

REPORT OF FACT FINDING REVIEW

Westfield South Middle School

Westfield Public Schools

Executive Summary

Westfield South Middle School (Westfield South) has the foundations in place to build a strong academic program. The school climate provides an environment that can be used to promote student achievement as the top priority. School administrators are held in high regard and have demonstrated competency to lead improvement efforts. In the judgment of the Fact Finding (FF) team, the inconsistent quality of instructional practices has had the greatest impact on low student performance rates. The current system for providing instructional oversight, support and feedback to teachers has contributed to this weakness. As improvement efforts move forward, school and district efforts must focus on improving teaching practices. This includes ensuring that the systems and structures are in place to fully support teaching and learning.

Domain I: Curriculum and Instruction

Instructional practices at Westfield South lack consistent quality and rigor to effectively increase student achievement. Student learning objectives are not clearly defined. Use of questions – specifically, higher order questions to elicit increased discussion and complex student thought – are limited at Westfield South. Most instruction is conducted in a whole group, teacher-led format, which limits student engagement and differentiated practices to address diverse student learning needs. Ongoing, school-based professional development to increase the quality of instruction should be top priority for Westfield South.

Domain II: Climate and Culture for Learning

The culture for learning is a strength at Westfield South. Student behavior is of minimal concern. The climate is marked by positive and respectful staff/student interactions. This provides students with an atmosphere that is conducive to learning and equipped to support increased academic focus and targeted improvement efforts. There are no recommendations in this domain.

Domain III: School Leadership

The responsibilities of school leadership at Westfield South focus primarily on organizational management and administrative tasks. District personnel assume the majority of instructional leadership responsibilities, including teacher evaluations, at the school. Because of the significant need for improvement in instructional practices at the school, it is not clear that the current model of instructional leadership is sufficient to bring about the necessary changes. Improvement efforts have focused on revising the School Improvement Plan (SIP) and have yet to be implemented at the classroom level.

Domain IV: Organizational Structures and Management

The current organizational structures at Westfield South are not being used to fully support teaching and learning at the school. The school day schedule does not provide sufficient time for instruction in mathematics. Scheduling adjustments that have been made to support increased instruction in ELA may not be having the desired impact on academic achievement. A specific agenda does not guide common planning time, which limits the effectiveness of this initiative. In order to see necessary increases in student performance, improvement efforts must consider the structures used to support teaching and learning.

Domain V: District Support

Consistent, high quality instructional practices are a priority need at Westfield South and should be the focus of district efforts. Professional development activities focused on strategies that will have the greatest impact on teaching and learning might be an initial step toward improving instruction. In order for newly implemented initiatives to be most beneficial at the classroom level, instruction must be monitored and teachers must be provided feedback. The district has provided Westfield South with strong leaders, and should consider reallocating instructional leadership oversight responsibilities to incorporate further control at the school level.

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.

Westfield South Middle School Profile

Enrollment

Westfield South Middle School (Westfield South) serves students in grades 6 through 8. Enrollment at Westfield South has dropped slightly over the past several years, decreasing by 29 students between 2002 and 2003, 43 students between 2003 and 2004, and 20 students between 2004 and 2005. The present enrollment at the school is 701 students in total. Between 2002 and 2005, student demographics have been stable, with percentages of student subgroups changing little from year to year. The exception to this is Westfield South's special education population, which had no reported percentages in 2002 and 2003 but grew to 20 percent of the student population in 2004. The size of the special education subgroup stayed roughly the same, at 19 percent, in 2005. Proportions of Westfield South student subgroups in 2005, as compared to state averages, are presented below:

Subgroup	School's 2005 % Enrollment	State Average % in 2005
Asian	1	5
Black	2	9
Hispanic	11	12
Native American	0	0.3
White	85	74
Low-Income	41	28
First Language Not English	15	14
Limited English Proficient	5	5
Special Education	19	16

In 2005, the attendance rate at Westfield South was 95.1 percent, with students absent 8.3 days on average. This attendance rate is slightly better than the state average of 94.2 percent. The school's retention rate was 1.0 percent in 2004, the last year for which these data are available. Westfield South's in-school suspension rate in 2005 was 4.0 percent, while out-of-school

suspensions averaged 5.3 percent. Averages in 2005 for the state were 4.5 percent for in-school suspensions and 6.1 percent for out-of-school suspensions.

Staffing

The 2005-2006 Westfield South staffing report indicates that the school is comprised of 3.5 administrators (1 principal and 1.5 assistant principals, 1 SPED Director), 67 teachers, 2 guidance counselors, a part-time librarian, a nurse, a school psychologist, 7 support staff members (including an adjustment counselor) and 2 long-term substitutes. The principal has been at the school for 18 years, 16 of which have been in an administrative role. Of the teachers, approximately 52 percent have been at the school for 5 or fewer years, while roughly 15 percent have worked at Westfield South for 10 years or more. The majority of teachers (approximately 73 percent) hold a master's degree, with several teachers holding more than one post-baccalaureate degree and with one teacher holding a doctorate.

MCAS Overview

Students at the Westfield South are assessed in grade 7 in English language arts (ELA) and in grades 6 and 8 in mathematics. Westfield South's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report for 2005 Mid-Cycle IV shows an accountability status of Identified for Improvement—Subgroups Only for ELA and Corrective Action for mathematics. The school made AYP in ELA in the aggregate, but it failed to make AYP for its reported subgroups of special education and low-income students.¹ Each year from 2000 to 2005, the school made AYP in ELA in the aggregate. In 2003, it also made AYP for subgroups, but this changed in the past two years. In mathematics, the school did not make AYP in the aggregate nor for any of its reported subgroups (special education, low-income, Hispanic and White) except the Limited English Proficient (LEP) subgroup, which met its participation, improvement and attendance targets. In 2004, the school did not make AYP in mathematics in the aggregate or for subgroups but it did make AYP in the aggregate (not all subgroups) in 2003. Prior to that, it did not make AYP in 2001 and 2002. In 1999 and 2000, it did make Adequate Yearly Progress.

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

GRADE 6**Mathematics MCAS Results**

Results of the 2005 Grade 6 Mathematics MCAS for students at Westfield South are presented below:

2005 Mathematics, Gr 6	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	11	26	35	28
Regular Education	14	33	39	14
Special Education	2	8	24	67
Limited English Proficient	7	7	29	57

On the 2005 grade 6 mathematics MCAS, 91 percent of special education students and 86 percent of LEP students scored in the Needs Improvement and Warning/Failing categories combined and 53 percent of regular education students scored in the same categories. There has been little change in student performance since 2001. This is reflected in the aggregate Grade 6 Mathematics MCAS results presented below:

Aggregate Mathematics, Gr 6	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	11	26	35	28
2004	10	23	38	30
2003	11	22	38	29
2002	7	30	31	31
2001	7	27	36	31

Although modest improvements in the Advanced and Warning/Failing categories were made, there was little change in the other categories. Percentages of students scoring at each level stayed basically the same in the aggregate and for regular education students. More substantial gains in performance were made over the past several years by students receiving special education services. Specifically, the Advanced category for special education students on the 2005 grade 6 mathematics MCAS grew by two percent between 2004 and 2005. Between 2001 and 2005, a 22 percent decrease in special education students scoring in the Warning/Failing category was achieved.

GRADE 7**ELA MCAS Results**

Results of the 2005 Grade 7 ELA MCAS for the school are presented here:

2005 ELA, Gr 7	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	8	51	31	11
Regular Education	10	64	24	2
Special Education	0	14	51	35
Limited English Proficient	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

On the Grade 7 ELA MCAS, 86 percent of special education students in 2005 and 82 percent of LEP students in 2004 (the last year in which these percentages were calculated for the LEP subgroup at Westfield South) scored in the Needs Improvement and Warning/Failing categories, while 26 percent of regular education students scored at the same levels. While the majority (74 percent) of regular education students scored Proficient and Advanced, 14 percent of special education students scored Proficient and no students in that subgroup had scores that exceeded that level. Over the years from 2001 to 2005 for students in the aggregate, the school made improvement in the Advanced category and slightly more modest improvements in the other MCAS performance categories, as is evident in the data shown below:

Aggregate ELA, Gr 7	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	8	51	31	11
2004	5	56	31	8
2003	3	55	33	10
2002	2	51	37	11
2001	4	48	36	12

GRADE 8**Mathematics MCAS Results**

Westfield South's 2005 Grade 8 Mathematics MCAS results are as follows:

2005 Mathematics, Gr 8	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
Aggregate	5	20	37	39
Regular Education	6	24	44	26
Special Education	2	4	10	64
Limited English Proficient	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

As shown above, the majority (76 percent) of grade 8 students in the aggregate scored at the two lowest levels of MCAS performance, while only 25 percent scored Proficient or Advanced. Performance has stayed relatively stable during the past several years, with little change at each level of MCAS performance. The data table provided below shows details of this:

Aggregate Mathematics, Gr 8	Percent			
	A	P	NI	W/F
2005	5	20	37	39
2004	5	20	38	37
2003	6	17	37	40
2002	2	17	37	44
2001	5	16	41	37

While the school has basically maintained its percentage of grade 8 students in the aggregate scoring Advanced and has made a modest improvement in the Proficient category for the same students, little change in the Needs Improvement and Warning/Failing categories has been achieved. For students in the special education subgroup – although the Warning/Failing category increased by six percent between 2004 and 2005 to 84 percent of students in the subgroup – both the Proficient and Advanced categories grew by two percent. While improvements in Proficient and Advanced categories were made by special education students, similar gains in these ranges were not achieved by regular education students.

Key Domains of Inquiry

Westfield South Middle School has strengths that can be built upon as improvement efforts begin. A sound climate and culture can be used to promote academic excellence; school administrators are competent and well-supported; and, a new School Improvement Plan (SIP) has been developed. The inconsistent quality of instructional practices requires priority attention from both school and district leadership. A clear system for providing instructional oversight, which includes frequent feedback to teachers on the implementation of instruction, will be critical to the success of improvement efforts. The school day schedule should be reexamined to ensure that all initiatives are supporting teaching and learning to the greatest extent possible.

I: Curriculum and Instruction

It is the judgment of the Fact Finding (FF) team that the consistency of instructional practices at Westfield South is not of sufficient quality to improve student performance rates. While instruction in some classes meets the standard for best practice, the quality of instruction in many of the classes is limited. This is characterized by a lack of clearly-defined learning objectives, limited use of higher-order questions and instruction that is predominately teacher-led. As presented, learning activities are not prescribed to meet the varied learning needs of students. In many cases, student engagement in learning is passive. Increased focus and training on the implementation of quality of instructional practices should be central to improvement planning.

The FF team conducted 46 classroom observations (approximately 42 minutes each) across all grade levels and subject areas. Through the use of an observation form, the team documented the presence of various best instructional practices on a tiered scale. The results of the observations are summarized below and described in the text following.

Standards of classroom practice	Does not meet the standard	Meets the standard	Exceeds the standard
Lesson objective is posted; MA standards evident	28/40 (70%)	10/40 (25%)	2/40 (5%)
Lesson objective is explained*	19/39 (48%)	18/39 (47%)	2/39 (5%)
Lesson content is appropriate/rigorous	14/38 (36%)	21/38 (55%)	3/38 (8%)
There is frequent use of questions to assess for student understanding	16/39 (41%)	22/39 (56%)	1/39 (2%)
Use of higher-order questions is evident	18/39 (46%)	18/39 (46%)	3/39 (7%)
Pace of instruction moves at an appropriate speed	11/39 (28%)	25/39 (64%)	3/39 (7%)
Sufficient resources to implement the curriculum	6/41 (14%)	32/41 (78%)	3/41 (7%)

*In some instances, the observer may have entered the classroom after the start of the lesson and might not have had the opportunity to hear the objective explained.

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 number of observations does not add up to 46, nor do the total percentages, in some instances, add up to 100%.

Teachers at Westfield South do not appear to have a shared understanding of academic objectives versus daily agendas. In 12 out of 40 classrooms observed (30%), the lesson objective was posted. In some of these classes, broad long-term objectives were permanently posted on the wall but were not referenced during the lesson. In 28 out of 40 (70%) classrooms, neither a learning objective nor the academic standards were posted. In many of these classrooms, a daily objective was presented to students. These objectives, however, more closely resembled a daily agenda that consisted of a list of the day's activities. For example, "Make corrections to the quiz;" "Today we will be reviewing [skill]." Without clear and specific learning objectives, it is difficult to ensure that students understand the lesson's desired learning outcome(s).

Although learning objectives were not posted in most classrooms (see above), in 20 out of 39 classes (52%), the teacher introduced the lesson with an objective that clarified the learning outcome for students. For example, "Today we will be learning the definition of [concept]." In the remaining 19 classrooms (48%), the lesson began without an explanation or reference to a specific academic standard. As a result, the lesson's intent or purpose was not clearly articulated for students. In addition, few lessons observed began with a review of material previously learned. Students were neither provided a context for the lesson nor an opportunity to activate prior knowledge. This was particularly noteworthy, since classes were resuming after a week-long vacation. Lessons seemed to pick up where they ended, with little connection to previously-learned content or the state standards. Desired student learning objectives and outcomes were presented in only half of the classes. In the judgment of the FF team, there is not a common practice for posting and/or routinely explaining the purpose of classroom lessons to provide a context or a goal for student learning.

Use of questions to assess student learning and/or to elicit complex student thought and discussion is another inconsistent instructional practice at Westfield South. Teachers assessed student understanding by frequently asking questions in just 58% (23/39) of the classrooms observed by the FF team – for example, recognition questions such as, “Where will you encounter more?” or explanations, “Why couldn’t this happen?” Multiple-choice questions that asked students to define vocabulary or to recall previously learned information were also used. In 16 out of 39 (41%) classrooms, there was limited use of questions to assess for student understanding. In these classes, lessons were marked by only a few questions and/or a very small number of select students responding to questions – that is, students who volunteered. As a result, it was not clear to the FF team that the teacher was able to ensure that all students in the class understood the lesson content.

School leadership reported that the incorporation of higher-order questioning is an area of ongoing professional development at Westfield South and that many teachers still inconsistently apply this practice. This was corroborated during observations conducted by the FF team. The use of higher-order questioning was evident in only 21 out of 39 (53%) lessons observed. An instance in which higher-order questioning exceeded the standard, students were asked to “formulate a testable hypothesis.” Use of higher-order questions is a common practice used to elicit greater discussion and complex thought, as well as more robust feedback on student responses. In addition, higher-order questions can be used to address varied student learning abilities, specifically to challenge more advanced students. While some teachers appear to have mastered this process, it is not being uniformly applied across Westfield South classrooms.

The overwhelming method of instruction at Westfield South is direct, teacher-led. Observations conducted by the FF team noted that most students play a passive role in the learning process. The traditional stand-and-deliver instructional approach was frequently observed. Nearly all classes are taught as whole groups. In some instances, students are physically arranged in small groups but the lessons are still delivered to the whole group. Learning activities are the same for the entire class. In the majority of classrooms observed, there was limited evidence of differentiated instructional practices. A detailed breakdown of the instructional modes observed across all 46 classrooms (including examples) is listed below. In some classes, more than one mode was observed – that is, both teacher-led instruction and independent student work were seen in the same observation period.

- *Teacher-led instruction:* 35 out of 46 classes (76%). Examples included: content delivery/lectures to the whole class, whole class review of homework or tests.
- *Student-led instruction:* 4 out of 46 classes (9%). Examples included: students making a choice. This was most often observed in non-core academic classes, such as art and physical education.
- *Independent work:* 13 out of 46 classes (28%). Examples included: students working quietly at their seat on worksheets or completing quizzes.
- *Small group:* 12 out of 46 classes (26%). Examples included: students sitting in groups, lab work.

The majority of lessons at Westfield South were conducted in a teacher-led, whole group format (76%). These lessons provided few opportunities for student hands-on engagement in learning activities, discussion or application. Few classes contained activities that were tailored to the students, so they could move through the lessons activities at their own pace. Instances of independent work observed by the FF team indicated that students were all working on identical tasks (i.e., the same worksheets). The division of students into small groups is an initial step toward differentiating instruction. The delivery of the same lesson to all students with a lack of varied learning tasks, however, does not address different student learning abilities. As observed at Westfield South, there were few instances of differentiated instruction that address the needs of struggling learners or that challenge students whose knowledge and skills are more advanced.

The level of student engagement in learning activities at Westfield South is variable across classrooms. In most classrooms observed by the FF team, students were compliant. Continued intellectual engagement, however, was not often evident. Based on professional judgment, the FF team indicated the average percentage of time students were engaged in the learning activity throughout the 42-minute observation. Engagement percentages are outlined in the following table.

Percent of Student Engagement across Classroom Observations at Westfield South			
Percentage of engagement	Student Engagement in Westfield South Classes	Percentage of engagement	Student Engagement in Westfield South Classes
100	9/46 (20%)	50	1/46 (2%)
90	5/46 (10%)	40	4/46 (8%)
80	13/46 (28%)	30	4/46 (8%)
70	1/46 (2%)	20	4/46 (8%)
60	0	10	5/46 (10%)

In 28 out of 46 (60%) classes, students were actively engaged in the learning activity at least 70% of the time. In the remaining 18 out of 46 classes (40%), however, students appeared engaged in the learning activity less than 50% of the time. Examples of limited student engagement included: few students volunteering to participate in question-answer sessions, students with their heads down on the desk, and student attention focusing elsewhere (not visually tracking or attending to the teacher). In five lessons observed, there was minimal student engagement. The FF team observed active student participation and learning for only 10% of the lesson. This is equivalent to only 4.2 minutes of student learning in a 42-minute instructional period. It is the judgment of the FF team that current instruction is not sufficiently eliciting or maintaining the attention of students, greatly limiting student learning opportunities. The lack of rigorous questions and limited use of differentiated teaching practices in most Westfield South classrooms appears to be impacting student engagement.

Although many aspects of instructional practices at Westfield South are inconsistent and currently insufficient to improve student achievement, the FF team identified the following strengths that Westfield South can build upon as the school begins its improvement efforts.

The pace of instruction is a strength at Westfield South. In 28 out of 39 (71%) of lessons observed, teachers moved the lesson activities along at an appropriate speed. Classroom observations indicated few instances of non-instructional time in which students were idle. In most classes, the FF team observed that teachers were in charge of the pace and the direction for the majority of the class period. As improvement planning moves forward, teachers should be well prepared to continue the productive use of instructional time, while – at the same time – working to increase levels of student engagement.

Adequate supplies, teaching materials and the facility itself are also strengths at Westfield South, which combine to provide an appropriate context for increased academic focus. It was noted that most classrooms contained computer hardware for teacher and student use, large screen monitors, microscopes for science activities, current textbook series, adequate furnishings and ample instructional space. The physical plant of the school is impressive. It is clean, uncluttered, bright and well-kept. All aspects of the physical environment at Westfield South are conducive to teaching and learning.

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

- **Targeted professional development should be provided to all teachers to increase the use of differentiated instructional practice across academic subjects.** The traditional lecture method of content delivery should be supplemented with other instructional strategies that require more active student participation and deeper engagement. Classroom activities should include variety, or different levels of challenge to meet the learning needs of all students. It is likely that the implementation of varied class activities, prescribed to address the learning level of different students in the class, will also increase student engagement. Ongoing feedback on the implementation of new practices at the classroom level will increase the impact of training sessions.
- **Continued focus and training in the use of higher-order questioning should be provided to all staff.** The emphasis on use of higher-order questions should be continued at the school. In addition to eliciting more complex thought and discussion, higher-order questions – one method of differentiating instruction – can be used to challenge advanced learners. Use of questions should also focus on increasing student engagement. Ongoing feedback on the implementation of new practices at the classroom level will increase the impact of training sessions.

II: Culture and Climate for Learning

The culture and climate for learning is a significant strength at Westfield South. Behavioral expectations appear to be consistent in nearly all classrooms and are well understood by the majority of students. Leadership and staff have purposefully and effectively created an environment that sets the stage for teaching and learning to occur. The atmosphere throughout the school is orderly, respectful and safe.

Across the 46 observations conducted by the FF team, behavior expectations either met or exceeded the standard in most classrooms. The FF team rated the 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
Transitions from activities/classes are fluid; maximizing instructional time	8/40 (20%)	29/40 (72%)	3/40 (7%)
Student/staff interactions are positive and respectful	4/40 (10%)	28/40 (70%)	8/40 (20%)
Clear behavior expectations are evident	4/41 (8%)	30/40 (75%)	7/40 (17%)

There is minimal evidence of student behavior problems across Westfield South classrooms. In classes rated by the FF team as “exceeded the standard,” there were not any disciplinary problems during the observation. In classes that met the standard, student behavior required minimal attention and consisted primarily of teacher efforts to redirect inattentive students. Focus groups conducted with teachers indicated that “students are ready to learn” and, generally, behavior issues at Westfield South are not an impediment to learning. In 92% of the classrooms observed, clear expectations for student behavior were evident.

Westfield South has purposely created a climate and culture for teaching and learning to occur. To further create positive teacher and student relations, Westfield South has established a chapter of the Foundation for Excellence Schools – The Century Program (TCP). This program targets underserved students who are at risk of not graduating from high school and pairs them with teachers to assist over the course of the students’ time at Westfield South. TCP is designed to help students improve academic performance and attendance, to develop personal and academic goals and, ultimately, to work toward ensuring future successes (that is, graduation from high school and college entrance). In focus group interviews, teachers expressed personal satisfaction with their involvement and reported better student/teacher rapport, which was attributed to their participation in this program. This was corroborated by FF team observations, as friendly and amicable exchanges between students and teachers were evident in 90% of the classrooms visited.

The culture for learning at Westfield South is well established. Student behavior is not an issue and the climate is free from distractions and disturbances. The conditions are in place to support a strong academic focus and targeted improvement efforts.

III: School Leadership

Westfield South is well-organized and managed. School leadership is supported by staff and has successfully cultivated a culture for learning (see Domain II), which sets the occasion for school improvement. The School Improvement Plan (SIP) has been revised. In the judgment of the FF team, the new SIP appears to provide a sound road map for improvement. Because improvement efforts have been focused on the planning process, initiatives have yet to produce significant changes at the classroom level. It is not clear that the current model of instructional leadership, which is primarily provided by district as opposed to school leadership, is sufficient to support the needed improvements to instruction and related classroom practices.

School and district leadership have recognized the weaknesses to the former SIP, which was found to be “unsound” by both the Department of Education (DOE) and the Panel Review team in the fall of 2005. In interviews with the FF team, both school and district leadership cited “poor communication” and a “lack of guidance” as factors contributing to the inadequacy of the previous improvement plan. Staff reported, for example, that they have student performance data to inform a school improvement plan but they were unaware that it was needed and were unsure about how this information was to be incorporated.

At the time of the Fact Finding visit, Westfield South had completed a revised SIP and is in the process of seeking district endorsement and DOE approval. School and district leadership reported apprehension in moving forward without approval to ensure that the plan is sufficient to improve school practices. The FF team completed an informal review of the new Westfield South SIP and noted dramatic differences that appear to address many of its former weaknesses from the previous SIP. These include the incorporation of baseline data, specific instruction strategies and specific and measurable goals.

The school improvement process at Westfield South has been focused on the planning process during this school year. As a result of these efforts, several positive changes, including the following, have occurred at Westfield South. The mathematics department has created and implemented checklists to track student progress. The science department has piloted MCAS preparation questions. Title One staff members are serving students who have performed poorly on MCAS. The school day schedule has been modified to increase instructional time in ELA/reading. In addition, the school continues to utilize the Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) model to guide improvement planning in both ELA and mathematics. Westfield South is in the early stages of analyzing data for both the aggregate and the school’s subgroup populations, linking the data to whole school reform and changes in instruction at the classroom level.

Improvement efforts, however, have yet to directly focus on classroom instruction, which is an area of weakness at Westfield South (see Domain I). More specific strategies for improving teaching in both ELA and mathematics have been incorporated into the revised SIP. In interviews with the FF team, both district and school leadership indicated they are aware of the weaknesses in classroom instruction. Teachers report that they are “working hard” and the principal and assistant principals corroborated that “the teachers are very dedicated.” These

efforts, however, have not yet had the desired impact on student improvement; the school has not yet moved the improvement planning process into the implementation phase.

There is limited instructional leadership to monitor and provide feedback on teaching practices at the school level. The organizational model and leadership structure does not require the principal to provide instructional leadership. The primary roles and responsibilities of the principal – as described by district personnel and the principal – focuses more on the administrative aspects of education, as opposed to teaching and learning. School administrators do conduct informal classroom walkthroughs and provide some verbal feedback to teachers. Instructional oversight is primarily provided by district content supervisors. Teaching staff are most closely monitored and supported by these district administrators, who also complete staff evaluations at the school. Both district content supervisors and Westfield South staff report frequent contact and regular visits to the school. However, they are not on site at Westfield South on a daily basis. Also, district personnel have numerous additional responsibilities. In an interview with the district, it was reported that district content supervisors, who currently serve grades 7-12, are slated to assume responsibility for content supervision across the district's K-12 program in the future.

Westfield South staff does not uniformly identify the school principal as the instructional leader. When asked during focus groups with the FF team to identify the instructional leader at the school, many teachers had difficulty responding to the question. Once clarified, staff indicated that the principal is the “person in charge of the school,” but view the team of district content supervisors as “their instructional leaders.” The current structure of instructional oversight resides primarily at the district level and places little responsibility on school leaders. District content supervisors, who are not school-based, are responsible for completing the staff evaluation forms (see below). As a result, teachers do not view the principal as the person in charge of teaching and learning. It is the judgment of the FF team that the school is not currently receiving the full benefit of its instructional leadership capacities, which could be provided by the principal or the assistant principals. Instructional practices at Westfield South have been identified as an area of weakness at the school (see Domain I). It is possible that district level instructional leadership may not be sufficient to provide ongoing feedback and support to teachers, to improve the quality of instruction at the school.

Although the school and district has a comprehensive model for staff evaluation, it does not provide long-term, robust supervision to the majority of its staff. The current evaluation process at Westfield South provides frequent observations for teachers in their first three years of teaching but dramatically declines in years four through seven. New teachers are observed four times annually for the first three years. Cycle I begins in Year Four with two formal evaluations per year. Cycle II – Year Five – is a year of peer observation. Cycle III is called the Collaborative Year, when teachers elect committee work or special projects. Cycle IV is referred to as the Reflection Year, which several teachers referred to as “the year off.” The school and district employ a summative evaluation form that identifies seven areas of focus: Currency in Curriculum; Effective Planning and Assessment of Curriculum and Instruction; Effective Management of Classroom Environment; Effective Instruction; Promotions of High Standards and Expectations for Student Achievement; Promotion of Equity and Appreciation of Diversity; and Fulfillment of Professional Responsibilities.

A review of teacher evaluations (without names) revealed that most of the completed forms lacked detail and specific directions for improvement. District leaders indicated that the evaluation process is tied to district-adopted standards of practice. The FF team, however, was unable to identify how these standards were adopted at the classroom level. Nor were the standards detected in the summative narratives. It does not appear that written evaluation documents have a clear and direct link to school-wide improvement efforts. Furthermore, district leaders report that 60 to 80 percent of the current staff is on professional status; they have been teaching for more than three years and do not receive regular evaluations. The majority of the school's staff, because of their professional status, does not receive formal evaluations that provide feedback. Other than the formal evaluation process, Westfield South does not have a clear system for instructional oversight, monitoring or providing feedback to teachers. As a result, the majority of Westfield South teachers are not receiving frequent, systematic feedback on the implementation of instructional strategies – a component that is critical to improving teaching practices and, therefore, increasing student learning.

As one means of oversight, district content supervisors hold monthly meetings for teachers in each content area. These meetings are scheduled simultaneously for staff in each content area (e.g., mathematics meeting, science meeting). Teachers reported that the meetings are “valuable,” are important for professional development and are often devoted to teaching and content standards. District personnel indicated that the meetings are designed primarily to discuss curriculum and instruction. It was not clear to the FF team, however, how content area meetings are used to support consistent use of instructional practices when these meetings are occurring in different locations, with different agendas. In addition, since meetings occur simultaneously, it is impossible for the principal to attend content area meetings as a possible mechanism for ensuring consistent and unified instructional approaches. The principal could not attend both the mathematics and science content area meetings. In the judgment of the FF team, this is another weakness in the current instructional leadership system, which has also contributed to the inconsistent quality of instructional practices at Westfield South.

Although instructional leadership to support teaching practices is an identified gap at Westfield South, the FF team identified the following strengths that can be built upon as the school begins its improvement efforts.

1. The current principal has significant support from the teaching staff.
2. Staff appears willing to work hard and to take new direction when offered. Staff does not appear to be resistant or reluctant to change.
3. The school has sufficient personnel in leadership positions to guide improvement efforts, with continued support from the district.
4. The improvement planning efforts, which have been modeled after the PIM process, are well underway and have the potential of to guide the implementation of focused initiatives.

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

- **Westfield South should consider site-based leadership models to establish on-site personnel as the instructional leaders at the school.** Teaching and learning will be better supported with direct and frequent support and supervision from leaders who are based at the school. A decentralized approach to school management should allow the school leadership to respond to the unique and specific needs of teachers, within the context of Westfield South, on a daily and ongoing basis. Specific and focused instructional leadership is necessary to improve the quality of instruction, support the implementation of new initiatives and, therefore, increase student achievement.
- **Once the SIP is approved, the school should focus its efforts on implementation.** The implementation of the SIP should focus on bringing planned efforts to the classroom level. This includes specific direction on how teachers can improve instruction as related to the learning needs of Westfield South students, consideration of the school's subgroups and an increased focus on mathematics. Improvement efforts should be the focus of planning instruction, implementation of teaching practices and should be supported by instructional leadership through ongoing monitoring and feedback.

IV: Organizational Structures and Management

The current organizational structures at Westfield South are not consistent with middle school best practices. The school has not modified its schedule to provide sufficient time for instruction in mathematics. Although scheduling adjustments have been made to support increased instruction in ELA, it is not clear that increased time is having the necessary impact on academic achievement. A specific agenda does not guide common planning time, which limits the effectiveness of this initiative. In order to see necessary increases in student performance at Westfield South, efforts must focus on improving instruction practices, which includes the structures to support teaching and learning.

The daily schedule at Westfield South does not provide adequate instructional time – particularly in mathematics. The school schedule is based on an eight-period day, consisting of 42-minute instructional blocks. Each day, students attend five core academic classes: reading, mathematics, science, social studies and English language arts. When asked about the length of instructional periods in focus groups with the FF team, teachers reported that, “We make it work.” Other staff indicated that, “On a good day, we typically get 30 minutes, due to transitions and daily procedures that take time.” This was of particular concern to the FF team in light of the school's low performance rates in mathematics. Thirty to forty minutes of instructional time in mathematics is not sufficient to increase student performance in this subject area.

The school has extended instructional time in reading and writing by providing each student with two classes – one in reading and one English language arts – for a combined 84 minutes of instruction in these subject areas. These classes, however, are taught by two different teachers and may not occur back-to-back in the students' schedule. Although increased instructional time is a benefit, the current schedule provides disruption to teaching and learning in ELA and may limit consistency of instructional delivery in this key academic area. It is the judgment of the FF

team that instruction in ELA would have a greater impact if it were delivered across a unified time span by the same teacher.

In addition, the structure of the school's ELA program – specifically, reading and writing – lacks cohesion and a formal curriculum to ensure consistency across classes. When asked about the school's reading program, teachers responded that they "Don't really have one." Other teachers indicated that "Scott Foresman texts are available as a resource." Reading and ELA teachers plan their lessons separately. Instruction in writing is available on a rotating schedule as an elective. Currently, the work that students do in the writing lab is not directly tied to the work that they are doing in either the reading or English Language arts classes. Due to the restrictions of the current schedule, teachers who are responsible for instruction in ELA, reading and writing do not all have common planning time. They do not benefit from a shared and coherent curriculum and, as a result, student projects are not designed to address similar achievement goals. In the judgment of the FF team, this has likely produced gaps in instruction – and, therefore, student learning – in these core academic areas.

The daily schedule provides an "academic support" period for most students each day. It is not clear, however, that students are receiving instructional benefit from the time allotted. In observations conducted by the FF team, academic support periods resembled a traditional study hall. Most students appeared to complete homework or other activities independently. In focus groups, most teachers reported establishing a standard routine that includes checking to see if students had any missing work or if they needed to make up tests. In addition, students can seek assistance and, conversely, teachers could require students to work with them, if needed. Teachers did not report – nor did the FF team observe – the use of academic support time to group students for targeted instruction.

As previously reported in Domain III, Westfield South has incorporated additional Title One services to support struggling students, as determined by MCAS results. Targeted support efforts have occurred in the form of supplemental services, which occur during electives. That is, as the schedule rotates to the next elective, students targeted for Title One support receive additional instruction. At the time of the FF visit, improvement plans at Westfield South were still in draft format. Students identified for support services were based on previous MCAS performance, regardless of current achievement levels. In addition, there is minimal collaboration between Title One service providers and regular classroom teachers, which limits the consistency between classroom practices and targeted support services.

Common planning time (CPT) is underutilized at Westfield South as a tool to advance teaching and learning. The current schedule affords teachers time and opportunities to collaborate as grade level teams for a minimum of 42 minutes per day, five days per week. Each team of teachers is comprised of the core content teachers and, in some cases, special education teachers and Title One staff. However, the schedule for CPT is determined by individual teachers and attendance and participation is optional. In focus groups conducted with the FF team, teachers reported that CPT is used as preparation time and for administrative tasks that are not directly tied to instruction. School leadership has not established a common agenda or specific expectations for what teachers are to accomplish during CPT. As a result, neither teachers nor students are

receiving the full impact of this opportunity. The current schedule is an obstacle to collaboration between core academic teachers and other special services staff. CPT is created by the elective offerings (e.g., writing lab, art) and, thus, there is little communication between academic core teachers and the other teachers who serve the same students.

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

- **Explore alternative scheduling options and structures.** Make effort to maximize instructional time, specifically in mathematics. The school day schedule should focus on increasing teaching and learning in the core academic subjects.
- **Establish a set agenda for common planning time that is focused on the improvement initiatives.** Regular meetings should be guided by an agenda, which is set forth by school leadership, monitored through participation by school leadership and shared with staff through meeting minutes. CPT should include special education and elective teachers. It should be focused on a common, school-wide agenda that is based on improvement efforts.

V: District Support

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

Domain I: Curriculum and Instruction

The district has supplied Westfield South with curriculum and resources to support the school's academic program. To see necessary increases in student performance, improvement efforts must focus on increasing the consistent quality of instructional practices. This requires collaboration from the district, through training support and oversight – specifically in the areas of differentiated instruction, use of questions to elicit higher-order thinking and other strategies to increase student engagement. Professional development activities to support instruction are likely to be beneficial. Targeted training activities will have the greatest impact if staff receives feedback on implementation and is presented with opportunities to discuss newly-learned teaching strategies. The district must collaborate with the school to align areas of instructional improvement with the SIP.

Domain II: Climate and Culture for Learning

The climate and culture for learning is a significant strength at Westfield South. There are no findings for the district in this domain.

Domain III: School Leadership

It appears that district improvement plans are aligned with the school. Efforts to collaborate in the PIM process have been ongoing. Revisions to the SIP have been the focus of improvement efforts at Westfield South since the Panel Review in the fall of 2005. Although the district has invested time and attention to rewriting the SIP, the plan has yet to be implemented because approval is still being sought. Once approved, SIP implementation must focus on improving instructional practices to support student learning. This requires ongoing and consistent support from the district, to see necessary increase in student performance rates at Westfield South.

Instructional leadership resides at the district level, rather than with the school's administrators. The current use of district content supervisors has limited the capacity of school leaders to provide instructional support and oversight. Furthermore, staff's perception and understanding of the school principal as an instructional leader is unclear. The district has provided Westfield South with strong leadership and should consider reallocating the oversight of teaching and learning to incorporate further control at the school level. It may be necessary for the district to engage in a partnership with the local professional association to alter the current evaluation processes and to establish the school principal as the direct supervisor.

In the judgment of the FF team, improving the quality of instruction is a critical priority. The district must work collaboratively with the school to establish instructional leadership and oversight that is likely to have the greatest impact on teaching and learning.

Domain IV: Organizational Structures and Management

The current school leader has demonstrated skill in the area of organizational management. The school day schedule at Westfield South, however, is not currently structured to maximize teaching, learning and related initiatives. The district should work with school leadership and/or provide school leaders the authority to restructure the school day to support academic excellence within the context of a middle school philosophy. This new schedule should consider increased instructional time in core academic subjects, continuity in ELA programming, targeted academic support services and continued common planning time that is organized to include all staff.

In addition, instructional leadership – at either the school level, district level or both – must utilize common planning time as a vehicle for moving improvement efforts forward. CPT should be based on structured, school-wide agendas that are aligned with the SIP. The school's instructional leaders should participate in and/or monitor the use of CPT.

Conclusion

There are a number of strengths that Westfield South can build upon as improvement efforts begin. These include: a stable and well-managed learning environment; a seasoned and committed staff who are committed to improvement; students who demonstrate that they are ready to learn; competent school administrators who are held in high regard by staff; and, a revised School Improvement Plan (SIP).

In the judgment of the FF team, the inconsistent quality of instructional practices at Westfield South has had the greatest impact on the low student performance rates. School and district leadership recognize this as a weakness at the school. The revised SIP, which is still in the process of being approved, considers some instructional areas in need of improvement. In addition, the FF team recommends that the school and district reconsider the current system for supplying instructional oversight. Instructional leadership responsibilities reside primarily at the district level. As efforts to improve instructional practices at Westfield South move forward, teachers should be provided ongoing and frequent feedback on classroom practices. This might be best provided at the school level, to ensure consistency and alignment with the improvement initiatives.

In addition, the current school day schedule does not make maximum use of instructional time. Supplemental services and academic support programs may not be having the greatest possible impact on student learning. Common planning time is not dictated by a specific agenda and, as a result, teaching and learning is not the focus of professional dialogue. Each of these structures could be better utilized to support instruction, student learning and, consequently, school-wide improvement efforts.

APPENDIX A Team Members

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**Westfield South Middle School
Westfield Public Schools
FACT-FINDING REVIEW SCHEDULE
April 23-26, 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