



Arlington Middle School
Lawrence Public Schools
SCHOOL REVIEW

September 2009

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
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Overview

To meet state accountability requirements,¹ schools in restructuring are being reviewed for the purpose of providing a progress report to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. These schools will be visited for two days to ensure that the review team has sufficient time to be able to describe improvement efforts (including district supports) and conditions at the school.

This report, by a review team of contracted Department of Elementary and Secondary Education consultants, profiles the trends in student achievement at the Arlington Middle School over the last three years and responds to two overarching key questions based on evidence collected while on site.

Key Question 1: To what extent have the school and the district demonstrated the capacity to improve student achievement?

Key Question 2: Are the conditions in place to continue to support student achievement?

The visit to the Arlington Middle School is also part of the District Plan for School Intervention (DPSI) review for the Lawrence Public Schools. The purpose of the DPSI review, being conducted in certain urban school districts, is to assess district efforts to support school intervention, including strategic decisions made to support ongoing school improvement. It also seeks to assess the impact of support given by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) for improvement efforts. DPSI reviews also carry out requirements for state audits of districts.²

The visit to Arlington Middle School was conducted from June 2-3, 2009. Further information about the review and the schedule can be found in Appendix B; information about the members of the review team can be found in Appendix A.

¹ Under 603 CMR 2.00.

² See Mass. Gen. Laws c. 15, § 55A, as amended by St. 2008, c. 311, § 3, effective August 14, 2008.

Arlington Middle School

School Profile

Arlington Middle School serves students in grades 5, 6, 7, and 8. Arlington became a middle school at the end of 2005, when the Arlington School split into Arlington Elementary School and Arlington Middle School. In the 2008-2009 school year, Arlington enrolled 450 students, of whom 18 percent were English language learners (ELL). However, the first language of 89 percent of the school's students was not English. Student demographic and subgroup information for the 2008-2009 school year is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Arlington MS Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity and Selected Populations 2008-2009

Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity	Percent of Total	Selected Populations	Percent of Total
African American	3.3%	First Language not English	88.9%
Asian	0.0%	Limited English Proficient	18.0%
Hispanic or Latino	93.6%	From low-income families	94.2%
Native American	0.0%	Special Education	21.3%
White	3.1%	Free-lunch	88.2%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.0%	Reduced-price lunch	6.0%
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	0.0%		

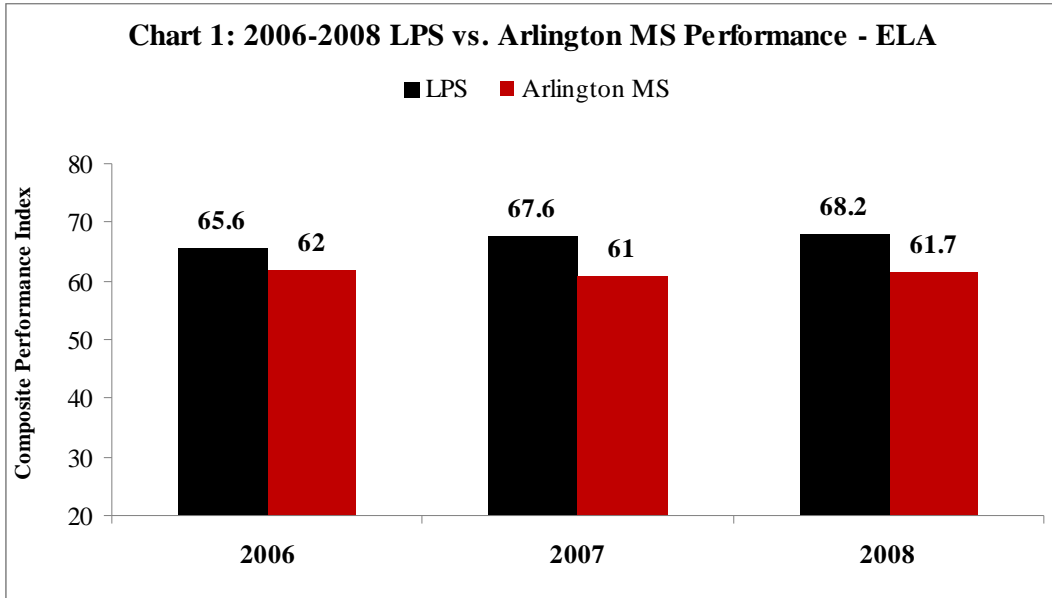
Student Performance

In 2008, Arlington Middle School did not make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) in either English language arts (ELA) or mathematics in the aggregate or for subgroups. In 2006, Arlington Middle School made AYP in ELA, both in the aggregate and for subgroups. The school currently has a No Child Left Behind (NCLB) status of Improvement Year 1 in ELA and Restructuring Year 2 in mathematics.

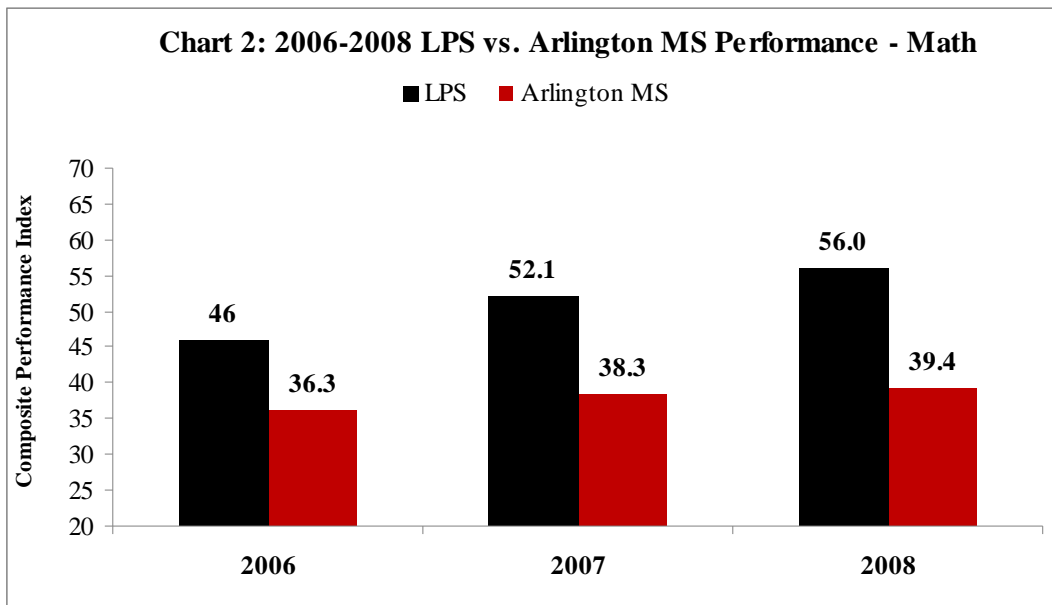
Table 2: Arlington MS Adequate Yearly Progress History

		2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	NCLB Accountability Status
ELA	Aggregate	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Improvement Year 1
	All Subgroups	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	
Math	Aggregate	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	Restructuring Year 2
	All Subgroups	No	No	No	No	No	No	

From 2006 to 2008, the performance of Arlington Middle School students on the ELA MCAS has been stable. The composite performance index (CPI) decreased from 62 to 61 between 2006 and 2007 and then increased slightly to 61.7 in 2008. The school performed below the district, (which has shown incremental improvements each year) in all three years.



In mathematics, the Arlington Middle School has increased its CPI each year from 2006 to 2008. The total increase was 3.1 points. The school has performed well below the district each year. The district has also shown incremental gains in mathematics from year to year that is, 10 CPI points from 2006 to 2008.



Findings

Key Question 1: To what extent have the school and the district demonstrated the capacity to improve student achievement?

This year, Arlington Middle School has undertaken a schoolwide process to come to consensus on priorities for the improvement of student achievement. This process led to the establishment of three priorities that were adopted schoolwide. However, these priorities were not always fully understood or implemented. In addition, the plan does not focus on mathematics, which is the area in which student performance is the lowest at the school. Arlington Middle School has taken advantage of numerous opportunities offered by the district and the Department to improve student achievement.

Findings under Key Question 1

The school came to consensus on priorities for improvement for the 2008-2009 school year.

After participating in the panel review of the state's Commonwealth Priority Schools in the spring of 2008, the administration involved all teachers and administrators in coming to agreement on the school's improvement priorities for the 2008-2009 school year. The process occurred through a new districtwide improvement planning process that required schools to review *Seven Essential Elements for School Transformation* in faculty committees. Each committee examined its essential element in the light of the student achievement profile, the annual school report card, the state MCAS and AYP report, walkthrough results, and appropriate surveys. Each group's objective was to come to consensus on the school's strengths, concerns, and next steps with regard to the particular essential element it reviewed. The school Comprehensive Educational Plan leadership team, working from the results of the teams' analyses, then arrived at consensus concerning the school's three main priorities for the school year. These priorities are:

1. Utilize formative assessment in all content areas.
2. Develop student ability to independently read and analyze questions and apply strategies to give a well detailed relevant response.
3. Authentic reading of text, nonfiction and fiction, during the school day and after school.

In focus groups, teachers demonstrated knowledge of these priorities and discussed how they were implementing two of the three, the first and the third, using formative assessments in all content area classrooms and promoting independent reading. By including all teachers in the analysis that led to the establishment of improvement priorities, the administration took an important step toward having teacher buy-in to address schoolwide priorities.

The Comprehensive Educational Plan 2008-2010 is limited as a guiding document, and its three priorities were not fully understood or implemented.

As described above, Arlington Middle School used an inclusive process to arrive at the three priorities in the Comprehensive Educational Plan 2008-2010. However, the document that came out of this exercise is limited in three ways. First, the plan does not address the critical achievement issue of mathematics. Second (based on interviews), the three priorities were not fully understood or implemented. Third, the plan generally lacked indicators for measurement of the implementation.

On 2008 MCAS assessments, Arlington Middle School had critically low achievement in mathematics, with between 8 and 13 percent of students in each grade attaining proficiency. None of the three priorities decided upon for school year 2008-2009, however, addressed mathematics achievement. When questioned concerning this, administrators said that mathematics achievement was being addressed indirectly under Priority 3—authentic reading of text, nonfiction and fiction during the school day and after school. Mathematics improvement was to be accomplished through the authentic reading of nonfiction texts. The connection between reading nonfiction texts and improved mathematics achievement is tenuous. The low mathematics scores require implementation of a priority that directly addresses improvement of mathematics achievement. It is important to note that the principal has shown concern for and has taken action regarding mathematics, including promoting and attending training at the Summer Academy. However, this emphasis is not expressed in the current Comprehensive Educational Plan.

Priority 1: There was confusion concerning the meaning of Priority 1: utilize formative assessment in all content areas. Teachers have received minimal professional development on the topic. In April 2009, a professional development session focused on formative assessment. Some teachers used this time to join a group discussing an article on formative assessment. However, interviews with teachers revealed that a number of them had a limited understanding of the concept. When teachers explained implementation of this initiative, they generally referred to the use of specific strategies to check for understanding during class, which is only one aspect of formative assessment. Some of the instances noted were the use of exit cards, thumbs-up/thumbs-down gestures, and brief notebook entries regarding some aspect of the lesson content. The review team noted teachers making partial or solid use of these types of formative assessments during class visits 65 percent of the time. When questioned, however, teachers indicated little understanding of the use of written formative assessments to measure student progress over a more extended period of time.

The Comprehensive Educational Plan, however, indicates that this priority was to involve teachers developing written formative assessments to be completed by February 2008. The only staff member who seemed to fully understand the extent of the priority was the principal, who noted that successful accomplishment of Priority 1 involved going beyond classroom checks for understanding. When questioned about developing written formative assessments, others were less informed. There were plans for the development of written formative assessments during

summer 2009 curriculum work; since development of the assessments had not yet begun at the time of the review, use of written formative assessments will not occur for some time. To maintain staff buy-in for achievement of this priority, there need to be clear expectations around the use of formative assessments and implementation of the initiative.

Priority 2: Priority 2—develop student ability to independently read and analyze questions and apply strategies to give a well detailed relevant response—was intended to address low student achievement on open-response questions and the long composition. According to the principal, the school scored below the district and below other district Commonwealth Priority Schools on open-response questions. School leaders reported that Arlington teachers have not used rigorous standards to evaluate writing. For the 2008-2009 school year, it was expected that teachers and students would use the state 4-point rubric to evaluate student writing. Strategies listed for accomplishment of this priority include targeted vocabulary and high-level questioning. This list, however, does not include the professional development necessary to improve teachers’ ability to ask high-level questions and to provide their students with the tools to respond to open-response questions and the requirements of the long composition. Instead, the school chose to rely on the Success For All (SFA) strategy, Team Talk Questions (TTQ), to accomplish Priority 2. This did not always achieve the desired results.

Priority 3: The school made a major schedule adjustment to provide 20 minutes at the beginning of every day for what was termed an independent literacy block to address Priority 3: authentic reading of text, nonfiction and fiction, during the school day and after school. In interviews, administrators regularly referred to this as independent reading and reported that the two purposes for the implementation of this initiative were: 1) to encourage the love of reading and 2) to improve MCAS scores. They described this period as a time when teachers and students alike “relax and read”; consistent with the promotion of pleasurable reading, record-keeping involved students simply listing the texts and pages read. In focus groups, administrators and teachers spoke enthusiastically about this initiative. At the same time, however, administrators indicated that they assumed much of the students’ independent reading would involve nonfiction in the content areas.

There is tension between this priority’s two intended outcomes. Independent reading is not mentioned under Priority 3 of the Comprehensive Educational Plan and the expectation that students will relax and read during the literacy block may not lead them to select content-area reading. And although teachers were trained during the summer in reading for content and were given opportunities to plan for use of the new literacy block, they agreed in interviews that they did not yet have the classroom libraries to support widespread content-area reading.

The Comprehensive Educational Plan itself refers to “assigned reading text, discussing text, [and] writing about text in content areas.” These activities are remarkably different from maintaining a list of texts with the number of pages read and bear little, if any, relationship to the notion of independent reading as implemented in the reading period each morning. The students’ freedom to choose, rather than be assigned their texts, and to make minimal notations in their log of what they have read is not consistent with the priority as developed in the document.

Measurement of Implementation: As appropriate, ultimate success of the plan is to be determined by improved MCAS scores. It would be impossible, however, to trace improved 2009 MCAS scores back to the effectiveness of any single initiative introduced during the school year. Each priority and initiative needs an implementation measure to ensure that it has been implemented with fidelity. Instead, administrators consistently indicated during interviews that they expected to measure the success of their numerous initiatives through one summative assessment—the 2009 MCAS results. Using a single measure will not provide information on what initiatives led to gains or, on the other hand, what efforts were not effective and should be revised.

The school has taken advantage of district and Department resources, professional development opportunities, and technical assistance.

National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) Training: The principal was enrolled in the NISL training offered through the Department. In interviews, the principal reported that the training provided useful tools for the work that needs to be done at the school. It was also indicated, however, that—given the extent of the school’s needs—there were difficulties with deciding where to focus attention.

Learning Walk Protocol: The school has received training through the district in the Department’s learning walk protocol and was using it at least twice a month. Administrators reported that almost all classrooms had been visited by administrative teams conducting learning walks. In focus groups, teachers reported they had also participated as observers in at least one of these administrative learning walks. In addition, teachers were conducting peer learning walks on their own, visiting one another’s classrooms. A number of teachers reported in focus groups that they had adopted strategies and techniques observed while in their colleagues’ classrooms. Administrators reported that teachers were beginning to move from picking up single strategies they could use in their own classrooms, to gaining increased perspective on what constitutes effective teaching in general. Administrators also reported that, although their comments were not evaluative, learning walks are a mechanism designed to provide teachers feedback concerning their teaching. The learning walks have provided administrators with a tool to begin to address teachers’ instructional practice, but by design, are not intended to provide critical feedback to individual teachers on strengths and areas for improvement.

District Professional Development: All teachers have been trained in the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model through district professional development. School-based coaches reported benefiting from monthly district professional development. In addition, the district offered teachers professional development in mathematics content. Twenty-five administrators and teachers from Arlington Middle School participated in the district’s one-week teacher mathematics academy in summer 2008. The same number registered for the summer 2009 academy. Also, administrators and teachers planned to participate in a summer mathematics conference in Lowell for Lowell and Lawrence teachers. Once a month throughout the 2008-2009 school year, a Lesley University professor taught mathematics content at Arlington Middle School. These district opportunities provided staff with effective strategies and important content with which to address student learning needs.

Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) Analysis: In the area of assessment, the district and the school rely heavily on MAP results to periodically assess students' progress toward improved achievement on MCAS. The district has found a significant correspondence between success on the MAP test and success on MCAS. The district reports to schools what the MAP test results mean as indicators of possible improved MCAS achievement. This district analysis of the school's MAP results has enabled the school staff to make some adjustments in the support it was providing to students as the year progressed.

Technical Support: The Lawrence Public Schools has also provided technical support to the school through the services of the district's mathematics coordinator, who was the school's district liaison. In addition, the director of assessment and accountability for the district assisted the school with data analysis. These supports have enabled the school to maintain perspective on its challenges and successes.

Key Question 2: Are the conditions in place to continue to support student achievement?

The Arlington Middle School has shown stable performance in ELA and slight increases in mathematics. However, performance in both subject areas is below the district. The gap is significantly larger in mathematics. The school has continued implementation of Success for All (SFA) to support student learning in ELA. In mathematics, however, there is inconsistent use of instructional programs. The school is beginning to review data to understand student achievement, but there is a lack of formative assessment information that can be used to drive instruction and, therefore, regularly support teaching and learning. Instruction at the school lacks rigor. Feedback from learning walks conducted in accordance with the Department's protocol is not designed to support individual teachers' development.

Findings Under Key Question 2

The school has continued its implementation of Success For All.

Success for All (SFA) has been in place for several years. The school offered professional development before school opened in September 2008 to reinforce teachers' understanding and implementation of the program. A newly-appointed coach works closely with teachers to refine their implementation of the program. Classroom observations indicated that teachers used SFA strategies consistently. There was a particular emphasis during the 2008-2009 school year on students working in groups and on team talk. SFA has provided teachers with tools for supporting students as learners.

Programs that support implementation of the math curriculum are used differently by teachers across the school. Teachers sometimes substitute supplementary programs because they consider the district mathematics programs too challenging for students whose first language is not English.

A practice to be examined closely is the inconsistent use of the district-adopted mathematics programs, Investigations (TERC) and the Connected Mathematics Program (CMP). That is, some teachers rely on the core programs, whereas others rely more heavily on the supplemental programs. In focus groups, teachers reported having the resources to teach the adopted programs, but also have classroom sets of supplementary programs (e.g., Scott Foresman, Prentice Hall); they also indicated that all of these programs are referenced in the district's scope and sequence document.

In focus groups, both administrators and teachers reported that teachers make individual decisions about whether to use the adopted program or the supplementary program to teach specific sections of the district's scope and sequence. TERC and CMP were seen as more language-based and Scott Foresman and Prentice Hall were seen as more skills-based. In focus groups, teachers reported that the language-based programs are more challenging and, possibly, too challenging for students whose first language is not English. As a result, teachers sometimes use the skills-based programs (e.g., Scott Foresman, Prentice Hall) instead of TERC and CMP. In some classes visited by the review team, use of TERC and CMP materials was not evident.

School leadership reported some concern around the possible overuse of supplemental materials to support implementation of the curriculum.

It is difficult to determine the impact of this varied use of the mathematics programs. It is possible that this practice is creating gaps in instruction and, therefore, student learning; increasing clarity around the use of core materials versus supplemental materials may prove beneficial. The school's low performance on the mathematics MCAS is another indicator that this practice should be reviewed.

The school moved teachers into grade-level teams for the 2008-2009 school year.

Teachers were previously organized in vertical teams. Restructuring into grade-level teams has provided teachers at each grade level with common planning time. Administrators have provided specific guidelines for the use of this time. One day a week, for example, is for a meeting with school leaders and other days for whole team meetings or for meetings by content area. In focus groups, teachers reported feeling empowered by these regular meetings.

While there was anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of this restructuring, there was no hard evidence as to its effectiveness. This was due, in part, to the fact that the school had not established how it would measure the effectiveness of the change.

The school is using its limited data to assess and address instructional needs.

The school relies heavily on the district's analysis of its MAP results to determine whether students are progressing toward improved MCAS achievement. The district has a program for predicting future MCAS scores on the basis of MAP results. These predictions have not always been accurate. For example, the previous year's analysis of 5th grade MAP mathematics scores had indicated a likely increase on MCAS, while in fact the 2008 5th grade MCAS mathematics scores decreased.

Administrators and coaches posted the district-interpreted MAP data disaggregated by teacher in the main office. From this, teachers could see whether their students were on track to improve their MCAS scores. However, the data was simply a predicted CPI score for each student, so teachers could not glean information about overall and individual student strengths and needs. In terms of planning instruction, this information has limited usefulness for teachers.

The school used SFA strategies to address Priority 2, reading and analyzing questions and writing detailed responses. Team Talk Questions (TTQ) was the SFA strategy implemented and measured. However, during the 2008-2009 school year when the SFA coach disaggregated student mastery results on this initiative, it was difficult to distinguish a pattern since results went up and down from cycle to cycle. At that point, the SFA data did not indicate progress on the Priority 3 initiative to increase ability to read and analyze questions and write detailed responses. In response to these inconclusive results, the school made changes to the TTQ and cycle tests, which included using the MCAS 4-point rubric to score the tests.

In several of the preceding years, the school had provided after-school support for 100 students at risk of scoring at the Warning level. In the 2008-2009 school year, based on the coaches'

recommendations, the after-school support was limited to 100 students whose MAP scores indicated they were on the cusp of passing MCAS. Initial data concerning this initiative indicated small improvements in the CPIs of the students involved. However, this result was gleaned by using the hypothetical student CPIs that the district reported back to the school on the basis of its interpretation of MAP scores. Until the 2009 MCAS scores arrive at the school, it will not be possible to know whether this has been an effective strategy.

An initiative that may yield important data to understand student learning is the use of formative assessments (Priority 1). But the effort to develop these assessments was not scheduled to begin until summer 2009. Developing formative assessments is a major undertaking for a school. It will be some time before the school sees data from this initiative.

Instructional practices are not rigorous enough to support continuing student achievement. Feedback provided to teachers from the learning walks based on the Department's protocol is not sufficient to support improved instruction.

The review team observed 23 classrooms and found a positive classroom climate, with respectful behaviors, during 65 percent of those visits. In only 39 percent of classroom visits, however, was there solid evidence of a range of instructional techniques. A large number of classes were primarily teacher-directed.

Rigor was defined by the following indicators: (1) questions requiring students to engage in a process of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; (2) opportunities for students to apply new knowledge and content; (3) students articulating their thinking and reasoning; and (4) teachers pacing the lesson to ensure active student engagement.

The review team consistently noted that teachers had posted lesson objectives and that students were seated in small groups. With regard to characteristics of rigorous instruction, there was less consistent evidence. The review team observed teachers pacing the lesson to ensure active student engagement 52 percent of the time, and there was partial evidence of this characteristic in the remaining 48 percent of instances. However, only 26 percent of the time was there solid evidence that questions required students to engage in a process of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Students were observed articulating their thinking and reasoning 17 percent of the time, and there was no evidence of students articulating their thinking and reasoning 39 percent of the time. There was partial evidence of this characteristic 43 percent of the time. Finally, students had opportunities to apply new knowledge 30 percent of the time.

Administrators reported conducting learning walks at least twice a month and providing teachers with feedback. They stressed that this feedback was not evaluative—not designed to assess individual strengths and weaknesses. When asked about feedback on instruction in focus groups, teachers cited formal evaluation as a mechanism. New teachers receive evaluative feedback three times during the year. Other teachers mentioned frequent walkthrough visits by administrators; the review team, however, did not see any written evidence from these walkthroughs. In focus groups, teachers also reported receiving feedback from coaches using specific tools (e.g., walkthrough tool adopted for SFA practices) as well as the Department's learning walk tool.

Coaches are regularly in classrooms, and they reported providing strong support to new teachers at the beginning of the school year. The coach's role with all teachers is to provide direction and support to improve instruction—not to evaluate.

Regular written feedback to teachers does not provide information on areas needing improvement. Written feedback is provided via the Department's learning walk tool (samples were provided to the review team); however, this feedback, by design, does not address individual performance. Formal evaluations (not reviewed by the review team) provide feedback to teachers—in particular, new teachers—but formal evaluations are not designed to provide formative feedback to improve instruction.

Observations revealed classrooms that in many instances lacked rigor. Providing regular feedback that includes information on both strengths and areas in need of improvement is important in order to ensure instruction is viewed against a standard of excellence and so is improved. The team found that processes for providing feedback are in place, yet not sufficiently developed to improve the quality of instructional practice.

Appendix A: Arlington Middle School Review Team Members

The review of the Arlington Middle School in the Lawrence Public Schools was conducted from June 2-3, 2009, by a team of educators from School Works on behalf of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Dr. Muriel Leonard, Consultant, School Works

Patricia Williams, Consultant, School Works

Appendix B: Review Activities and Schedule

Activities conducted at the Arlington Middle School

The following activities were conducted as part of the review of the Arlington Middle School, Lawrence Public Schools.

- The review team conducted interviews and focus groups with the following representatives from the Arlington Middle School:
 - Administrators: principal; assistant principal; reading, mathematics, and writing coaches
 - School Comprehensive Educational Plan leadership team
 - 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade level teams
- The team conducted 23 classroom visits at the school in ELA, literacy, mathematics, and science in grades 5, 6, 7, and 8.
- The DPSI review team reviewed the following documents at the school.
 - Comprehensive Educational Plan 2008-2010
 - 2009 professional development agendas
 - Learning walk feedback samples
 - Team Talk discussion protocol samples
 - MCAS results
 - MAP results
 - Learning walk tool
 - Student notebooks

Schedule for review of Arlington Middle School

Day 1: June 2, 2009 Schedule		
Time	Team Member #1	Team Member #2
7:30–8:00 AM	Team arrives at school and morning meeting	
8:00–9:00 AM	Focus group with school leadership	
9:00–11:30 AM	Teacher focus group (9:00 – 9:30) Classroom visits	Classroom visits
11:30–12:00 PM	Teacher focus group	Focus group with school Comprehensive Educational Plan leadership team
12:00–1:00 PM	Lunch; Mid-day meeting and team debrief	
1:00–2:00 PM	Follow-up with school leadership	Classroom visits
2:00–2:30 PM	Focus groups with school based coaches	Teacher focus group
2:30-3:00	Classroom visits	
3:00– 5:00 PM	Team debrief and evidence sorting	
5:15 PM	Team departs	

Day 2: June 3, 2009 Schedule		
Time	Team Member #1	Team Member #2
7:30–8:30 AM	Team arrives at school and morning meeting	
8:30–9:00 AM	Check in with school leadership	Classroom visits
9:00–11:30 AM	Classroom visits	
11:30–12:00 PM	Classroom visits	Document review
12:00–1:00 PM	Lunch; Mid-day meeting and team debrief	
1:00–2:00 PM	Document review	Classroom visits
2:00–2:30 PM	Follow-up as needed / document review	
2:30-4:30	Team debrief and evidence sorting	
4:30– 4:50 PM	Report of summary themes	
5:00	Team departs	