

School Panel Review Report Great Falls Middle School Gill-Montague Public Schools

Introduction

The purpose of the School Panel Review process is to assist the Commissioner of Education in determining whether State intervention is needed to guide improvement efforts in schools where students' MCAS performance is not at a level that reaches the schools' Adequate Yearly Progress targets in English language arts or mathematics or both. Great Falls Middle School met this criterion and was one of 21 schools selected for panel review in Fall 2005. The panel review was conducted on December 13 and 14, 2005.

The review panel's charge was to analyze data and written information on the school's performance and improvement efforts, visit the school, and meet with school and district officials in order to advise the Commissioner on the answers to the following two key questions:

1. Is the school implementing a sound plan for improvement, and what gains have been achieved to date as a result of this implementation?
2. Do the conditions appear to be in place for successful implementation of the school's improvement plan?

The panel's responses to the two key questions that defined the scope of its review are included in this report. These findings and conclusions are the product of the panel's analysis, discussion, and observation, based on the evidence available to it. A list of panel members who participated in the review is provided in Appendix A. A detailed schedule of the panel's activities is provided in Appendix B.

The panel's findings and conclusions on the two key questions, together with school performance data, will be forwarded to the Commissioner of Education for consideration in determining whether Great Falls Middle School is deemed under-performing. The panel was not asked to formulate a sound plan for school improvement where such a plan does not presently exist or to recommend a course of action to create the conditions for successful implementation of sound improvement strategies where such conditions at present do not appear to exist. Diagnostic and/or prescriptive intervention, where needed to assist an under-performing school, occurs at the next stage of the school review process.

Great Falls Middle School Profile

Enrollment

Great Falls Middle School serves students in grades seven and eight, and is the only school in the district serving these grades. Enrollment at Great Falls has decreased from 262 students in 2004 to 224 students in 2005. Between 2002 and 2005, student demographics have remained relatively stable, with the exception of the Low-Income subgroup, which has grown steadily from 24 percent in 2002 to 51 percent in 2005. The proportion of First Language Not English students has also risen slightly, from 4 percent each year from 2002 to 2004 to 7 percent in 2005. Proportions of Great Falls student subgroups in 2005, as compared to state averages, are presented on the next page:

| Subgroup | 2005 Enrollment (%) | |
|----------------------------|---------------------|-------|
| | School | State |
| Asian | 1 | 5 |
| Black | 3 | 9 |
| Hispanic | 5 | 12 |
| Native American | 0 | 0.3 |
| White | 91 | 74 |
| Low-Income | 51 | 28 |
| First Language Not English | 7 | 14 |
| Limited English Proficient | 2 | 5 |
| Special Education | 22 | 16 |

In 2005, the attendance rate at Great Falls Middle School was 94.1 percent, with students absent 10.2 days on average. These numbers are similar to district and state averages. Hispanic students have the highest rates of absenteeism, with 16.5 days absent on average. The school's retention rate was 0.4 percent in 2004, the last year for which this data is available. Great Falls Middle School's in-school suspension rate in 2005 was 30.4 percent, while out-of-school suspensions averaged 31.3 percent. These numbers represent a significant jump from previous years. 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 Great Falls Middle School staffing report indicates that the school is comprised of one administrator, 18 teachers, one school psychologist, one librarian, one nurse, six teacher aides, and four additional personnel. The principal has been at the school for 27 years and has a total of five years of administrative experience. Of the teachers, approximately 41 percent have been at the school for ten or more years, 35 percent have been at the school for fewer than five years, and 12 percent (2 teachers) were new to the school in 2005. Teachers average roughly 17 years of teaching experience, with 41 percent having taught for 20 or more years compared to only 18 percent (3 teachers) having taught for less than five years. Seventeen of 18 teachers (including the school psychologist and adjustment counselor) are reported as highly qualified, and approximately 71 percent have earned an advanced degree.

MCAS Overview

Students at Great Falls Middle School are assessed in Grade seven in English language arts (ELA) and in Grade eight in mathematics. Great Falls' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report for 2005 Mid-Cycle IV shows an accountability status of No Status for ELA and Corrective Action for mathematics. The school failed to make AYP in ELA in 2005 for the aggregate population and for the Low-Income subgroup.¹ This is the first year that the school has failed to make AYP in ELA for either the aggregate or subgroups. In mathematics, the school failed to make AYP in 2005 for the aggregate population and for the Low-Income and White subgroups. Great Falls has not made

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 five percent 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 Great Falls Middle School in 2005 were Low-Income and White.

AYP in the aggregate for four years, including 2001, 2002, 2004, and 2005. In mathematics, the school has never made AYP for its subgroups since they were first reported in 2003.

In 2005, the aggregate Composite Performance Indices (CPIs) for Great Falls Middle School are 80.2 in ELA and 46.6 in mathematics. Year-by-year aggregate CPIs are shown below:

| Year-by-Year Aggregate CPI Data Summary | | |
|--|------------|-------------|
| Year | ELA | Math |
| 2001 | 75.8 | 51.6 |
| 2002 | 86.0 | 55.1 |
| 2003 | 84.4 | 57.9 |
| 2004 | 85.8 | 56.3 |
| 2005 | 80.2 | 46.6 |
| State Target 2005 | 80.5 | 68.7 |

GRADE 7

ELA MCAS Results

Results of the 2005 Grade 7 ELA MCAS for students at Great Falls Middle School are shown here:

| 2005 ELA | Percent | | | |
|---------------------|----------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| | A | P | NI | W/F |
| Aggregate | 0 | 47 | 43 | 11 |
| Regular Education | 0 | 66 | 34 | 0 |
| Special Education | 0 | 3 | 61 | 35 |

Regular Education students at Great Falls have significantly outperformed Special Education students in ELA. No students scored in the Advanced category, but 66 percent of Regular Education student and 3 percent of Special Education students performed in the Proficient category. Aggregate student performance has been variable over time, but with an overall improvement since 2001, as reflected in the aggregate Grade 7 ELA MCAS performance outlined next:

| Aggregate ELA | Percent | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| | A | P | NI | W/F |
| 2005 | 0 | 47 | 43 | 11 |
| 2004 | 3 | 59 | 32 | 6 |
| 2003 | 6 | 52 | 36 | 6 |
| 2002 | 9 | 56 | 31 | 4 |
| 2001 | 2 | 38 | 46 | 14 |

The percentage of students scoring Advanced or Proficient was lowest in 2001 at 40 percent, rose to a peak of 65 percent in 2002, and has since declined to 47 percent in 2005. The percentages of students scoring Warning/Failing and Needs Improvement have increased by 16 percent. Special Education students have shown improvement from 2001 to 2004, followed by a decline in 2005, as reflected in the next table:

| Special Education ELA | Percent | | | |
|--------------------------|---------|----|----|-----|
| | A | P | NI | W/F |
| | 0 | 3 | 61 | 35 |
| 2004 | 0 | 29 | 58 | 13 |
| 2003 | 0 | 17 | 64 | 19 |
| 2002 | 0 | 10 | 71 | 19 |
| 2001 | 0 | 5 | 53 | 42 |

For Special Education students, the percentage of students scoring Proficient increased from 5 percent in 2001 to 29 percent in 2004, followed by a decline to 3 percent in 2005. Students scoring Warning/Failing decreased between 2001 and 2004, and then increased in 2005.

GRADE 8

Mathematics MCAS Results

Results of the 2005 Grade 8 Mathematics MCAS for students at Great Falls Middle School are presented here:

| 2005 Math | Percent | | | |
|-------------------|---------|----|----|-----|
| | A | P | NI | W/F |
| Aggregate | 3 | 12 | 39 | 46 |
| Regular Education | 4 | 17 | 45 | 34 |
| Special Education | 0 | 0 | 22 | 78 |

Regular Education students at Great Falls have significantly outperformed Special Education students in mathematics. Aggregate student performance overall has declined slightly since 2001, as reflected in the aggregate Grade 8 math MCAS performance shown below:

| Aggregate Math | Percent | | | |
|-------------------|---------|----|----|-----|
| | A | P | NI | W/F |
| 2005 | 3 | 12 | 39 | 46 |
| 2004 | 2 | 22 | 33 | 43 |
| 2003 | 3 | 23 | 39 | 34 |
| 2002 | 2 | 21 | 34 | 43 |
| 2001 | 3 | 14 | 41 | 42 |

The percentage of students scoring Advanced or Proficient rose from 17 percent in 2001 to a high of 26 percent in 2003, and then dropped to a low of 15 percent in 2005. Similarly, the percentages of students scoring Warning/Failing rose from 42 percent in 2001 to 46 percent in 2005. The percentage of students scoring Needs Improvement dropped slightly from 41 percent in 2001 to 39 percent in 2005, indicating a slight reduction in overall performance from 2001 to 2005. Special Education students have seen a slight increase in overall performance from 2001 to 2005, as outlined next:

| Special Education Math | Percent | | | |
|---------------------------|---------|---|----|-----|
| | A | P | NI | W/F |
| 2005 | 0 | 0 | 22 | 78 |
| 2004 | 0 | 3 | 21 | 76 |
| 2003 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 88 |
| 2002 | 0 | 0 | 13 | 88 |
| 2001 | 0 | 0 | 14 | 86 |

The percentage of Special Education students scoring Warning/Failing has decreased from 86 percent in 2001 to 78 percent in 2005, while the percentage of students scoring Needs Improvement has increased from 14 percent in 2001 to 22 percent in 2005. These changes indicate that improvement is the result of students moving from Warning/Failing to Needs Improvement. Special Education students have scored in the Proficient category only in 2004.

PANEL RESPONSES TO THE KEY QUESTIONS

In an effort to minimize disruption to the Great Falls Middle School community, and with the agreement of the school, the Panel Review was scheduled to coincide with the review of the district by the state's Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA). While the scope and focus of the two reviews are different, EQA examiners shared their findings from classroom visits they conducted in the middle school with the Panel Review Team. The Panel Review Team also conducted observations in literacy and mathematics classes as part of their school-level review.

KEY QUESTION ONE: IS THE SCHOOL IMPLEMENTING A SOUND PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENT, AND WHAT GAINS HAVE BEEN ACHIEVED TO DATE AS A RESULT OF THIS IMPLEMENTATION?

No. The current three-year (2004-2006) school improvement plan lacks specificity—in identifying the academic needs of its students in mathematics and English language arts, formulating action plans that include needed changes in current curriculum and instruction, setting timelines for implementation, and establishing benchmarks and measures of progress on implementation or student learning—to serve as a coherent guide for curricular and instructional improvement needed at the school, particularly in mathematics. Gains on climate indicators such as higher attendance and many fewer disciplinary incidents have reportedly resulted from several steps taken over the last two years.

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

School Improvement Plans (SIPs) were submitted in preparation for School Panel Reviews scheduled in November and December 2005. Teams of three Department of Education staff members reviewed the written plans and completed summary assessments of their soundness, based on a Department rubric with specific indicators for five central components: overall clarity and coherence of the plan, identifying and prioritizing problems based on multiple sources of data, analyzing the causes of weakness in student performance, establishing improvement objectives and selecting strategies, and establishing benchmarks for implementation and outcomes. The judgment on the soundness of these written documents provided in the summary rubric was based solely on a close reading of the written documents submitted. It was not a final determination. The panelists used the summary rubric to inform their discussion of the written plan each panelist had read individually prior to the review, and to help focus their time in the school on the

implementation of the planned strategies. Final judgment on the soundness of the school's plan—and the panel's overall response to Key Question 1 in the Panel Review Protocol—depended upon further information about the development of the plan and evidence of the plan's implementation that was gathered by the panel during on-site interviews, focus groups and observations.

A fundamental gap in the school's improvement planning is the absence of analysis of student performance data to specify student learning needs and target strategies to address those needs. The school is in Corrective Action for mathematics, with a Composite Performance Index (CPI) of 46.6. The plan offers no assessment of the core programmatic or instructional causes for the chronically low performance and lack of significant improvement in math over the past few years, including a 10.4-point decline in the school's CPI in math in 2005.

The three-year School Improvement Plan 2004-2006 submitted to the Department for review meets none of the criteria for a sound plan as defined by the DOE rubric. It appears to be a merger of two different types of action plans: one focused on two objectives for climate and the other that includes two objectives following a template from the Massachusetts Teachers Association Priority Schools Initiative (PSI), designed to assist teachers in low-performing schools. It is not apparent in the document where the goals came from, or who determined them, or who actually contributed to the planning process. Although the plan is presented as, and is widely considered, a multi-year plan, it is very sparse and provides no indication of when actions will take place over the three years. It also fails to note what has already been accomplished during the first year of implementation (2004-2005). Instead, the principal provided the panel with a separate document that lists goals and accomplishments to date.

The single academic objective to create “standards-based units in ELA and math across the curriculum, aligned with the Curriculum Frameworks” does not address the more basic question of root causes. It therefore does not articulate what needs to happen and when in order to make specific changes to teaching and learning in mathematics classes that will lead to improved student performance. A generic action plan does provide an overview of what would need to happen to begin to develop standards-based curriculum, instruction and assessments for ELA and mathematics across the curriculum in any school. It also fails to list the types of training teachers would need. The level of detail presented in the action plan would not be sufficient as a guide for teachers' implementation of specific sets of strategies to reach this objective.

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

In the School Leadership Report (SLR), the principal described a process that involved assistance from the MTA, utilizing the results of a KEYS survey completed by the staff in which they identified several key areas in need of improvement (p2, Q8). The six-member team included three teachers, one paraprofessional, the principal and the president of the local association. The goals were then presented to the full faculty for discussion and approval. The two goals on attendance and transition to middle school were developed by the School Community Council, based on attendance data and “personal experience with transitioning students and district improvement data.”

There is currently no calendar or mechanism in place for school improvement planning at the school. The superintendent has discussed local school improvement plans and how they connect to the district plan. The superintendent, principal and staff are relying on the faculty study groups to determine their action plans for improving math. The soundness of this approach will depend on the level and quality of support the teachers receive for using performance data and other

assessment information and for linking the work in the study groups to school improvement planning.

Professional development planning has been linked by the school to the goals and objectives outlined in the school plan. The fourth objective in the 2004-2006 improvement plan is to develop standards-based units in English language arts and mathematics. The 2004-2006 school improvement plan calls for the formation of faculty study groups as the professional learning that will be needed for teachers to reach their academic objectives. Last year, as participants in the Massachusetts Teachers Association's Priority Schools Initiative, the staff received professional development on how to build standards-based units. Beginning in October 2004 and throughout the 2004-2005 school year, teachers attended one full-day and five half-day sessions on "creating standards-based units using ELA and math across the curriculum." The goal set for the training was for teachers to complete one unit for their own class and one common unit, developed collaboratively and then taught individually. The principal and teachers reported that the presentations were not a good use of their professional development time, but that when they met in small groups, they did well on their own. In September 2005, the school withdrew from participation in the initiative.

In 2004, the superintendent introduced the district to Whole Faculty Study Groups (WFSGs) in each of the schools to provide time for teachers to plan collaboratively. A team of educators from a middle school in New York presented the improved student achievement data that resulted from the school's use of the groups for two years. The Gill-Montague district piloted the program in its Reading First schools in 2004-2005. These study groups focused on improving school climate—i.e., improving attendance and decreasing disciplinary incidents/disruptions—beginning with the middle school version of the Responsive Classroom model, known as Responsive Designs. In June 2005, Gene Thompson-Grove presented a two-day intensive workshop on a Looking at Student Work protocol. This workshop was attended by Reading First faculty and all administrators.

In September 2005, Karl Clauset presented a half-day workshop to all the faculty and paraprofessionals in Gill-Montague, and Whole-Faculty Study Groups (WFSGs) were formed in all of the buildings in the district. The superintendent describes the goal of the WFSGs as instituting and supporting a plan-reflect-plan cycle of continuous improvement and embedded professional development. Teachers in the district get 11 half-days (every other Friday) for in-service. This year, the superintendent required one hour of each in-service to be dedicated to WFSG meetings.

The WFSG meeting schedule and agendas show that the study groups have met five times to date. In a focus group, teachers each reported on the work underway in their WFSG in math, and reported being more conscious either of trying to incorporate math into their own subject matter or of emphasizing the mathematical concepts they had always used more than they did in the past. Although the staff is small, these groups appear to be fostering conversations about student learning and achievement that were not happening before the groups were formed. They have begun to raise consciousness about the importance and applicability of math throughout the curriculum.

The formation of the groups and their school-wide focus on mathematics are promising. However, at present the study groups are working with little or no support from outside the building. Karl Clauset is reportedly available by phone and email to answer questions from the principal until the end of the school year, although he is not currently under contract.

According to the School Leadership Report submitted by the Principal, copies of the plan are distributed on a regular basis, including the beginning of the year, during individual goals

meetings, and during Whole-Faculty Study Group meetings. The school community council, (i.e., school site council), contributed the first two goals on attendance and transition to the plan. Teachers verified this fact. The plan was presented to the School Committee. The Panel Review Team found that teachers are familiar with the four goals/objectives articulated in the plan.

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

Although the academic objective in the school improvement plan was reportedly formulated using the results of a KEYS teacher self-assessment survey, the Instructional Staff Survey completed by teachers in October, prior to the on-site visit, indicated a mixed level of understanding on the part of staff regarding their own roles in implementing the action plans in the 2004-2007 plan. In response to Question 12—"Do you know what you are expected to do to improve student performance according to your school's improvement plan?"—six teachers cited their participation in the Whole-Faculty Study Groups. Other teachers were "not sure" what was expected of them, responded "not specifically," or simply said "no."

According to the Instructional Staff Survey completed by 28 of the 31 teachers and paraprofessionals working in the school as of October 2005, seven of the 28 respondents do not know what they are expected to do to improve student performance according to their school improvement plan. Five teachers specifically cited Whole-Faculty Study Groups as the key strategy for improving performance in mathematics.

None of the 25 respondents who answered Question 13—"What are the reasons for low student performance at your school?"—cited academic causes within the school's control for chronically low student performance in mathematics. Socio-economic factors, discipline, lack of student motivation and parental involvement were cited in virtually all responses. In interviews, teachers did not bring these issues. Instead, they reported that they were trying to incorporate more writing and mathematics into their own classes.

The Team found evidence that the strategies aimed at the first two school improvement plan goals on climate have been put in place and/or are being practiced more consistently in the building this year. In a document provided to the Team, the principal listed the following actions undertaken to address these goals.

1. To maintain attendance rate of 95% or higher: Attendance letters are sent to parents after five absences. Two chronically absent students have been reported to Social Services for attendance, and certificates for perfect attendance will be awarded at Honor Roll Assembly.

The principal, teachers, and one of the interventionists working in the school report that other strategies not in the plan but now underway to improve the climate are contributing to the rise in attendance from 94 percent last year to 96 percent so far this year. A Circle of Power and Respect (CPR) class that resulted from staff training in Responsive Designs for Middle Schools is held every morning for 20 minutes to start the day with routines aimed at developing social skills. This class is now taught by all teachers. One of the school's two interventionists also pointed to better use of CPR as a major contributor to improved attendance and overall communication and climate at the school this year.

2. To create a smooth transition from 6th grade to middle school: Great Falls enrolls students from three feeder elementary schools—Gill Elementary and Sheffield Elementary in the district and Erving Elementary, which tuitions students into the district beginning in 7th grade. The principal has already visited one 6th grade and plans to visit another in December. There is a day planned for 6th graders to come to the school for an afternoon for a "step-up" day; seventh and eighth graders will go home early on that day. Teachers are completing transition sheets for their students.

3. To create a school climate focused on learning in which students and adults interact positively and respectfully: Teachers received training in Responsive Designs for Middle School (Responsive Classroom principles adapted for middle schools). While the data on attendance and in- and out-of-school suspensions clearly indicates a problem, the school improvement plan does not identify any of the possible causes for a lack of focus on learning or issues with adult/student interaction. The plan called for clearer guidelines for managing discipline issues in classrooms, and these are in place and appear to be understood by the teachers. In response to classroom disruptions, this year teachers have been trying to redirect students rather than confront them. They then proceed in the following order of escalation, if/as necessary: 1) student is moved to time-out space in each classroom when disruptive, 2) student is sent to the team leader's classroom to decompress, and 3) student is sent to the in-school suspension room, staffed by the interventionist, where a problem-solving form encourages students to figure out why they were sent to the interventionist and how this referral might have been avoided. In addition, students are no longer sent to a general detention after school, but fill out a form for a "consultation" with the teacher after school, during which the problem raised in class is discussed and resolved.

In focus groups, teachers articulated this three-step procedure and reported that as the school year goes on, the three-step approach has greatly diminished the amount of disruption to instruction. This somewhat contradicts the prevalence of behavior and disciplinary matters impeding student learning indicated in the staff survey. During visits to three math and two English language arts classes, there were no disciplinary incidents observed; however, the level of student engagement appeared low in all but one class, with students moving about the room, talking among themselves or calling out during class.

4. To create a standards-based curriculum by developing standards-based units using ELA and math across the curriculum, aligned with the Curriculum Frameworks. Progress on this goal was less evident. Several in-service training sessions last year were focused on developing standards-based units incorporating ELA and math across the curriculum, directly addressing that objective. The principal reported that teachers had each created a unit, but the Team did not review any units that resulted from that work, nor see or hear of ongoing work on these units since the school withdrew from the Priority Schools Initiative by the Massachusetts Teachers Association, which guided the planning process and provided the training on standards-based lesson planning.

Teachers reported that they do "standards-based units" regularly. In classroom observations, the standards were posted at the front of the classrooms. However, there is no tool or mechanism for consistent monitoring of implementation. The principal reports that teachers are using the standards more during his visits to classrooms. The principal reports visiting each classroom in the school twice a week for 15-20 minutes and discussing what he observed with the teacher.

The principal points to "more and more assessments being used on a regular basis." The GRADE reading assessment has been administered this year for the first time, on the advice of the district's Reading First facilitator, and the staff reports using Brainchild.com for math assessments beginning only recently. Plato software should be up and running in the near future, but it is unclear what training will be provided to help the staff use it productively.

Because the school is in Corrective Action for mathematics (with a Composite Performance Index of 46.6 at Mid-cycle IV), the inclusion of all teachers and the specific focus of all faculty study groups on teaching mathematics this year is in line with a broad need clearly demonstrated by persistent low performance on MCAS, if not with any specific goals articulated in the school's current plan. The topics covered by each of the five Whole-Faculty Study Groups were reportedly determined by looking at MCAS mathematics data prepared by the Data Analysis and Strategic Planning Project at Boston College. This data shows performance on question types broken out by

the frameworks, standards, and skill areas addressed, and it includes remedial strategies to address student performance gaps. Based on this, the groups determined which areas in math they needed to work on, and these included increased mathematical communication, test-taking skills, fractions and ratios, math concepts, and math problem solving. It is unclear whether or how these item analyses are being used by teachers to address specific learning needs of their students.

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

The school has exceeded its goal of raising attendance to 95 percent or higher, with a rate of 96.2 percent so far this year. Self-reported gains in climate include decreased disciplinary actions, a drop in detentions from 1500 in 2004 to 51 in 2005, and a significant decrease in out-of-school suspensions. To date, there are no other measurable performance benchmarks articulated in the plan, or specified by the WFSGs, for implementation of standards-based units in mathematics or English language arts.

The principal credits the clearer guidelines for responding to disciplinary issues, as well as the enhancement of the CPR classes, with improvements in climate this year. Teachers echoed this sense of overall improvement in this area. One of the interventionists, a former social worker who has been at the school for two years, describes a much-improved discipline situation. She reported a significant decline from 70 out-of-school suspensions reported last year to eight out-of-school suspensions to date for this year. She also credits the CPR class, the new three-step discipline procedure, and the relocation and rearrangement of the in-house suspension room with a dramatic decline in the number of students sent to in-school suspension. She estimated that the room dropped from accommodating 25 students a day on average last year to three or four students in 2005.

According to documents and interviews with the superintendent, principal and teachers, the principal and staff had not been analyzing student performance data to inform their decision-making and planning or to track progress. With the advent of Whole-Faculty Study Groups in September 2005, the principal and teachers began to look at student work together during their meetings. The district has purchased licenses for Plato software for online mathematics and language arts assessment; they are running into some delays in getting this software up and running effectively. In the interim, a teacher discovered a free on-line math assessment called Brainchild.com, which the district has embraced as a “powerful assessment tool.” The Team saw graphs generated by Brainchild and found them to be relatively unsophisticated. The questions generated by the software are reportedly based on, or consistent with, the Massachusetts learning standards.

Data, primarily in the form of student work, has become a topic for discussion in the study groups. The principal and superintendent acknowledge the need for extensive staff training on analyzing and using various kinds of performance data to inform their instruction. There is currently no mechanism or support for a data-driven, cyclical improvement planning and implementation process in the school. The principal reported that he is not aware of any calendar or procedures for improvement planning in the district.

The school has not been using any consistent formative assessments in math or language arts prior to 2005. The district has purchased Plato mathematics and ELA assessment software licenses, which are still in the process of being installed and implemented properly. As noted earlier, Brainchild.com is being used as an interim measure until Plato is up and running. Brainchild is an assessment that tests student knowledge on specific learning standards and generates graphs on individual progress from assessment to assessment. Teachers are reportedly using this data, as well

as student work, in the WFSGs. It is unclear how this information will be used to gauge the effectiveness of specific curricula or instructional strategies at the class or school level.

The faculty study groups show promise as a vehicle for fostering a more collaborative professional culture. The groups are still in the very early stages of using data and student work to assess specific student learning needs and progress.

Reported changes to classroom practice, with the exception of the new common approach to discipline, have been voluntary and vary from teacher to teacher. For example, language arts teachers reported using rubrics to assess work; nevertheless, these units are not standard. Other teachers report incorporating writing and math into their classes, but exactly how or how often this is done is unclear.

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

Not at present. Although by all accounts the staff is beginning to work together in a more collegial manner, current planning documents and processes are not data-driven. The current math text (McDougal-Littell, Heath), which has been in use at the middle school for ten years, is not aligned with the learning standards in the Curriculum Frameworks or aligned with other curricula in use K-6 or 9-12 in the district. Teachers are using their own supplemental materials.

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

The teachers and principal communicate often and freely. The staff sees the principal's door as always open if they have questions or concerns. The principal asks for, and receives, teacher input on most decisions that are not administrative. The principal has instituted an *Update* newsletter that lets parents know what their children are learning. The December 2005 issue included news on the 8th grade, including the link to the 8th grade team website where homework assignments are posted. Other efforts this year to establish relationships between home and school are such events as "getting to know you", parent conferences, and an open house for incoming 6th graders. A team leader contacts students who are leaving for other schools and attempts to convince them to stay; this leader also welcomes incoming students. Teachers report making phone calls to parents that include positive communications.

The teachers point to the principal as the *de facto* curriculum coordinator at the school. The principal reports visiting each classroom twice a week for a 15-20 minute informal observation. He follows up each visit with a brief conversation. However, there is no checklist or other mechanism for capturing and synthesizing this information, or for aggregating it up to the school level to track progress on implementation of any specific initiatives or strategies. The principal reports seeing more reference to the standards in teachers' lessons.

Teachers formulate personal goals with input from the principal on a Professional Growth Map form. These forms varied widely in specificity (measurability) and rigor, from "be more organized" to "implement math journals" to "work in one open-response question every two weeks in notebooks." Teachers were expected to make one of their three goals for this year focus on developing positive teacher/student relationships.

Sample evaluations from the 2004-2005 school year reviewed by the Team focus on student engagement and classroom management, with little or no feedback on instructional strategies, methods, or on the content or rigor of lessons, without reference to student skills and knowledge (learning standards), without reference to teachers' personal goals. The evaluation form provides the teacher's performance category: strong support, growth, or at risk. The principal reports that the categories are contractual, so that a new teacher, for example, is automatically characterized as

needing strong support. The evaluations reviewed varied in performance categories, but the form had no place for remediation plans or support for teachers in order to meet personal goals.

The middle school occupies a brand new wing of the Turners Falls High School complex, which includes wireless networking, a swimming pool, an auditorium, and a television studio. During a fire drill on the second day of the Team's on-site visit, staff moved students out of the building in an orderly and safe manner and then got them back into their classes with minimal disruption.

Despite the size and grade configuration of the school (two grades, 200 students, 17 full-time teachers), climate was identified as a key area of focus by the planning team. The staff survey was completed by 28 of 31 staff members (including paraprofessionals). In response to the statement, "Our school principal provides effective leadership to guide and support staff efforts to improve the academic performance of our students," 43 percent of the respondents noted that they "strongly agree" and 39 percent noted that they "agree."

The principal indicated that deep budget cuts two years ago negatively impacted morale for both teachers and students when elementary teachers with K-8 licenses and seniority in the district, with jobs being cut elsewhere in the district, were moved to the middle school to replace several laid-off non-professional status middle school teachers with subject-specific, middle school licenses. This was readjusted the next year, but again resulted in significant turnover. A very high rate of student absenteeism and of both in- and out-of school suspensions during the past three years supports the claim of weakened morale.

When asked to characterize the principal's leadership, staff members emphasized his "open-door policy," the strength of his communication skills, his respect for teachers' views and ideas, and his willingness to let staff members make decisions that are not administrative. Teachers were unable to describe specific ways the principal has provided leadership and direction for making changes in classroom practice.

The principal and staff at the school appear to have been focused on students' behavioral and discipline issues. The Team heard over and over again of how student behavior had disrupted classrooms on a regular basis, leading to 1500 after-school detentions last year. There does seem to be significant progress on this, evidenced by the 51 detentions this year to date. In answer to the question of what their vision for the school is, teachers expressed the desire to bring students to their full potential, meet them where they are and take them as far as they can, and help them do the best they can. While student performance indicates that the school is stronger in ELA than it is in mathematics (with a CPI of 80.2 in 2005), there were no students performing at the Advanced level. The Team heard no evidence of any specific picture of current student performance and no clear expectations for what would constitute improvement in student achievement. There are currently no specific targets for student performance in mathematics or language arts in place, either in the planning documents or elsewhere.

The principal is refocusing staff efforts to establish consistent standards for behavior at the school. He also appears to be encouraging the staff to develop standards-based units across the curriculum. Based on the School Leadership Report, work on curriculum and instruction in math appears to have been suspended until the Math Task Force/Curriculum Committee makes a decision on a new curriculum. A math applications class has been added to help students link work in math with real-world applications.

Teachers and students are asked for input on a variety of topics on a regular basis. The principal stated on several occasions that teacher-empowerment is important. The School Community Council developed the first two goals in the improvement plan. These goals are related to climate,

the transition to 7th grade, and attendance. Teachers report that the principal asks for their input on many decisions.

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

The identified needs in the 2004-2006 plan were largely determined by a staff self-assessment, and there is general agreement about those needs. The breakdown of results provided by Boston College was reportedly also used to develop the plan, but the Team heard little about this while on-site, and any specific information gleaned from the data is not in the plan. More specific needs are now being identified in math from student work being analyzed in WFSGs.

Teachers cited the four goals from the 2004-2006 improvement plan and reported implementing them. Focus groups agreed with the strategies for behavior and climate, including the WFSGs.

The staff firmly believes the changes have had a positive impact in the school and in the classrooms by increasing time on learning. There is a general perception among teachers that more consistent use of standards-based units will lead to improvement. There is recognition of the need for programmatic changes in mathematics. The three mathematics teachers at the school are involved on the district taskforce working to align math curriculum vertically K-8. There are not yet any clear expectations for what would constitute improvement in math beyond the cultural indicators already mentioned.

Teachers of subjects other than mathematics or English language arts reported in a focus group that they are integrating more mathematics into all their classes. They reported that their work in the study groups has raised awareness about the applications of mathematics in their own areas. They described, for example, emphasizing the mathematical properties of pyramids in history/social studies, calculating the area of floor plans in architecture, and spending more time calculating formulas in science class. A mathematics applications class has been added to the daily schedule for all 8th graders so that they are now getting two periods of math. It does not appear that the work in this class builds on what students are doing in their regular math class.

To date, there has been no plan or mechanism in place at the school for reviewing the plan and assessing the extent or effectiveness of changes in instructional practice. The WFSG could provide a structure for such a mechanism for needed review and assessment of changes in practice.

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

There is very little infrastructure, (e.g., curriculum coordinators or coaches), at the district level to provide direct guidance and support to the schools for either school improvement planning or for the implementation of curricular and instructional improvements. There is now a Reading First facilitator, who is also the Title I Director. She helped to administer the GRADE assessment at the middle school this year for the first time. It is unclear whether she has any ongoing role in supporting the middle school.

The superintendent pointed to the need for establishing standards-based curriculum and instruction in the district, including the vertical alignment of math curriculum. Acknowledging that the district has not used data in the past, she sees a need for substantial training for the staff on how to do data analysis. This would help facilitate needed changes to the school improvement plan to make it more data-based, as she says the district plan is now. Pointing to the outdated math text as an example, the superintendent expressed her commitment to the work of a K-12 Math Curriculum Committee, which will convene for a full day in mid-January to begin to review math programs. *TERC Investigations* has been in place in the district's elementary schools since 2001. The

superintendent, who has been in this position since 2002, acknowledged that the implementation of that math program was not complete, and not enough professional development was provided to teachers. She adds that teachers are anxious to use something different at the middle school. There is some discussion now about piloting *Connected Math* at the middle school and possibly in a separate pre-algebra class.

The superintendent thinks the current plan is a good guide that states goals clearly and gives objectives. The key is leadership and how it will be implemented.

The district provided time for the study groups to meet regularly by allowing schools to use their district in-service time for the WFSG meetings. A district Curriculum Committee will meet in mid-January to begin the process of selecting a new math program from a pool of three possible programs. The superintendent expresses a willingness to support the implementation of improvements, and wants the principal to let her know what he needs in order to implement the plan. The superintendent notes that she will try to provide what is needed to the school.

A scanner has been provided to the school to speed the turnaround of GRADE assessment results. Grade Quick has been provided for teachers to record and calculate grades electronically. The district funded the retention of a math teacher position, despite declining enrollment at the school. This position is used for the math applications course started in the school this year. The district also shifted a former science teacher into a technology support and implementation support position to help teachers and students maximize the new technological capacity at the new school building. A consultant was funded to work with the staff on forming the Whole Faculty Study Groups at all the district schools. This consultant is reportedly available “electronically” by phone or email to answer questions for principals this year.

The principal is participating in the Leadership Team with four other principals who meet with the superintendent every Monday. The goal is to develop principals’ skills as instructional leaders and facilitate communication between the schools and the district.

The superintendent reports that the NCLB/Title I Coordinator attended a one-day training at the Department of Education on the data-driven Performance Improvement Mapping process for improvement planning that is provided in five sessions over time to under-performing schools as part of the state’s regulatory intervention and assistance at those schools. She did not participate in the development of the current plan. The superintendent had seen the four-page plan and was familiar with the objectives, but there is no process for review, feedback, or approval of plans in this small district.

CONCLUSION

The Team found little evidence of a sense of urgency on the part of school or district leaders or staff members about their accountability status of Corrective Action or the persistently low performance of their students in mathematics. Despite the general consensus that the math textbook is inadequate, the district Curriculum Committee that was put together to explore and select a new math curriculum/program for the middle school will not meet until mid-January 2006. In the meantime, teachers at the school are creating and using units, lessons, and rubrics individually and inconsistently, and without planning assistance or ongoing implementation support.

APPENDIX A

Panel Review Team

Denise Delorey, Ph.D., School Performance Evaluator, Massachusetts Department of Education

Jacob Foster, Ph.D., School Performance Evaluator, Massachusetts Department of Education

APPENDIX B**Great Falls Middle School
School Panel Review
POTENTIALLY UNDER-PERFORMING PANEL REVIEW SCHEDULE**

All activities take place at the school.

Day 1: Monday, December 12, 2005

- 1:00 PM** Team arrives at the school
- 1:30 – 2:30** Interview Principal
- 2:30 – 3:15** Teacher Focus Group (not math or lang. arts)
- 4:00 – 5:00** Interview Superintendent

Day 2: Tuesday, December 13, 2005

- 7:30** Team arrives at the school
- 7:40** Circle of Power and Respect (CPR)
- 8:00 – 10** Classroom visits
Review documents
- 10:30 – 12** Team meets
- 12:30 – 1:30** Meet with team leaders
- 1:30 – 2:15** Meet with mathematics and English language arts teachers
- 2:30** Exit meeting with Principal
- 3:00 – 5:00** Team deliberates, organizes evidence, and responds to key questions