number of significant weaknesses in the practices at the Randolph Community Middle School (RCMS) that in the judgment of the Fact Finding (FF) team, have led to low student performance. Priority areas of focus exist across each of the five domains. Improvement efforts at RCMS must begin with the creation of a vision for improvement, the development of a sound plan for improvement and the establishment of related initiatives to support improvement efforts. This requires increased support and guidance from the district, which has been limited in the past.

Domain I: Curriculum and Instruction

RCMS does not have a curriculum that is aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. As a result, students have not received access to the necessary content and/or skills to perform proficiently. The quality and rigor of teaching practices vary at the school. Neither standardized nor formative assessments are utilized consistently to measure student achievement or adjust classroom instruction. The institution of a standards-based curriculum is critical to the future achievement of RCMS students. Training to advance teaching strategies and ensure consistent implementation of the curriculum will be beneficial. These practices must be monitored to promote success.

Domain II: Climate and Culture for Learning

The climate and culture for learning at RCMS is plagued by a belief that low student performance is a result of factors unrelated to teaching and learning (e.g., transience, absenteeism). Expectations for student achievement are also limited. It is the judgment of the FF team that these beliefs have continued to manifest themselves because the school lacks a clear vision for academic success and improvement. RCMS recognizes the need to establish a set of core values. This, along with high expectations for academic performance, should be used to establish a school-wide vision for improvement. Input from all school stakeholders should be considered.

Domain III: School Leadership

There is a lack of instructional leadership at RCMS. Faculty does not receive guidance or feedback on classroom practices. Instructional oversight responsibilities reside at the district level, as opposed to school-based supervision. Currently, RCMS does not have an improvement plan that is guiding practices at the school. It was not clear to the FF team that improvement processes (i.e., planning, implementation) are well understood by staff or leadership. In addition to developing a plan for improvement, RCMS must reassess its current procedures and establish systematic process to oversee, monitor and provide feedback to teachers on instruction.

Domain IV: Organizational Structures and Management

RCMS has critical gaps in its organizational structures and management. This is marked by limited time for teacher collaboration, the lack of targeted professional development and a school-day schedule that fails to maximize time for teaching and learning. Each of these important aspects of educational practice must be considered in the planning process and aligned with initiatives to further increase the success of school improvement.

Domain V: District Support

The educational program at RCMS has a number of significant issues. District guidance and oversight to support school-based efforts has been limited. The Randolph Public Schools have continued to experience reductions in revenue, which have diminished the capacity of the district to support critical aspects of the middle school. However, the areas that the district has supported have not prioritized teaching and learning – factors critical to school success. The lack of a clear and specific plan for improvement, a district curriculum that is inconsistent and does not consider state standards and limited instructional leadership at RCMS are three areas on which the district must focus its efforts. In addition, the school requires collaboration from the district to organize a school-day structure that maximizes time for instruction and related practices to support the academic program. These efforts require immediate attention to increase the performance of RCMS students.

Fact Finding Review Process

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

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

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

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

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

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

The purposes of the Fact-Finding Review are to:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Randolph Community Middle School Profile

Enrollment

The Randolph Community Middle School serves students in grades seven through eight and is the only school in the district that services these grades. Enrollment at RCMS remained fairly stable from 2002 to 2004. Enrollment declined significantly, however, from 754 students in 2004 to 662 students in 2005. Student demographics for the majority of subgroups have remained fairly stable over the last four years, with the exception of Black/African American, White and First Language Not English. While the percentage of Black/African-American students has increased (37 percent in 2002 to 45 percent in 2005), the proportion of White students has decreased (43 percent in 2002 to 36 percent in 2005). In addition, the percentage of First Language Not English students has increased from 13 percent in 2002 to 34 percent in 2005.

Proportions of RCMS student subgroups in 2005, as compared to state averages, are presented below:

| Subgroup | School's 2005 % Enrollment | State Average % in 2005 |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Asian | 11 | 5 |
| Black | 45 | 9 |
| Hispanic | 8 | 12 |
| Native American | 0 | 0.3 |
| White | 36 | 74 |
| Low-Income | 35 | 28 |
| First Language Not English | 34 | 14 |
| Limited English Proficient | 3 | 5 |
| Special Education | 20 | 16 |

In 2005, the attendance rate at RCMS was 92.9 percent, with students absent 11.8 days on average. Across the state in 2005, the average attendance rate was 94.2 percent and students were absent 10.0 days on average. The overall rate of absence for RCMS is 1.8 days higher than the state average and 3.0 days higher than the district average. Male students are absent an average of 3.6 more days than are female students and are chronically absent 7.1 percent more often than their female counterparts. While the average number of days absent at each grade level is fairly consistent, there are significant differences in chronic absenteeism between seventh and eighth grade students, with the latter chronically absent 6.3 percent more often than the former. Among

racess, there are slight differences in attendance rates, except for Asian students, who are absent half as often as other subgroups. There are, however, differences in chronic absenteeism across racial subgroups. Hispanic students have the highest rate of chronic absenteeism (29.1 percent), followed by Whites (22.5 percent) and African Americans (22.1 percent), with Asian students chronically absent the least (10.7 percent). RCMS's retention rate was 6.6 percent in 2004, the last year for which these data are available. The school's in-school suspension rate in 2005 was zero percent and out-of-school suspensions averaged zero percent (a 19.4 decrease from 2003).

Staffing

The 2005-2006 RCMS staffing report indicates that the school is comprised of 2 administrators, 45 teachers, 1 school psychologist, 1 Special Education Department Chair, 1 school nurse and 2 teacher aides. The principal has been at the school for seven years and has a total of three years of administrative experience (two years as an assistant principal and one full year as principal). Of the teachers, approximately 60 percent have been at the school for less than five years, 40 percent have been at the school between five and ten years, and no teachers have been at the school more than ten years. Teachers' years of experience in the profession, however, is more equally distributed than is their time at the school. Approximately 33 percent have more than 10 years' experience, 31 percent have between five and ten years' experience, and 36 percent of the teachers have less than five years' teaching experience. Approximately 84 percent of teachers are reported as being highly qualified and 58 percent hold advanced degrees.

MCAS Overview

Students at the RCMS are assessed in grade seven in English language arts (ELA) and grade eight in mathematics. RCMS's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report for 2005 Mid-Cycle IV shows an accountability status of Corrective Action for mathematics and Identified for Improvement-Subgroups only for ELA.¹ In the aggregate, the school made AYP in mathematics from 1999-2000 and again in 2003. However, they were unable to make AYP in mathematics for the aggregate in 2001-2002 and 2004-2005. In addition, RCMS has not made AYP in subgroups for mathematics for three consecutive years. In ELA, the school made AYP for the aggregate population from 1999 to 2004, but then failed to meet AYP in 2005. RCMS has failed to make AYP for subgroups for the past three years.

¹ In accordance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001, student performance is disaggregated by the following subgroups: Limited English Proficient, Special Education, Low-Income, African-American/Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American, and White. A minimum of 40 students per subgroup (or 5% of the total number of students assessed, whichever is greater) is required to issue a statistically sound rating or determination of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The subgroups meeting the minimum sample size at Randolph Community Middle School in 2005 were Special Education, Low-Income, African-American/Black and White.

GRADE 7**ELA MCAS Results**

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

| 2005 ELA | Percent | | | |
|-------------------|----------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| | A | P | NI | W/F |
| Aggregate | 1 | 43 | 43 | 14 |
| Regular Education | 2 | 52 | 41 | 5 |
| Special Education | 0 | 10 | 46 | 44 |

Regular education students at RCMS have significantly outperformed special education students in ELA. There has been little progress in student performance since 2001, as reflected in the aggregate Grade 7 MCAS performance presented below:

| Aggregate ELA | Percent | | | |
|----------------------|----------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| | A | P | NI | W/F |
| 2005 | 1 | 43 | 43 | 14 |
| 2004 | 1 | 46 | 41 | 11 |
| 2003 | 3 | 49 | 40 | 8 |
| 2002 | 1 | 41 | 42 | 16 |
| 2001 | 2 | 41 | 42 | 16 |

Since 2001, RCMS has averaged 1.6 percent of students scoring in the Advanced category, which is significantly below the state average of 8.4 percent. Student performance at RCMS generally improved from 2001 to 2003 and then declined slightly in 2005. While the percentage of students scoring Proficient has decreased six percent from 2003, the percentage of students scoring Warning/Failing has increased six percent. RCMS students scoring Needs Improvement has fluctuated only three percentage points over a five-year time span, with the highest percentage (43 percent) of students in this category occurring this past year. Similar trends are exhibited by the special education group.

GRADE 8**Mathematics MCAS Results**

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

| 2005 Mathematics | Percent | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| | A | P | NI | W/F |
| Aggregate | 1 | 15 | 34 | 49 |
| Regular Education | 2 | 18 | 41 | 38 |
| Special Education | 0 | 3 | 9 | 89 |

Regular education students at RCMS have significantly outperformed special education students in mathematics, with 89 percent of special education students scoring in the Warning/Failing category. Student performance in mathematics appears to be heading in a downward trend since 2001, as reflected in the aggregate Grade 8 Mathematics MCAS performance presented below:

| Aggregate Mathematics | Percent | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| | A | P | NI | W/F |
| 2005 | 1 | 15 | 34 | 49 |
| 2004 | 4 | 21 | 35 | 40 |
| 2003 | 3 | 19 | 31 | 48 |
| 2002 | 3 | 13 | 37 | 47 |
| 2001 | 5 | 13 | 37 | 45 |

Students scoring in the Advanced category have decreased from a high of five percent in 2001 to a low of one percent in 2005. Students scoring in the Proficient category reached a high of 21 percent in 2004 and has declined to 15 percent in 2005. RCMS students scored 12 percent below the state average for students scoring in the Advanced category and 11 percent below state average for student scoring Proficient. Warning/Failing percentages have increased from a low of 40 percent in 2004 to a high of 49 percent in 2005. Trends for special education students are similar over time, although the performance is significantly lower than the aggregate population, as reflected below:

| Special Education Mathematics | Percent | | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| | A | P | NI | W/F |
| 2005 | 0 | 3 | 9 | 89 |
| 2004 | 1 | 4 | 18 | 77 |
| 2003 | 0 | 0 | 18 | 82 |
| 2002 | 0 | 0 | 13 | 87 |
| 2001 | 0 | 5 | 13 | 82 |

Key Domains of Inquiry

Low student performance rates at Randolph Community Middle School are the result of numerous weaknesses in educational practices across all five domains: curriculum and instruction; climate and culture for learning; school leadership; organizational structures and management; and, district support.

I: Curriculum and Instruction

It is the judgment of the Fact-Finding (FF) team that the Randolph Community Middle School (RCMS) faces significant challenges in the domain of curriculum and instruction. The curriculum at the school does not present students with the content or skills in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, neither as written nor delivered. Classroom instruction lacks rigor and use of higher-order questions to challenge RCMS students. In addition, assessments are not used to inform teaching practices.

As both written and presented, it is not clear that the curriculum provides RCMS students with the necessary depth and breadth needed to succeed, as defined by Massachusetts Curriculum

Frameworks. School leadership indicated that the teachers understand the state standards in a broad sense but are not certain of how to integrate them into daily instruction. Focus groups conducted by the FF team corroborated that teachers have varying degrees of knowledge about the standards. RCMS staff indicated that some teachers need to “study the standards” to understand them more fully before they can teach them on a regular basis. One teacher proclaimed to know that, “State standards take precedence over city standards.” In addition, teachers report that there is limited linkage across content areas or across grade levels and that the school’s curriculum has been “watered down” over the years. The pacing is slower and less material is being covered. Another RCMS staff member told the FF team that, “Teachers use different styles to teach materials.” Focus group discussions further indicated that implementation of curriculum is a challenge for new teachers.

RCMS teachers indicated that another factor affecting the inconsistent implementation of the curriculum is the lack of consistency of student knowledge and skills upon entering RCMS. The curriculum across district elementary schools that feed students into the Middle School is not consistent, misaligned or interpreted differently. As a result, students come to the RCMS with varying degrees of knowledge, skills and proficiency. District personnel reported awareness of this concern but do not currently have a plan in place to address this issue.

The FF team conducted 22 observations (35 minutes each) across all grade levels and including special education services. Some classroom observations were scheduled, whereas others occurred while a FF team member shadowed an RCMS student. Through use of an observation form, the team rated various standards of classroom practice on a tiered scale. The majority of instructional practices observed at RCMS are either not meeting the standard, or are meeting the standard of good practice. The results of 22 classroom observations are summarized in the table below and described in the text following.

| Standards of classroom practice | Does not meet the standard | Meets the standard | Exceeds the standard |
|---|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Lesson objectives posted | 14/22 (63%) | 6/22 (27%) | 2/22 (10%) |
| Lesson objectives clearly explained | 6/19 (31%) | 12/19 (63%) | 1/19 (5%) |
| Use of questions to check for understanding | 7/17 (41%) | 9/17 (53%) | 1/17 (6%) |
| Use of higher order questions | 10/15 (66%) | 4/15 (27%) | 1/15 (7%) |
| Rigor of classroom lessons is appropriate | 8/19 (42%) | 11/19 (58%) | 0 |
| Pace of classroom lessons is appropriate | 5/17 (29%) | 10/17 (58%) | 2/17 (13%) |

Note: In each category there were a percentage of responses that were *Not Applicable*. The observer may not have had a chance to fully judge this criterion because of the type of lesson or timing of the observation. As a result, the total number of observations varies.

The posting of and explanation of learning objectives is not a universal practice at RCMS. Classroom visits indicated that lesson objectives were posted for only 8 of 22 lessons (37%) observed. In the remaining 14 classrooms, neither an objective nor the Massachusetts standard were posted for students to reference while the lesson was conducted. In 12 out of 19 (63%) classrooms, the teacher explained the lesson activity – that is, what students were to do (meets

standard). In only one classroom, however, did the FF team find that the objective was clearly explained so that students knew and understood the desired learning outcome (exceeds standard).

Instruction at RCMS lacks rigor, which is marked by an absence of questions and a lack of variance in modes of teaching. Of the 17 classrooms observed in which the FF team was able to assess rigor, 7 lessons (41%) lacked any use of questions to assess for student understanding. This is a critical deficiency because it minimizes student engagement and does not present teachers an opportunity to ensure that students are learning the content being taught. In 66% of classrooms lessons observed, there was no evidence of higher-order questions. A lack of higher-order questions is correlated with limited learning challenges. Students are not offered the opportunity for more complex thought or discussion. The FF team found that the majority of classroom instruction observed at RCMS did not require students to engage in higher-order thinking skills.

In addition, there is little variation in the modes of instruction used at RCMS. Within the 22 classroom observations, the FF team noted 40 different instructional activities. Most instruction was teacher-led 25 out of 40 activities (62.5%), or stand-and-deliver lectures. Although the majority of instructional activities observed by the FF team fell into this category, varying modes of instruction were seen in several classrooms: Independent work, 7 out of 40 (17.5%); small group activities, 5 out of 40 (12.5%); and student-led instruction was observed in 3 out of 40 (7.5%) of classrooms.

There are few common assessments in place at RCMS. Some content area departments have piloted assessments that may be helpful in informing instruction. The systematic use of assessments to measure student performance and guide instruction, however, are not in practice at the school. This is of particular concern because use of questions to assess for student understanding does not appear to be a uniform practice at RCMS. Without a battery of standardized, formative and informal classroom assessments, it is difficult to know which skills students are achieving and/or those skills that require continued focus.

Some efforts to monitor student progress have been implemented through the use of action plans for students identified as “at risk” or “underperforming.” These action plans are used to document strategies that teachers have implemented to address student learning needs. Teachers reported, “There is a school-wide push to get students to pass based on progress reports. Every teacher must pass in a plan for how failing students are going to raise their grade” and that school leadership collects action plans. It is the judgment of the FF team, however, that there does not appear to be a template to ensure that student action plans are being developed consistently, nor is there a systematic process in place to monitor, implement or follow through on action plans in a proactive manner.

Use of student action plans is an initial step toward identifying students at the school who have more critical learning needs. This is an effort that RCMS can build upon as improvement planning begins. The school must recognize that, although student action plans may be an effective tool for monitoring and individualizing student achievement needs, this is different than assessment tools, which can be used to systematically identify gaps in student performance at the school-wide level or to guide and adjust instruction at the classroom level.

The FF team noted a few teachers at RCMS with knowledge about and expertise in differentiating instruction – particularly in some special education classrooms. This is a strength that the school can build upon. As improvement planning moves forward, exemplary practices should be recognized and used as models for what good instruction should look like.

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

- **Create a blueprint to develop and implement curricula that is monitored to promote success.** This must begin with review and alignment of the curriculum to ensure that students are receiving access to content and skills prescribed by the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Teachers must understand and accept the importance of uniform standards. Implementation of the curriculum in the classroom must be monitored to ensure consistency. This is critical to increasing performance rates of RCMS students in the future.
- **Implement focused training for all staff (administrators, teachers, supervisors) on the elements of best instructional practices. This must also be monitored to promote success.** Evidence gathered by the FF team suggests there are substantial inconsistencies in lesson design, delivery and instructional rigor. Specific training on elements of best teaching practices, including differentiating instruction to meet the needs of varied student learning abilities, may be beneficial. Instances of excellent classroom instruction can be used as models. Training might also include use of classroom-based assessments to identify areas in which students are having difficulty and that may require remediation. RCMS should collaborate (district, school leadership, teachers) to identify the greatest needs and focus training efforts on these areas. Implementation must be monitored to ensure quality and consistency.

II: Culture and Climate for Learning

The climate and culture for learning at Randolph Community Middle School lacks a sense of urgency to address the critical issues facing the school. A belief that low student performance is a result of external factors, as opposed to those within the school's control, continues to plague the RCMS community. Some procedures, such as the promotion plan, appear to have exasperated low expectations for students. There is not a clear or unified vision for improvement and, in addition, academic expectations for students and teachers lack definition.

Most faculty and staff at RCMS believe that low student performance is a result of external factors, as opposed to those related to teaching and learning. As reported in the Panel Review report in the fall of 2005, 52% of staff indicated parent involvement, 31% indicated student apathy and 26% indicated high rates of student transience as "...the most significant cause for low student performance" at the school (*DOE Instructional Staff Survey*). During focus groups conducted by the FF team, teachers continued to maintain a similar outlook. High transience and absentee rates, difficulty with the English language, limited parent involvement or the failure of students to do what is expected of them (e.g., homework) were common reasons reported by teachers.

Persistent beliefs that external factors have resulted in low student performance rates at the school are further manifest by limited expectations for students. There is a focus on what students have not done, as opposed to what they may accomplish. RCMS faculty members indicate that educational challenges are met with resistance on the part of students. In focus groups with the FF team, teachers reported that students have “negative attitudes” and a “lack of motivation” toward academic work. Teachers indicate that students often do not do the work prescribed, but that this may be because “they [students] are unable to do the work” because it is too difficult, or because students lack grade-level proficiency in the English language. RCMS staff stated that a number of the school’s students were “transferred” through the elementary grade levels without mastering the necessary skills. As a result, staff reports that some students at the school believe they have met their education requirements just by attending school. Interviews with district personnel confirmed that there is not a clear standard for promotion in the Randolph Public Schools and that this issue needs to be addressed.

Across classroom observations conducted by the FF team, behavioral expectations of students were clear in some instances and not in others. Most student-staff interactions witnessed by the FF team were positive. The FF team rated these aspects of school climate on the same tiered scale described in domain I. The results are summarized in the table below.

| Standards of classroom practice | Does not meet the standard | Meets the standard | Exceeds the standard |
|---|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Clear expectations for student behavior | 8/20 (40%) | 8/20 (40%) | 4/19 (20%) |
| Positive student-staff interactions | 5/19 (26%) | 10/19 (53%) | 4/19 (21%) |

In sixty percent of the classes observed, expectations for student behavior were clear and the team witnessed few instances of disciplinary problems. In 8 out of 20 classes (40%), however, expectations were less clear. These classrooms were marked by lower rates of student engagement and students acting to their own accord. The FF team also noted a correlation with instructional practices and classroom behavior. In those classrooms in which instructional practices met an acceptable standard (see domain I), student behavior was also held to a higher standard. In classrooms in which instruction was less rigorous, student behaviors presented increased problems for teachers. For example, in one classroom in which students were required to copy notes, the observer noted that approximately half of the students were engaged in the task while the other half were engaged in peripheral conversation with each other.

The majority of classroom observations (74%) indicated positive and supportive student-staff interactions. Instances in which communications did not meet the standard were witnessed in classrooms where student behavior required constant redirection. The FF team also discussed the possibility that some negative interactions may be a result of reported student apathy and limited expectations for student academic success (see above).

It is the judgment of the FF team that these persistently low expectations for student performance stem from the lack of a school-wide vision for improvement. The school’s administration has not established a vision that emphasizes teaching, learning or a focus on increasing expectations for students to be academically proficient. The Panel Review conducted in the fall of 2005 found that teachers did not have a uniform understanding of the school’s improvement initiatives. At

the time of the FF visit, RCMS staff still had varied perceptions of what is needed at the school. When asked in focus groups, “What does the school need to do to have a sound plan for improvement?,” responses varied. Responses included: “If teachers would make changes to instruction, most of the behavior issues would disappear and student engagement would improve.” “Students don’t understand that they are supposed to write about math.” In addition, a majority of teachers described the need to address external factors that are outside of the school’s control. Improving student performance must become the primary focus at RCMS. This begins with a vision, rooted in academic excellence and must hold all members of the school’s community – students, staff and leadership – accountable for success.

As RCMS begins its improvement planning efforts, the FF team identified the following strengths upon which the school may build.

There is widespread recognition of issues at the school that are negatively impacting the culture for learning. School leadership acknowledged that the school’s current mission and vision are not providing a climate of respect or high expectations for academic achievement. RCMS is in the initial phase of trying to improve Core Values at the school.

The RCMS staff maintains a professional entrepreneurial attitude, is collaborative and creative by nature and enthusiastic about the field of education. It was the impression of the FF team that school staff is, for the most part, committed to improvement and willing to learn new practices. Staff recognizes the importance and necessity of raising the performance rates of the school’s students. In the absence of a clear vision for improvement, however, teachers have not received the necessary guidance for this to occur.

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

- **Create a vision of school-wide norms that reflect high expectations. This must include input from the entire school community.** Improvement planning at RCMS must begin with the establishment of vision that everyone in the school is working toward. Input and collaboration from the all school stakeholders – district, leadership, faculty, students, parents – is critical to developing ownership for low performance and building a unified community that is focused on improvement and the notion that students can succeed. This should consider both behavioral and academic expectations.
- **Establish academic challenges that invest students in the positive aspects of teaching and learning.** There are school-wide celebrations – school dances, interscholastic athletics, awards for academic excellence, academic improvement and good citizenship – intended to promote participation in extracurricular activities and to drive positive outcomes at RCMS. Expand upon opportunities that interest students and incorporate them into the academic arena, so that learning becomes enjoyable, appreciated and important to students. The external barriers that the school and its students face will likely continue to persist. Encourage positive cultural and academic experiences that can occur within an educational setting, that are culturally sensitive and are communicated to parents as a means of connecting the school to the home.

III: School Leadership

There is a clear deficit in the area of instructional leadership at RCMS. This is marked by the absence of oversight and feedback on teaching practices. Supervision and teacher evaluation are district-level responsibilities. This has also contributed to the limited instructional leadership at the school. School improvement processes are not currently well understood at RCMS. These are significant deficits in the school's academic program that must be addressed with a sense of urgency.

There is no evidence of instructional leadership at RCMS. This is evidenced first, by the lack of alignment the school's curriculum – either across grade levels or subject areas – to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks (see domain I). There is a lack of consistent expectations for student performance as evidenced by classroom observations and interviews with school staff. A belief still exists within the RCMS community that low student performance rates are a result of external factors (see domain II). Teachers report that feedback on instructional practice is limited to infrequent formal observations and that they do not have any regular supervision in either content areas or instructional practice. This is not sufficient to increase the quality of teaching practices. Although there have been efforts to provide mentors to new teachers, school leadership and the district report that this initiative was not having the intended impact because teachers are mentoring out of their subject areas and out of their grade-level teams. As a result, the content knowledge and expertise being provided is not having the intended impact. As one teacher stated, “Students are missing essential skills all along the way.” Further, there is no obvious plan to address the quality of instruction in the building. Instructional oversight is a critical component of effective educational practice and must be addressed immediately if RCMS is to see the necessary improvements in student performance.

Evaluation and supervision of instruction is not the responsibility of building leadership. As a result of how administrative tasks are assigned in the district, the principal is not directly involved in the supervision and evaluation of instruction. As reported by school leadership and the district, monitoring of curriculum implementation is the responsibility of subject area department heads. These individuals are not on site at RCMS and they also maintain oversight responsibilities for other schools in the district. Furthermore, it is not clear that district personnel collaborate to ensure that oversight of the curriculum is consistent. Some department heads described more in-depth analysis of data to drive the teaching and learning discussion than others. Ongoing evaluation and supervision of instructional practice and curriculum is critical. Because these responsibilities reside outside of the school, the principal – who is consistently on-site – does not have full ownership over this process, or on the success of the staff. This is an additional factor that has likely contributed to the limited instructional leadership at RCMS.

The school improvement process is not well understood by the RCMS community. As a result, improvement planning efforts have not yet been established. The Panel Review conducted in the fall of 2005 found that the school does not have an “effective or operational school improvement plan” (*Panel Review report, p.9*). School and district leadership recognized significant deficiencies in the current School Improvement Plan (SIP). Focus groups conducted by the FF team indicated that little further effort has continued to be put forth to establish uniform and

targeted improvement initiatives. One teacher indicated, “I don’t know how to do this ... We [teachers] need training in what to do.” Teachers also recognize the lack of an improvement plan and continue to remain unable to articulate initiatives designed to move the school forward. Since the school’s designation of Corrective Action and since the time of the Panel Review, few efforts to address improvement have been implemented. While this is indicative of the lack of urgency surrounding necessary improvement efforts at the RCMS, it is the judgment of the FF team that the lack of an improvement plan or process is also attributable to a lack of understanding of school improvement and reform. School and district leadership indicated that this Fact Finding review will serve as a blueprint for staff and become the foundation of a multi-year plan.

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

Information gathered during focus group discussions indicated that an overwhelming majority of teachers at RCMS are looking for feedback on their professional behaviors. There is a walkthrough protocol that had been in place in prior years but was recently abandoned to address other issues facing the school. Teachers and the administration spoke independently about the existence of the protocol and hoped it would be back in play soon. Staff understands that improvement is needed. In the absence of instructional leadership, however, they have not received the necessary guidance or support to work toward improvement.

The PIM (Performance Improvement Mapping) process is slowly beginning to make sense to some staff who are directly involved. This is an initial step that the school can build upon as it begins its improvement efforts. As the committee involved in the PIM process begins to analyze the information available, it is important that staff is made aware of the findings to ensure that the entire school community understands – and has ownership over – the improvement process. Focus groups with RCMS staff indicated interest in being part of learning conversations.

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

- **New hires to the building’s administrative team need to have the capacity to provide instructional oversight.** The school’s current principal reported that, with the departure of the current assistant principal, two new administrative positions are going to be established at RCMS for the upcoming school year. In order to begin increasing and improving instructional leadership capacity at the school, it is the judgment of the FF team that this is imperative. These personnel must have the knowledge and expertise to support content delivery and instructional practices in key academic areas. This must include some school-based oversight responsibilities.

- **School leadership needs to develop and embrace a walkthrough protocol to provide regularly-scheduled feedback on instructional practices.** Oversight of teaching practices is one aspect of instructional leadership and a factor critical to improving classrooms practices. This must include feedback and follow-up, however, to ensure that instruction and curriculum implementation is consistent and improving in quality. Use of a classroom walk-through protocol is one method the school might consider to provide support to teachers. Oversight and feedback should align with the targeted improvement strategies identified by the school. The presence of administrators in the classroom should be established as a common practice at RCMS.
- **RCMS should develop a system of building-based accountability for the administration to engage in ongoing supervision and evaluation that is aligned with the school’s improvement plan.** As the school begins improvement planning efforts begin, consider reassessing and realigning supervisory roles. This should include an analysis and identification of systematic procedures to hold accountable those individuals who are directly responsible for implementing and overseeing various aspects of school improvement. The primary focus should be to ensure the greatest benefit to the school and its community of student learners.

IV: Organizational Structures and Management

There are critical absences in the organizational structures and management of RCMS that have resulted in the lack of a formalized learning community. Structures such as common planning time and targeted and planned professional development activities do not exist at RCMS. The school-day schedule does not maximize instructional time. The absence of these structures has likely impacted the poor quality of some instruction and the low expectations for student performance at the school. It is the judgment of the FF team that each of these factors has directly and indirectly impacted low student performance rates at RCMS.

There is no systematic structure to encourage collaborative dialogue or common planning at RCMS. As reported in the Panel Review report, “Thirty-eight percent of RCMS staff meet only quarterly with other teachers to plan and coordinate lessons and instruction” (p.10). Focus groups conducted with RCMS during the Fact Finding visit reiterated the lack of professional discussion to share teaching practices or to review student work. One teacher stated, “I need to have a mechanism to share with other teachers... to talk about student work.” While some teachers do report occasional planning with other staff, this is often to address administrative issues (e.g., scheduling). Common planning is critical to educational success. It is one vehicle for ensuring consistent instruction, curriculum implementation and assessment of student work. In addition, collaboration is critical to creating and establishing a unified vision and responsibility for improvement and success. This is not currently part of the culture at RCMS. When asked in a focus group, “What is the school doing to improve student performance in ELA and math?,” one teacher indicated, “I don’t know. I don’t teach that [ELA or math].”

Professional development is limited at RCMS. A specific calendar for training does not exist either at the school or at the district level. Professional development that does occur is not based on analyses of student performance or instructional needs. Training opportunities provide a context for creating and establishing uniform practices and targeting areas in need of improvement. This type of formalized and focused professional development has not yet occurred at RCMS.

The school-day schedule does not make maximum or creative use of time for teaching and learning. Many RCMS students have multiple study halls per day, in which instruction does not occur. The school schedule is static; that is, students who have mathematics 3rd period, have mathematics 3rd period every day. This is particularly an issue during the school's lunch period, which is divided into three segments. Some students attend a portion of a lesson, break for lunch in the middle, and then return to class for the remainder of the lesson. Evidence of missing or inadequate structures includes the fact that students have two directed study halls a day. Time within the school day is not optimally used as a resource to create increased opportunities for teaching and learning at RCMS.

In addition, the current tardy policy at RCMS allows students who are late to miss even more instructional time. According to an attendance and tardy logs reviewed by the FF team, 98 of approximately 650 RCMS students (15%) are chronically tardy (more than ten times). Of these 98 students, 53 (54%) are not achieving at grade-level standards. Students who are more than 20 minutes late must report to In School Detention (ISD). RCMS faculty report frustration with this policy for several reasons: 1) Teachers prefer that students be present in class for a portion of the instructional time, as opposed to spending time in ISD. 2) Teachers must spend additional time preparing work for students that have been absent from classes at the beginning of the school day. Additionally, focus groups with RCMS staff indicated that the current policy is not working to improve student tardiness at the school. Given the low performance rates of RCMS students – specifically those who are chronically tardy – it is unclear if increasing missed learning opportunities is best serving the needs of some of the school's learners.

It is noteworthy that the school and the district have faced ongoing struggles due to budget constraints (level funding), collective bargaining agreements, Work to Rule and staff turnover (as a result of Reduction in Force). This has impacted leadership's ability to establish sound structures. For example, common planning time that did exist previously was eliminated this school year due to reduction in staff. The depletion of enrichment activities has resulted in additional study halls for students. Staff turnover has also had an impact at the school. Teachers that aren't forced out choose to seek work elsewhere in anticipation of losing their job. Positions that are available take a long time to fill. It is the judgment of the FF team that these issues have created isolation, rather than unification, in the RCMS staff.

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

School leadership and faculty recognize that the school and its students could benefit from reorganization of the school day. Staff meetings during this school year have focused on “changing structure as a means of MCAS improvement.” Leadership and RCMS staff indicated that they have reviewed the organization and structure of the school day. This has included an examination of how to optimize time and efficiency. Examples reported to the FF team included the elimination of “directed studies” (study halls) and implementation of “block” schedules. RCMS should continue these discussions as improvement planning moves forward.

RCMS currently lacks a multi-faceted program and a formalized learning community to enable students to reach their full potential. To address these areas in need of improvement, the FF team prioritized the following next steps for the RCMS in the domain of organizational structures and management.

- **Establish time for staff and leadership to collaborate in a formalized and structured manner.** Create opportunities for collegial and professional collaboration among staff, among school leaders and between leadership and staff. Opportunities for common planning should be based on targeted improvement efforts. Conversation should be dictated by a set agenda to ensure uniformity and alignment with improvement efforts.
- **Once an instructional leadership team is established, set frequent meeting times.** Critical to the success of improvement efforts is an instructional leadership team that includes representation from across the school – grade levels, content areas and special services. This team may benefit, especially initially, from weekly meetings. These meetings should be dictated by a set agenda, with a focus on development, implementation and progress monitoring of improvement initiatives.
- **Align professional development with goals in the school improvement plan.** Professional development has the greatest impact when trainings are focused on specific initiatives in need of improvement. Trainings should be based on an analysis of the greatest areas on need in the areas of teaching and learning (which should also be reflected in the SIP). Once trainings have been completed, monitor use of newly-learned practices to ensure consistent and high quality implementation across the school
- **Build the schedule around instruction, not the budget.** The academic program at RCMS needs to be built around what the school has, not what it doesn’t have. Although the impact of financial constraints is evident, there is much room for creativity in the school-day schedule. Make efforts to reduce the amount of time students spend in study halls. Continue discussions regarding block scheduling, focusing on increasing the amount of time students spend in ELA and mathematics classes. Consider moving from a static to a rotating schedule to create a formalized middle school learning community.
- **Revisit school procedures (e.g., the tardy policy) in order to increase student learning and teacher instructional time.** In order to improve achievement, opportunities for student learning must be maximized.

V: District Support

As documented throughout this report, there are a number of significant concerns the FF team identified at RCMS that have contributed to the low student performance rates. While many of these issues reside at the school level, the district has not supplied sufficient guidance or oversight to ensure that academic achievement is a priority at RCMS. The district must assert its presence at the school. This must be immediate in order to address the current deficiencies and begin to see necessary improvements in school-wide practices.

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

Domain I: Curriculum and Instruction

The district has not provided curriculum guides across grade levels that are aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. As a result, students are being advanced through the system and arriving at the RCMS without the skills or the content necessary to achieve proficiency according to state standards. This is a critical gap in the district and at the school that must be addressed if the school is to see improvements in student performance.

Professional development at the district level has been diminished to one of compliance, focused on maintaining the “highly qualified” status under NCLB. The district reports that this is in direct correlation to a reduction in revenues. However, professional development serves a critical role in developing teacher skills to employ and implement sound instructional practices – an area in need of improvement at RCMS (see domain I). As yet, neither the school nor the district has conducted an analysis to determine what areas of training are likely to have the greatest impact at the school. Analyses of student performance have not been completed to determine gaps in learning. Direct input from teachers on training needs has not been solicited. Leadership does not conduct observations of instruction. As a result, the school has not identified gaps in teaching. In order to address the underperformance of RCMS students, the school and the district must first begin to understand the parallel relationship between teaching and learning. And secondly, implement professional development activities to support the identified areas of need.

As improvement planning begins, RCMS – in collaboration with the district – must focus instruction and program development on areas of critical student need. The district reports that some professional development monies for the next fiscal year have been dedicated to bringing the practices of the Center on Research for Better Teaching to the school. In order to maximize the impact of practices, professional development should be aligned to student (learning) and teacher (instructional) needs.

In addition, the responsibility for the supervision of curriculum and instruction must be returned to the school leadership. The employment of additional personnel in instructional leadership roles will help with oversight of curriculum implementation and the advancement of instructional

practices. It is the judgment of the FF team that increased instructional leadership at the school – particularly to support ELA and mathematics programming – is imperative.

In addition to providing some resource support at RCMS, ongoing collaboration from the district is also needed to assist with analyses of assessment results. The district reports that Plato, a computer-driven instructional support system, is being rolled out to support struggling learners and the selection of appropriate strategies to address student needs.

Domain II: Climate and Culture for Learning

The climate and culture for learning at RCMS is marked by a pervasive belief that the barriers students bring to the school are the reasons for low student performance. As a result, expectations for students are low and staff feels students are not interested in the academic challenges presented to them. It is the judgment of the FF team that the lack of a consistent district promotion policy has contributed to these beliefs. RCMS teachers indicated – and the district agreed – that some students advance through the elementary grade levels without achieving the necessary mastery of content or skills to be promoted. As improvement planning begins, the Randolph Public Schools should revisit the promotion policy. It is worth noting that the lack of a standards-based curriculum may also be a factor, since teachers and school leaders may be unclear as to what students must achieve to perform proficiently.

RCMS lacks a clear vision for academic improvement. The district has focused its recent efforts on broadening awareness about the Randolph Public Schools in an effort to increase community partnerships and participation, as well as an understanding of the district’s unique student population. The district reports that this work has been effective, especially in light of receiving some additional financial support from outside organizations.

To increase parent collaboration and interest in school initiatives, a telephone network has been developed and is in the process of being implemented to more easily communicate with parents.

While these are important issues, the district – in collaboration with the school – must now fully focus its efforts on the academic improvement of RCMS students. As a vision for improvement is created, it should consider input from the school’s entire community – students, staff, parents and partnerships. Teaching and learning, however, must be at the core of the vision if RCMS is to see necessary increases in student performance.

Domain III: School Leadership

The lack of a clear and specific School Improvement Plan (SIP) and the absence of instructional leadership at RCMS are two significant gaps at the school. These two deficits are of primary importance and require the immediate and urgent attention of both the school and the district.

RCMS does not currently have a plan in place to guide improvement efforts. The school has been “identified for improvement” according to NCLB and state regulations for three years, before moving to a status of “corrective action” in the 2005-06 school year. Since the Panel Review to RCMS in the fall of 2005 and following the school’s designation of “under-performing,” neither the school nor the district have made efforts (other than initial participation in PIM training) to begin to develop, let alone implement, an improvement plan. Both school and

district leadership are aware that the current SIP document is not sufficient to guide improvement efforts, yet nothing has been done to address this issue. This indicates a lack of urgency. Prioritized improvement planning, which requires ongoing collaboration from the district, is a critical next step for RCMS.

Instructional leadership and the supervision of teaching practices are other areas of significant concern at RCMS. Currently, teachers are receiving minimal feedback on instructional practices – an area that requires attention at the school. Oversight and evaluation of teaching practices does not occur at the school level. This has been the primary responsibility of the district department heads, who are not located on site at the school.

Further, the district determines the success of school leadership based on administrative functioning; that is, the deployment of students and the operation of the school within the required budget. The need for well-developed site-based leadership, focused on instruction, has not been the priority of the Randolph Public Schools in the past. School improvement has been viewed as a compliance issue and not as a process to increase student achievement and attainment.

As improvement planning moves forward, the district must reassess and refocus its procedures – making teaching, learning and student attainment the top priority. This must begin with the development of a plan – or a roadmap – for improvement. In addition, the district must re-evaluate the role and effectiveness of the content-area department heads as school-based leaders. It is the judgment of the FF team that content-area instructional leaders will have a greater impact if they are on site and can readily provide critical feedback (via walkthroughs), model lessons and serve as part of an instructional leadership team. The district reports that they intend to hire personnel into these positions. The principal requires support and assistance from the district to become the true instructional leader of the building.

The district reported that three days of system-wide professional development have been scheduled for the end of the year to train emerging leaders in the Randolph Public Schools. This is a promising practice. The FF team recommends that training specifically focus on school improvement – specifically, on building instructional leaders.

Domain IV: Organizational Structures and Management

There are critical absences in the organizational structures and management of RCMS – in particular, those that are intended to support teaching and learning. RCMS does not currently maximize use of instructional time and utilize common planning for collaboration. Also, professional development is limited.

As indicated in domain IV, the Randolph Public Schools have faced significant budgetary constraints and ongoing contract negotiations in recent years. This has added to some of the difficulties that the district and the school have faced, particularly in terms of hiring and retaining teaching staff. While the FF team recognizes the limitations that level funding can cause, the district must collaborate with RCMS to be creative in supporting teaching and learning as improvement planning moves forward. The district and the school must focus on what they do have, as opposed to what they don't have.

The district has not provided RCMS with targeted professional development aligned with teacher and student needs. As stated earlier, professional development has most recently been viewed as a compliance issue, rather than as an initiative correlated to improving student performance. The district reports that budgetary constraints have limited professional development trainings. As with the school, once the focus of improvements efforts has been identified, the district should re-assess professional development support to ensure that it is aligned with teaching and learning needs. This is one way to ensure that the allocation of resources is having the greatest impact.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are a number of significant gaps in the educational program at Randolph Community Middle School. A curriculum that is aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks does not exist at the school or in the district. The quality of instructional practices varies and there is little use of assessment to inform instruction or to monitor student learning.

The climate and culture for learning lacks a vision for improvement and academic success, which has resulted in a school-wide belief that the barriers students face outside of the school dictate what they can and cannot do in the classroom.

Instructional leadership at the school is limited and that which does exist, is not clearly defined. RCMS does not currently have sufficient personnel in place to oversee and monitor instructional practices or curriculum implementation, which has also limited the academic environment and progress with improvement planning.

The organizational structures at RCMS are not designed to best support teaching and learning. The school-day schedule does not make maximum use of instructional time and there is no common planning time. Professional development activities are not the result of an analysis of teaching and learning needs.

District support and guidance has been limited in the past. As improvement efforts begin at RCMS, both the district and the school must collaborate to best use the resources that are in place. To determine how teaching and learning can best be supported, improvement planning should begin with the creation of a vision, the development of a road map to guide improvement efforts and a reassessment of resource allocation. The establishment of a strong instructional leadership system will be critical the success of improvement efforts.

APPENDIX A Team Members

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Joyce Harrington, Practitioner, Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum and Instruction, Bourne Public Schools, Bourne, MA

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James Gibney, Practitioner, Principal, Westport Public Schools, Westport, MA

NOTE: **Emily Finkel**, School Performance Evaluation, Department of Education, was present during the Fact Finding review as an observer. This individual did not participate in the activities, discussions or formulation of findings.

**Randolph Community Middle School
Randolph Public Schools
FACT-FINDING REVIEW SCHEDULE
April 4-7, 2006**

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

DAY ONE

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

DAY TWO

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

DAY THREE

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

DAY FOUR

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