Evaluation of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) Process

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Impact of AIP on District Capacity, Teaching Practices, and Student Outcomes in Underperforming Districts

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# Executive Summary

In 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) began implementing the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process to catalyze rapid change in seven districts with a long history of underperformance. The goals of the AIP process are to help districts: (1) develop and implement systems, structures, and practices that improve teaching and learning for all students; and (2) implement a cycle of inquiry at the district level to continuously reflect on and modify improvement strategies. To achieve these goals, ESE realized a need to: focus efforts on a few key strategies that would yield the most impact on teaching and learning; give more ongoing, intensive, and structured support to help underperforming districts implement their turnaround plan; and help districts develop and sustain routines for articulating a focused plan, using evidence to track implementation, while reflecting on goals, and making adjustments as needed.

To meet these needs, ESE designed the AIP process to include three key components: (1) an Accelerated Improvement Plan that focuses on three or four key objectives and specific strategies; (2) intensive support for planning, implementation, and capacity building in the form of a Plan Manager or Management Team; and (3) ongoing monitoring.

To date, the AIP process has been implemented in seven districts. To help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process overall, and the influence of the AIP process components individually on district improvement, as well as the ways in which the process can be improved and potentially streamlined, American Institutes for Research (AIR) was charged with conducting a mixed-methods evaluation of the AIP process. In particular, AIR examined the ways in which the plans—or elements of these plans—and the process for implementing them have affected district capacities, teaching practices, and ultimately, student outcomes. AIR also examined how the AIP process is helping districts move toward the long-term goal of being able to maintain a cycle of continuous improvement on their own, without the involvement of ESE.

AIR and ESE jointly identified district- and school-level stakeholders in each AIP district to participate in interviews and focus groups during the second half of the 2013-14 school year. The interview sample included participants from central offices and schools, as well as ESE staff, Plan Managers, and Plan Monitors. At the district level, AIR not only interviewed current superintendents and assistant superintendents, but also contacted prior top administrators who had been involved in the AIP process but had since moved on to other positions or retired. The evaluation also included conversations with principals and teachers to gauge the degree to which the work had permeated into schools and beyond the level of district leadership. In most districts, AIR staff interviewed at least two school leaders and two groups of teachers from schools suggested by ESE.

The findings contained in this report illustrate the key ways in which, according to stakeholders in participating AIP districts, the AIP process has impacted district and school capacity for improvement, teaching practices, and student outcomes thus far.

The most commonly cited impacts on district-level capacity because of the AIP process included the following:

* Improved **data systems and use of data** to support strategic planning
* Increased use of **collaborative structures**, including school and district leadership teams
* Greater focus on developing **principals’ capacity** to serve as instructional leaders

The most impactful changes reported in classrooms because of the AIP process were as follows:

* **Instructional shifts** related to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks
* Increased **data-based decision making**
* Higher **expectations** for instruction

The evaluation of the impact of AIP on student outcomes was based primarily on an analysis of quantitative data for the AIP districts and comparison districts, which suggested that the AIP process had not yet had any significant impact on student outcomes in AIP districts as compared to similar non-AIP districts. However, many stakeholders explained that they expect to see improvements in student outcomes in the next year or two. The report contains further detail about the key impacts in each area, including specific examples, along with a discussion about to which components or qualities of the AIP process the observed impacts can be best attributed.

The report also includes several key challenges, identified by stakeholders in participating AIP districts, to the successful implementation of AIP and districts’ ability to bring about rapid improvements in district capacity, teaching practices, and student outcomes. These include the following:

* Leadership **turnover**
* Weak teacher **talent** pipeline – recruitment, development, and retention
* Teacher **skepticism** about change and challenges gaining buy-in
* **Competing priorities** within the district
* Mismatch between the level of **pressure** and amount of **support**
* Student **demographics**

In addition, the report includes promising practices for the successful implementation of the AIP process, a discussion of the key indicators of a district’s readiness to implement an Accelerated Improvement Plan without ESE supports, and considerations for a voluntary AIP program.

Although the quantitative analyses conducted did not show any significant impact of AIP on student outcomes for AIP districts, stakeholders at all levels in nearly all districts reported that since beginning the AIP process, AIP districts have increased their school and district capacity for focused, continuous improvement and improved teaching outcomes in numerous ways. These reports suggest that despite the current lack of quantitative data to support the ability of the AIP process to bring about rapid improvements in student outcomes, AIP districts are already witnessing meaningful districtwide improvements, and many stakeholders perceive the efforts to be “worth it” and more effective than similar improvement efforts. It remains to be seen, however, whether the process will have the intended effect of bringing about meaningful and rapid change in terms of individual and measurable student outcomes

# Introduction

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) has a history of strategically intervening in districts that are deemed underperforming. In April 2010, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) adopted regulations to redefine ESE’s approach to engaging with school districts to improve student performance (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.). Based on these regulations, all Massachusetts schools and districts are classified into Levels 1 through 5. There are two paths for districts to be in Level 4 status, as described in the *Framework for District Accountability and Assistance.*[[1]](#footnote-1) The framework notes that “A district generally is classified into the level of its lowest-performing school, unless it has been placed in Level 4 or 5 by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education or has been required by the Department to develop a Level 4 District Plan to aid in turning around its Level 4 schools” (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). As outlined in the *Framework for District Accountability and Assistance*, at Level 4, a district is still fully responsible for its programs and services but receives a higher level of support and monitoring by ESE to ensure that student performance and district systems of support are rapidly and measurably improving. The Level 4 designation signals that the district is “at risk” of being placed in Level 5 (chronically underperforming), which triggers state receivership.

In 2011, ESE began implementing the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process to catalyze rapid change in seven districts with a long history of underperformance. This process aligns with the above regulations and is built on lessons learned from previous district intervention efforts as well as research on successful district-level transformations that led to sustained improvement in student performance (Curtis & City, 2009; Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010). The goals of the AIP process are to help districts do the following:

* Develop and implement systems, structures, and practices that improve teaching and learning for all students.
* Implement a cycle of inquiry at the district level to continuously reflect on and modify improvement strategies.

To achieve these goals, ESE recognized a need to modify its previous approach for intervening in underperforming districts in the following specific ways:

* **Increased focus:** A district review may result in as many as 15 recommendations for improvement. ESE determined that a district could not effectively address all findings at once and supported districts to focus intensive efforts on a few key strategies that would yield the most impact on teaching and learning.
* **Emphasis on implementation:** Previous district improvement plans were not necessarily designed to inform implementation. ESE determined that improvement plans needed to more clearly define and communicate the steps needed to implement the work successfully. In addition, although ESE previously supported plan development, it expected districts to implement the plans themselves. In reflecting on the impact of previous district interventions, ESE determined that more ongoing, intensive, and structured support was needed to help underperforming districts bring their turnaround plan to life in a way that would transform teaching and learning.
* **Monitoring and adjustments:** ESE expects districts not only to improve student outcomes in the short term but also to build and sustain district systems and capacity to continue the improvement process over time. The AIP process was designed to help districts develop and sustain routines for articulating a focused plan, using evidence to track implementation, reflecting on goals, and making adjustments as needed—even after ESE support and monitoring is removed.

With these modifications in mind, ESE staff designed the AIP process to include three key components:

* An **Accelerated Improvement Plan** that focuses on three or four key objectives to quickly target the instructional core, along with specific strategies to meet the objectives. Plans are renewed and approved annually by ESE.
* Intensive support for planning, implementation and capacity building in the form of a **Plan Manager** (0.5 FTE). Plan Managers may be a single individual or a team of two to four individuals, contracted by ESE through an external provider.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* **Ongoing monitoring** that includes conversations with district leaders (referred to as highlight discussions) to review AIP benchmarks, observations of key activities outlined in the AIP two or three days per month, and public reporting to the school committee two to four times per year. Plan Monitors are independent consultants contracted by ESE.

These AIP practices and resources are in addition to other baseline assistance offered to every Level 4 district through targeted assistance staff in ESE’s Statewide System of Support (which is comprised by the Office of District and School Turnaround and the District and School Assistance Centers).

The theory guiding the AIP process is: *If* a Level 4 district can **define a narrow set of strategic objectives** to accelerate student learning, **execute well-defined initiatives** with a relentless focus on implementation, and **systematically monitor the impact of those initiatives** to inform midcourse corrections, *then* outcomes for students will be dramatically transformed.

Oversight of the process is provided through close coordination between ESE’s Center for District and School Accountability and Office of District and School Turnaround, ensuring that the process provides both assistance and accountability, and that there is an alignment of messages from all ESE representatives involved with the AIP districts.

To date, the AIP process has been implemented in seven districts designated as Level 4 due to a prior “underperforming” designation and/or to deficiencies in district systems. In addition, in 2012 ESE began implementing a voluntary version of the AIP process in Level 3 districts,[[3]](#footnote-3) with support from facilitators in the District and School Assistance Centers.

To help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process overall and each of the listed components individually on district improvement, as well as the ways in which the process can be improved and potentially streamlined, American Institutes for Research (AIR) was charged with conducting a mixed-methods evaluation of the AIP process in the seven participating districts.[[4]](#footnote-4) In particular, AIR examined the ways in which the plans—or elements of these plans—and the process for implementing them have affected district capacities, teaching practices, and ultimately, student outcomes. AIR also examined how the AIP process is helping districts move toward the long-term goal of being able to maintain a cycle of continuous improvement on their own, without the involvement of ESE.

AIR’s mixed-methods approach to this examination included both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analyses. AIR researchers collected a rich set of qualitative data through documents and state-, district-, and school-level stakeholder interviews and focus groups. Specifically, the following stakeholders participated in interviews or focus groups: ESE staff; current and former Plan Managers or Management Teams and Plan Monitors; current and former district leaders, including superintendents and assistant superintendents; and school-level staff, including both principals and teachers. The research team also conducted a comparative interrupted time-series (CITS) analysis of student outcomes in the AIP districts compared with student outcomes in a set of comparison districts.

In addition to this report, AIR will prepare a policy brief for a wider audience that summarizes the key findings from the report and the ways in which lessons learned from the AIP work in Massachusetts might inform similar district improvement efforts both within and beyond Massachusetts.

# Research Questions

The report will address the following nine research questions.

* What factors contribute to the success of an Accelerated Improvement Plan in a district?
* To what extent does the AIP process overall, or specific aspects of the process, affect district capacity to implement a continuous cycle of improvement, and in what ways?
* To what extent has the AIP process affected instructional supports and teaching practice, and in what ways?
* To what extent has the AIP process affected student outcomes?
* What supports for engaging in the AIP process do participating districts receive regarding plan development, implementation, and monitoring?
* From the perspective of various stakeholders, how does implementation of the AIP process vary across districts and over time?
* How is the AIP process perceived by district and school stakeholders in terms of its effectiveness?
* What changes would help strengthen the AIP process and its ability to increase district capacity and improve teacher practice and student outcomes?
* What are the indicators that a district is ready to manage a systemic continuous improvement process without the involvement of a manager or monitor?

In addition to the findings related specifically to these research questions, additional information about the AIP districts has been included for context in the section “The Seven Districts: Background and Context.”

# Methodology

## Sample Selection

All AIP districts participated in this study, including Gill-Montague, which transitioned to full district ownership of the AIP process prior to the start of this study. AIR and ESE worked together to identify district- and school-level stakeholders in each district for participation in the study. In addition, Plan Managers or Management Team representatives and Plan Monitors from each district were included in the sample of stakeholders.

The interview sample included participants from central offices and schools, as well as ESE, Plan Managers, and Plan Monitors. At the district level, AIR not only interviewed current superintendents and assistant superintendents but also contacted prior top administrators who had been involved in the AIP process but had since moved on to other positions or retired. These former leaders were interviewed to capture the district’s key decisions and stakeholder involvement in the initial planning stages of their AIP.

The evaluation also included conversations with principals and teachers to gauge the degree to which the work had permeated beyond the level of district leadership. In most districts, AIR staff interviewed at least two school leaders and two groups of teachers from schools suggested by ESE. Schools were selected, in part, to reflect the range of school types, including elementary, middle, and high schools, and school leaders were chosen based on length of time in the district. AIR prioritized school leaders who had been in the district at least since the start of AIP. Table 1 shows the number of schools at each grade level included in the study for each district and across all seven districts. Each school represented in the table participated in a principal interview, teacher focus group, or both. Just three of the 19 schools were high schools, a reflection of the pre-study hypothesis that elementary and middle schools were more likely to show effects—if any—from participation in the AIP, since several districts had focused initial improvement efforts at these levels.

Table 1. Summary of Schools Sampled, by Level

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| District | Number of Elementary Schools | Number of Middle Schools | Number of High Schools |
| Fall River | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Gill-Montague | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Holyoke | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| New Bedford | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| Randolph | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Salem | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Southbridge | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| **Total** | **12** | **4** | **3** |

## Protocol Development

To collect information on a wide range of topics from various stakeholders, researchers at AIR developed separate focus group and structured interview protocols for each type of respondent. These protocols were designed to gather information to answer the research questions posed previously, including how the AIP process has been carried out and perceptions of impact on district capacity, teaching practices, and student outcomes. AIR worked in collaboration with ESE to inform early protocol development, and an initial draft of each protocol was shared with ESE for review before AIR researchers finalized the protocols. Protocols were revised slightly between Phase 1 and Phase 2 of data collection (described in more detail in the next section) to improve the content and quality of data collected.

Interview protocols were developed for use with the following respondent types: current and former superintendents and assistant superintendents, principals, current and former Plan Managers and Management Teams, and ESE staff. Focus group protocols were developed for use with the other respondent types: teachers, Plan Monitors, and Level 3 support staff.[[5]](#footnote-5)

All protocols included questions about the following topics: AIP plan development, AIP implementation, AIP monitoring, AIP supports (from Plan Managers, Monitors, and ESE), sustainability, AIP impact (on capacity, teaching practice, and student outcomes), and suggestions for improving the AIP process. However, each protocol was tailored to focus on stakeholders’ unique perspectives on and involvement in the AIP process. For example, the superintendent interview protocol focused more heavily on plan development and interactions with the Plan Manager or Management Team than on specific changes at the classroom level, whereas the teacher focus group protocol focused more on the impact on expectations for teachers and specific changes in teaching practice as a result of the AIP than on plan development and monitoring. (The superintendent/assistant superintendent protocol used for Phase 2 is included in Appendix A. All other protocols are included in a separate addendum to this document.)

## Data Collection

In an effort to provide timely information to ESE to meet ESE’s program needs, qualitative data for this report was collected in two phases. In Phase 1, AIR staff collected data from each stakeholder group across five of the seven districts to be examined.[[6]](#footnote-6) For the majority of these districts, AIR interviewed the superintendent and one principal. In Randolph, the “deep-dive” district recommended by ESE for Phase 1, AIR interviewed a wider range of stakeholders. To inform the researchers’ understanding of the AIP process and how the various elements work together, one of Randolph’s AIP monthly highlight discussion meetings was observed during Phase 1.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Researchers used the data collected in Phase 1 to prepare a set of preliminary findings, or emerging themes, related to AIP and presented these findings to key ESE AIP staff in April 2014. The purpose of this was twofold. In part, the information informed some decisions ESE was making for AIP implementation in the 2014–15 school year. But the presentation of the preliminary findings also allowed AIR and ESE to confirm the direction of the next phase of work and to clarify areas where more or less emphasis was needed. In Phase 2, AIR staff collected data from a wider range of stakeholders across all districts, including the two districts excluded from the Phase 1 data collection. The findings included in this report reflect data collected during both phases.

### Phase 1

The Phase 1 sample included representatives from multiple districts for each role (save for the single teacher focus group and Plan Manager). AIR staff collected qualitative data from the following:

* District-level staff in five districts
* Principals from elementary and secondary schools in four districts
* A teacher focus group in one district comprised of teachers who represented a range of grade levels
* A group interview with key AIP staff at ESE
* A Plan Manager who has worked directly with one district and supports managers in other AIP districts
* Plan Monitors who currently oversee two AIP districts

### Phase 2

Phase 2 data collection took place during May and early June 2014 and included interviews and focus groups with remaining stakeholders in all seven districts. Table 2 shows all interviews and focus groups conducted, by both district and respondent type. Totals reflect the number of interviews or focus groups conducted, not the number of individuals who participated.

Table 2. Summary of Data Collection (Interviews and Focus Groups) by Stakeholder

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| District | District Leaders | Principals | Teachersa | Plan Managers and Management Teams | Plan Monitors | ESEb |
| Fall River | 2 | 2 | 2 |  | 1 |  |
| Gill-Montague | 2 |  | 2 | 1 |  |  |
| Holyoke | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |  |
| New Bedford | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |  |
| Randolph | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 |  |
| Salem | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |  |
| Southbridge | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |  |
| **Total** | **18** | **12** | **13** | **6** | **2c** | **10** |

a Most teacher data were collected using focus groups instead of interviews. In two districts, a teacher leader was interviewed in lieu of a teacher focus group.

b ESE data were collected via one individual interview and two focus groups, including one focus group of staff working with Level 3 districts choosing to implement an AIP.

c Plan monitor data were collected in one interview, with a monitor who supports two districts, and one focus group with three other plan monitors, one of whom works with two districts.

In addition to interviews and focus groups, researchers also collected and reviewed extant documents for each district, including district review reports, accelerated improvement plans, monthly highlight discussion notes, and quarterly progress reports, along with other miscellaneous documents related to the AIP process provided by ESE for context.

## Data Analysis

### **Qualitative Analyses**

Four AIR researchers analyzed the data collected from focus groups and interviews to better understand how the AIP process has been implemented across districts and over time and how stakeholder perceptions of the impact of AIP on district capacity, teaching practices, and student outcomes vary across districts and across stakeholder groups. The transcripts for each focus group and interview were first transcribed and uploaded into NVivo, a computer program used for qualitative data analysis. AIR researchers then developed a codebook using the research questions and interview protocols. Researchers reviewed each transcript and sorted the text into one or more of these coding categories.

To ensure that codes were assigned consistently by all researchers, researchers double coded four of the transcripts, representing a range of interview and focus group types, and discussed coding questions and issues. The coding team reviewed and revised coding for the four transcripts discussed and then updated and annotated the codebook before coding the remaining interviews. Throughout the coding process, the coding team met regularly to discuss coding issues and to establish rules and exceptions for inclusion in the codebook.

Nine major coding categories, based on the research questions, were used to code text from the interviews and focus groups. These categories include the following: Background, Plan Development, Plan Implementation, Plan Impact, AIP Support and Monitoring, Change Over Time, Sustainability, “Light-Touch” (or Voluntary) AIP, and Ways to Improve. See Appendix B for the complete codebook, which includes several additional categories and subcategories.

Once all data had been coded, researchers identified which categories and subcategories would be used to answer each research question and began analyzing the data to identify key findings related to the following areas of interest.

* Impact of AIP on the following:
* District capacity
* Teaching practices
* Student outcomes
* Indicators of readiness for ESE to remove AIP support and monitoring
* Key factors that affect the impact of AIP
* Promising practices in terms of the following:
* AIP plan development
* AIP implementation
* AIP monitoring
* Ways to improve AIP, including recommendations regarding a “light-touch,” or voluntary, AIP

Researchers considered the number of districts and types of stakeholders in determining whether the data comprised a finding and reported only on the most prevalent themes reported. The key findings reported generally represent data collected from at least two different districts or from at least two different stakeholder types.

Quantitative Analyses

AIR conducted quantitative analyses to estimate the impact on student outcomes of engaging in the AIP process over time (research question 8) and to address the following specific research question:

Compared with a set of matched comparison districts, do AIP districts experience the following:

1. Improved achievement outcomes, as measured by an increase in composite performance index (CPI) scores, an increase in the percentage of students scoring at the proficient or advanced levels on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) English language arts (ELA) and mathematics assessments, and a decrease in the percentage of students scoring at the warning or failing levels on these MCAS assessments?
2. Improved nonacademic outcomes as measured by lower dropout rates, higher attendance rates, and lower retention rates?

We addressed this question with seven years of achievement data and six years of nonacademic data for districts that were involved in the AIP process and a matched set of comparison districts that were not involved in the AIP process.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**Data and Study Sample.** Our quantitative analysis was based on school districts that participated in the AIP process and comparison districts that did not. Of the seven AIP districts included in our analyses, six districts began implementing the AIP process in the 2011–12 school year, and five of those districts continued implementing the AIP process through the 2014 school year. (ESE removed AIP support and monitoring from Gill-Montague by the end of the 2012–13 school year.) Salem began the process a year later than the rest of the AIP districts. The comparison districts were selected through statistical matching, described in more detail in the “Methods” section.

We used publicly available data taken from the ESE website to select comparison districts and conduct the impact analysis; ESE collects and publishes school- and district-level data for students annually, both overall and for key student subgroups. ESE data allowed us to explore the historical trends of student outcomes for AIP and comparison districts using multiple points of observation before and after the AIP process had begun.

**Outcome Variables**. From the ESE website, we extracted student achievement and nonacademic data on the following variables:

Student Achievement. We used three sets of student achievement outcomes based on MCAS ELA and mathematics assessments from the 2007–08 school year to the 2013–14 school year.

* Percentage of students performing at the proficient or advanced levels on the MCAS ELA and mathematics assessments
* Percentage of students performing at the warning or failing levels on the MCAS ELA and mathematics assessments
* CPI for the district

*Nonacademic Outcomes*. In addition to student achievement, we looked at three additional student outcomes. Analyses of these outcomes were based on data from the 2007–08 school year to the 2012–13 school year. Data on these outcomes from the 2013–14 school year were not yet available when the impact analyses were conducted.

* Dropout rates
* Student attendance
* Retention rates

**CITS Design**. If AIP does indeed impact how students fare academically, then we would expect observations of these indicators after AIP implementation to be different than those prior to the start of the initiative. However, in the absence of random assignment, we can never be certain that the changes we observed are not due to other factors, such as the maturation effect, other school or districtwide initiatives, or a change in the population of students served.

Because we have a group of comparison districts that did not participate in the AIP process as well as pretreatment and posttreatment data for AIP districts and these nonparticipating districts,[[9]](#footnote-9) we can use a CITS design to estimate the effect of the AIP process on student outcomes. This design compares before and after student achievement and nonacademic outcomes of the AIP districts to before and after student outcomes of the comparison districts based on the same time period as the AIP districts. If the AIP process has an effect on student outcomes, then we should see a discernible difference in the student outcome change for AIP districts relative to comparison districts.

An important strength of the CITS design is that each district in the study is compared with itself, so pretreatment and posttreatment differences in an outcome are not due to preexisting district characteristics (i.e., selection bias), as is often a concern in nonrandomized designs based solely on posttreatment comparisons. By including a group of comparison districts that were not engaged in the AIP process, we can also account for statewide changes (e.g., changing graduation requirements or criteria to be scored as advanced or proficient on a test) that equally affect treatment and comparison districts. The CITS design is considered one of the most rigorous quasi-experimental designs available (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

The main idea behind the CITS design is to examine whether the difference between the pretreatment average outcome for AIP districts and the posttreatment average outcome for AIP districts changed by a greater amount than the difference between the pretreatment average outcome for comparison districts and the posttreatment average outcome for comparison districts.

Identification of Comparison Districts. To reduce the chance that the observed effects are due to non–AIP-related factors that might have contributed to changes in the AIP districts, we selected matched comparison districts within the state through a statistical matching procedure called Mahalanobis matching. To identify the optimal matched comparison district for each AIP district, we relied on a select set of student achievement and demographic indicators for four years prior to the initiation of the AIP process. District characteristics included enrollment, percentage of English language learners (ELLs) and low-income students, and percentage of students with disabilities. As shown in Table 3, the matched comparison districts are more similar to the AIP districts than nonmatched districts from the state in terms of student outcomes, but they are still better performing than the AIP districts. For example, 29.76 percent of students in AIP districts performed at the warning or failing levels on MCAS compared with 19.96 percent of students in matched comparison districts. However, only 10.91 percent of students scored at this level in non-AIP districts statewide. The dissimilarity between the AIP districts and comparison districts may be due to the fact that some districts that are similar to AIP districts were excluded from matching because they were receiving other treatments from ESE.

Table 3. Characteristics of AIP Districts and the Matched Comparison Districts Not Involved in the AIP Process

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Mean of Treatment Districts  (*N* = 7) | Mean of all Nontreatment Districts  (*N* = 297) | Mean of Matched Comparison Districts (*N* = 7) | Standardized Group Difference |
| Attendance | 92.80 | 95.12 | 94.11 | –0.13 |
| Enrollment | 5,585.14 | 2,881.04 | 7,226.14 | –0.33 |
| Percent disability | 21.12 | 16.04 | 16.80 | 0.17 |
| Percent Black | 11.70 | 3.12 | 11.20 | 0.03 |
| Percent Hispanic | 30.15 | 5.66 | 16.00 | 0.50 |
| Percent low income | 62.69 | 19.18 | 50.25 | 0.31 |
| Percent ELL | 9.38 | 2.23 | 10.39 | –0.07 |
| ELA CPI | 76.04 | 89.76 | 81.83 | –0.21 |
| Mathematics CPI | 66.24 | 83.11 | 73.31 | –0.20 |
| Percent ELA warning or failing | 17.24 | 5.16 | 10.81 | 0.33 |
| Percent mathematics warning or failing | 29.76 | 10.91 | 20.33 | 0.31 |

*Statistical Model*. AIR researchers conducted CITS analysis using school-level data extracted from the ESE website. The approach used for the analysis was a two-level hierarchical regression model that treats district matched pairs as fixed effects and accounts for the nested structure of the data. We treated district matched pairs as fixed effects because the districts in our sample did not represent the population of school districts and the results of the analysis cannot be generalized to other districts in the state of Massachusetts (see Appendix C for details on the CITS approach and Appendix D for additional CITS analysis figures not included in the body of the report). As described in Appendix C, the fixed-effects model allowed us to examine whether the average performance of the schools in the AIP district deviated from their baseline trend by a greater amount than schools from the comparison district within each matched district pair.

Because the districts implemented AIP in different years, we recoded years for both AIP and comparison districts based on the treatment district’s program adoption year. For Salem, which initiated the AIP process in 2012, and Salem’s matched comparison district, 2007–08 to 2011–12 are considered the pretreatment period, and 2012–13 to 2013–14 are the posttreatment period. For other districts that adopted the AIP process in 2011 and their matched comparison districts, 2007–08 to 2010–11 are considered the pretreatment period, and 2011–12 to 2013–14 are considered the posttreatment period. By referencing years relative to the program adoption year, we place all districts on equal footing based on the time since implementation. Please note that not all outcome variables had the 2013–14 year data by the time the analyses were conducted. The nonacademic outcomes were not published yet. Thus, the models testing the effects of AIP on nonacademic outcomes covered a shorter posttreatment period (one year for Salem and two years for other districts).

Subgroup Analyses. In addition to the main impact models, we also examined whether the AIP process had differential effects on low-income students, ELLs, and students with special needs. More specifically, we tested whether the average performances of subgroups of students from schools in AIP districts had a greater improvement than those of subgroups of students attending schools in non-AIP comparison districts.

Before presenting the findings, the next section provides context on the seven AIP districts represented in this report.

# The Seven Districts: Background and Context

Although there are a set of general expectations and guidelines for the AIP process (see [*Guidance for Level 4 Districts: Focused Planning for Accelerating Student Learning*](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/level4/default.html), hereafter referred to as the AIP Guidance document [Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013]), it is important to remember that each of these districts is unique and has its own set of strengths and challenges with regards to improving student outcomes.

Each AIP district is described below in brief. Appendix E (AIP District Snapshots) contains additional information about the nature of the AIP process in each district over time.

Table 4 summarizes several of the key characteristics of these districts at the time of this study (spring and summer 2014), including student demographics and achievement, the number of schools at each accountability level, and leadership and staffing data. Appendix F includes a similar table for the matched comparison districts.

## Fall River

Fall River began the AIP process in the 2011–12 school year. In Fall River, the AIP replaced the previous district turnaround plan (known as their Recovery Plan).[[10]](#footnote-10) Fall River has had the same superintendent throughout the duration of the AIP process. Unlike other AIP districts, however, Fall River has never had a designated Plan Manager or Management Team, but it received significant support for their initial plan development from ESE targeted assistance staff. Throughout this time, it has had the same Plan Monitor. According to the ESE criteria, Fall River has shown sufficient improvement since the start of AIP and transitioned to full district ownership of the AIP process in October 2014 after the completion of data collection for this study.

## Gill-Montague

Gill-Montague was declared “underperforming” by ESE in 2007 and was designated as a Level 4 district in 2011 in accordance with the new regulations. As a result, Gill-Montague began the AIP process in the 2011–12 school year; the AIP took the place of the district’s previous turnaround plan (initially adopted in 2008). Gill-Montague had a Plan Manager for only its first year in the AIP process and had the same Plan Monitor for the duration of its time as an AIP district. The district had three different superintendents since the AIP process began. As a district, it showed sufficient improvement and in summer 2013 became the first district to transition to full district ownership of the AIP process, at which point it was designated a Level 3 district.

## Holyoke

Holyoke began the AIP process in the 2011–12 school year. The AIP replaced Holyoke’s previous turnaround plan, which had been in place since 2004, after the Massachusetts’s Board of Education declared the district “underperforming” in late 2003. Holyoke appointed a new superintendent at the start of the 2013–14 school year. The district has used a Plan Management team approach since it began the AIP process, although the makeup of that team has changed each year based in part on district needs, and the district has its second Plan Monitor since beginning the AIP process.

## New Bedford

New Bedford began the AIP process in the 2011–12 school year. Since the start of the AIP process, New Bedford has had three different superintendents in three years, including one who left mid-contract at the end of 2012, an interim superintendent in 2012–13, and one appointed at the start of the 2013–14 school year with a multiyear contract. Initially, New Bedford was provided a single Plan Manager, but by the end of the first year ESE shifted to a Plan Management team of three to four individuals, who were contracted through a different vendor. The same vendor has provided the Plan Management team since then, although the composition of individuals has shifted somewhat each year based in part on district needs. New Bedford has had three different Plan Monitors, with ESE Accountability staff providing continuity during the transitions.

## Randolph

Randolph began the AIP process in the 2011–12 school year. In Randolph, the AIP replaced the previous district turnaround plan, in place since 2008, after the Massachusetts’s Board of Education declared the district “underperforming” late the year before. Since the start of the AIP process, Randolph has had three different acting, interim, or permanent superintendents, including a new superintendent who was appointed for the 2014–15 school year. Randolph has had the same lead Plan Manager since the start of the process, with a second Plan Manager added to provide targeted support for the middle and high schools. The district has had the same Plan Monitor since the start of the AIP process.

## Salem

Unlike the other districts, Salem began the AIP process in the 2012–13 school year. Since then, it has not had any superintendent turnover. The district has had the same individual Plan Manager since the start of the process and has had two different Plan Monitors.

## Southbridge

Southbridge began the AIP process in the 2011–12 school year. The AIP replaced the previous district turnaround plan, in place since 2005, after the Massachusetts’s Board of Education declared the district “underperforming” late the year before. Since the start of the AIP, the district has had three superintendents, with one leaving mid-contract in fall of 2012, replaced briefly by a temporary acting superintendent, and then a superintendent who served through spring 2014. A new superintendent was hired for the 2014–15 school year with a one-year contract.

The district had an individual Plan Manager during the 2011–12 school year, who was subsequently replaced with another individual. In spring 2014, this second Plan Manager was replaced at the request of the district. At this point, ESE shifted to have one lead Plan Manager supported by a second Plan Manager who provided targeted support for the middle and high schools. During the time of this study, the district had only one Plan Monitor, although the district received a new Plan Monitor at the start of 2014–15 (shortly after completion of data collection for this study).

Although several districts began their first year in the process with an AIP that had not yet met criteria for approval, Southbridge is the only participating district that began each of its first three years of the AIP process without an approved plan because of difficulties in meeting ESE’s requirements for an AIP. However, ESE expects districts to implement improvement strategies even if their AIP has not yet been approved. As a result, for the majority of the time covered by this study, the district was simultaneously developing, revising, and implementing its plan during the school year.

Table 4. Characteristics of AIP Districts

|  | Fall River | Gill-Montague | Holyoke | New Bedford | Randolph | Salem | Southbridge | MA Average |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Start of ESE involvement at district level | 2002 | 2007 | 2003 | 2009 | 2007 | 2011 | 2004 | — |
| AIP start | 2011 | 2011 | 2011 | 2011 | 2011 | 2012 | 2011 | — |
| ESE removal of AIP support and monitoring | 2014 | 2013 | — | — | — | — | — | — |
| Enrollment as of SY13–14a | 10,319 | 1,010 | 5,573 | 12,744 | 2,954 | 4,336 | 2,239 | — |
| Percent English language learners | 8.5% | 5.6% | 29.2% | 5.5% | 12.0% | 13.0% | 12.7% | 7.9% |
| Percent of students with disabilities | 20.4% | 18.5% | 25.1% | 22.5% | 23.3% | 21.6% | 18.9% | 17.0% |
| Percent low income | 78.3% | 55.6% | 85.3% | 75.6% | 55.9% | 59.7% | 76.3% | 38.3% |
| Percent high needs | 81.7% | 62.9% | 89.0% | 80.2% | 69.8% | 67.8% | 80.8% | 48.8% |
| Percent proficient or higher MCAS ELA | 50.0% | 59.0% | 32.0% | 45.0% | 51.0% | 51.0% | 43.0% | 69.0% |
| Student growth ELA | 49.0% | 47.5.0% | 39.0% | 40.0% | 49.0% | 45.0% | 45.0% | 50.0% |
| Percent proficient or higher MCAS mathematics | 41.0% | 52.0% | 28.0% | 38.0% | 42.0% | 43.0% | 35.0% | 61.0% |
| Student growth mathematics | 53.0% | 61.0% | 45.0% | 42.0% | 51.0% | 43.0% | 37.0% | 50.0% |
| Percent proficient or higher MCAS science | 37.0% | 44.0% | 20.0% | 29.0% | 33.0% | 37.0% | 27.0% | 53.0% |
| Attendance rate | 91.6% | 94.2% | 91.4% | 96.3% | 94.6% | 93.8% | 92.6% | 94.9% |
| Graduation rateb | 68.6% | 81.5% | 60.2% | 60.8% | 75.7% | 85.4% | 62.9% | 86.1% |
| Dropout ratec | 5.3% | 1.2% | 6.4% | 5.2% | 1.8% | 1.3% | 4.4% | 2.0% |
| No. of Level 1 schoolsd | 5 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | — |
| No. of Level 2 schools | 2 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 1 | 3 | 0 | — |
| No. of Level 3 schools | 5 | 1 | 6 | 12 | 5 | 5 | 3 | — |
| No. of Level 4 schools | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | — |
| No. of Level 5 schools | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | — |
| No. of superintendents between 2009–14e | 2 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | — |
| Principal turnover rate (2010–14) | 24.0% | 33.0% | 21.8% | 19.4% | 26.6% | 20.2% | 33.0% | 17.6% |
| Teacher turnover rate (2010–14) | 19% | 19.4% | 13.6% | 11.4% | 14.6% | 12.4% | 16.8% | 11.6% |
| No. of Plan Managers/ Teams since AIP start | 0 | 1f | 1g | 2h | 1i | 1 | 3j | — |
| No. of Plan Monitors since AIP start | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 2k | — |

a All enrollment, demographic, MCAS, and school accountability level information reflect 2013–14 school year data.

b Based on cohort, four-year graduation rate (2014).

c Grades 9–12 dropout rate (2013–14).

d Schools with insufficient data are not included.

e Including acting and interim superintendents.

f Gill-Montague had a Plan Manager only for its first year with the AIP process.

g In Holyoke, the same vendor has provided a team of three or four Plan Managers, but team composition has been reconfigured slightly each year.

h For the first year, New Bedford had a single Plan Manager. Since then, it has had a team of three or four Plan Managers provided by a different vendor.

i Randolph received support from an additional Plan Manager in Years 2 and 3.

j Southbridge’s third Plan Manager works in partnership with an additional Plan Manager.

k Since the completion of data collection for this study, Southbridge received a third Plan Monitor.

# Findings

The next section presents key findings that emerged primarily from interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders across the seven districts. In addition, extant data and documents were used to triangulate findings wherever appropriate. Findings related to impact on student outcomes, for example, rely heavily on quantitative analyses of extant data. The findings are organized into two main sections: (1) impact on district capacity, teaching practices, and student outcomes; and (2) promising practices for effective implementation.

Above all, the goal of the AIP process is to affect rapid change in struggling school districts by impacting teaching practice in a way that directly affects student outcomes and ultimately builds the capacity of districts to sustain these impacts over time. The following findings reflect stakeholder perceptions of how the AIP process has, to date, impacted district capacity for improvement, teaching practices, and student outcomes.

## AIP Impact on District Capacity

According to ESE staff and to the AIP Guidance document (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013), the AIP process is intended to impact student outcomes by building the capacity of districts to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement in order to significantly improve teaching and learning.

To investigate the impact of the AIP process on districts’ capacities to develop and manage their own improvement plans, interviewers asked all types of participants to consider how the AIP process affected their school’s or district’s capacity for improvement, and to consider what aspects of the process most helped to enhance such capacity.

This section details the findings about the perceived impacts of AIP on district and school capacity as well the aspects of the AIP process to which participants attribute these impacts.

### Impacts on District and School Capacity

The most commonly cited impacts on district-level ***-***capacity because of the AIP process included the following:

* Improved data systems and use of data to support strategic planning
* Increased use of collaborative structures, including school and district leadership teams
* Greater focus on developing principals’ capacity to serve as instructional leaders

**Improved Data Systems and Use of Data to Support Strategic Planning**. Districts’ AIPs outlined several goals for enhancing the use of data, including conducting more formative assessments and forming district- and school-level teams to examine the results. In some cases, external contractors were used to collect these additional data. The additional data systems and the work of data teams were designed to help staff examine their practices and to guide improvements. At the district level, participants most commonly cited an increase in the district’s capacity to lead a data-based reflection process as the biggest AIP-related improvement. Five districts explicitly attributed increase in this capacity to their work with their AIP.

Reports of improved data use are particularly significant in light of the major goals that participating districts outlined in their AIPs. Two districts, for example, noted increasing their districts’ capacities to use data as explicit AIP goals. In other cases, goals at least indirectly drew on this same concept, citing plans to enhance the districts’ abilities to assess students’ progress using assessments. In addition, state-levelparticipants expressed a desire for districts to be able to monitor their own progress, in part by putting “data systems in place” and then developing capacities “to understand what the data” are revealing. A Plan Manager noted that these systems would allow districts to “make…informed decisions” in the long run.

Specifically, some districts’ AIPs included plans to administer more assessments to gather additional data, form data teams, and conduct data analysis cycles. District-level participants confirmed the implementation of these plans, citing districts’ enhanced abilities to use these data analysis structures, to support what one administrator called “a cycle of data and inquiry.” This participant noted that such a capacity did not exist three years prior, but now it was thriving with the help of an external contractor who regularly administered assessments for the district. A colleague in the same district described how their improvement process is now a series of regular meetings, focused on data and student improvement:

[The contractor helped us create] interim assessments that we administered and helped us work through the data cycle. We spent time in principal meetings, reviewing that data cycle, looking at specific areas that students were not mastering, and then…working with principals and their leadership team on… training teachers and working with teachers on how to develop re-teach plans, and then we worked specifically with their principals around actionable feedback on those re-teach programs.… Those are just a couple of examples of how the priorities [for improvement] grow from the work [with the AIP].

Participants from four AIP districts noted that their districts not only were using data more often in planning their improvement process but also were collecting additional data—that they otherwise might not have—and using it to drive improvement efforts (in ways they previously had not). They noted that data were often used to drive their improvement in some way, either through interim assessments guiding instructional planning or through observation data that supported principals and teachers in making overall instructional improvements.

Participants from four districts also noted that since the start of AIP, their districts had increased the frequency of meetings focused on examining and planning instruction around data. Districts conducted these meetings in a variety of ways, including the following:

* Hosting monthly, all-day sessions with key district staff to examine data and to create action plans based on those results
* Holding data-sharing sessions with individual principals in meetings between school leaders and their district supervisors
* Sharing data from walk-throughs and observations in reports at principals’ meetings

In sum, these activities have helped districts to grow in their capacities for what one district administrator described as a process of “gathering data and doing a certain kind of analysis that helps us make decisions.”

**Increased Use of Collaborative Structures**. Beyond data collection and reflection, participants noted that district capacities increased in other areas as well, including the creation of collaborative structures and processes. These include decision-making and planning committees as well as district and school leadership teams. Participants noted that the AIP fosters this growth in collaboration in several ways, including bringing external pressure for immediate results to bear on existing structures and relationships, building capacity for collaboration through Plan Managers and Monitors, and helping to forge a collective direction for district staff.

The most prominent impact on collaboration reported was the act of bringing staff together to form a focused, collaborative plan for which they were now publically accountable. By design, the AIP process encourages districts to involve stakeholders in developing a unified plan for improvement, and being involved in the process, one administrator said, “created a collaborative relationship” throughout the district that pushed staff to have more intensive discussions about improvement.

In one district, the Plan Monitor identified changes in collective decision-making processes, where more voices were now welcome at the table:

I think I would classify it as distributive leadership. So there is more and more responsibility being put on principals and directors to come up with solutions for problems in a collaborative way. So for example, one of the district meetings that I was at they were looking at data and the…directors were there and what they were doing is defining their job as a result of that data.… And it was a very public discussion with assistant superintendent, superintendent, and directors.… I’ve definitely seen that change, and I don’t think that I would have seen it without the AIP.

In this case, the superintendent was not solely responsible for leading improvement efforts; more central office leaders were involved. In contrast to previous efforts, district leaders now had both support for collaborative efforts as well as external forces pushing them together to form immediate solutions.

The AIP process also incorporates external perspectives from Plan Managers and Monitors as intellectual, capacity-building resources. Two districts strongly cited the work of Plan Managers in helping to build collaborative structures at both the district and school levels. One district worked with their Plan Manager to create a collaboration “tool kit” that supported new teacher teams in structuring their time. Another called the Plan Manager a “crucial partner” in focusing their leadership team discussions on forming and executing their improvement plan.

Stakeholders reported that the AIP process also helped to establish shared ownership for improvement and a collective direction for staff. One district administrator described using the public goals and increased accountability of the AIP to “drive the culture toward higher expectations.” For example, principals’ meetings in this district now include open discussions of data from all participating schools, a distinct departure from the more “private” and “competitive” uses of data in the past. The district now conducts data analysis together, trying to collaborate on common problems and share solutions.

In conjunction with the AIP promoting improvement, these districts reported that the process had helped them to begin to collaborate more often and more effectively, bringing more staff into the improvement process and helping them to focus on their goals. Participants noted that these cultural shifts toward collaboration were aided by the AIP process, particularly the “clout of ESE” applying pressure for change, helping superintendents achieve a “focus on instruction,” and providing a framework for a “much stronger system and structure for collaboration.”

**Greater Focus on Developing Principals’ Capacity to Serve as Instructional Leaders**. At the school level, the key impact reported in terms of building capacity related to the role of principal. Participants in six districts cited an increased focus on the role of the principal as that of instructional leader; participants from the seventh district were unsure about whether the AIP has impacted the role of principals. District-level participants generally believed they [district leaders] were better at focusing the efforts of principals, and principals felt more encouraged to take on the role of instructional leader.

Districts used several specific strategies, as follows, to improve principals’ performance and focus on instruction:

* Including principals in the writing and planning of the AIP
* Conducting group walk-throughs, instructional observations, and group debriefs
* Implementing data sharing meetings and planning sessions within schools, as well as across schools
* Providing peer mentors for principals

The strategy most commonly cited (by staff in three districts) was the use of walk-throughs and observational tools. In the early phases, principals did not do these alone. For example, Plan Managers led walk-throughs using protocols, or principals were accompanied by peer mentors. In all cases, the debriefing discussion was described as a key learning point for principals to increase their capacity to help teachers improve instruction. In one district, the Plan Manager helped the district to develop not only a walk-through process but also a structured process for principal capacity building in the role of instructional leader. In this district, the Plan Manager and district leaders developed a walk-through observation template and rubric, as well as guidelines for offering feedback to teachers on increasing classroom rigor and supporting instructional improvement. The Plan Manager then conducted walk-throughs in schools alongside district staff, supporting local administrators in learning to lead the process. The district then trained principals by conducting walk-throughs in their buildings and established an accountability structure called a “dashboard.” School leaders were asked to make regular reports on the number of walk-throughs conducted, the nature of the feedback to teachers, and the progress teachers were making in improving instruction. Principals’ meetings and subsequent walk-throughs that included principals and district staff served to sustain, reinforce, and “calibrate” the rating and feedback process.

Building the “human capital” pipeline was another key priority identified by stakeholders, which included recruitment of, evaluation of, and support for principals. For example, Plan Managers helped one district to strengthen and clarify their evaluation procedures, pushing all principals to a more consistent, high standard across the district. At least two districts used peer mentoring for principals as well.

Overall, what many principals described was a greater sense of involvement and empowerment since beginning the AIP process. This was most clearly evident in districts where principals collaborated with the superintendent in the creation of the AIP. One principal described feeling thoroughly involved and supported in this process, saying that “the principals are the drivers for the accelerated improvement plan” and adding that “the district is supporting us with professional development, capacity building in our ability to provide feedback in these areas, or to build our own knowledge base in these areas.” This included supporting teachers in making shifts aligned to the new state Frameworks, leading teachers in data analysis cycles, and establishing structures for teacher improvement.

### Elements of the AIP Process Increasing District and School Capacity

According to respondents, several specific aspects of the AIP process especially contributed to increases in district and school capacity. Participants primarily cited three elements of the AIP process as being particularly impactful:

* Collaborative planning process that fueled more collaborative implementation between stakeholders
* Support from Plan Managers in building systems and structures to sustain change
* Emphasis on communication and creating transparency

**Collaborative Planning Process**. First, participants noted that the collective process of writing and planning the AIP was instrumental in enhancing their local capacity for taking a more collective and collaborative approach to self-directed improvement. Five districts explicitly cited crafting and implementing the plan as among key AIP experiences that had built their districts’ capacities for continuous improvement. A district leader discussed the district’s most recent AIP, which was created in a collaborative effort between the district’s principals and central office staff. Both the superintendent and principals in this district cited this as a powerful, capacity-building experience that also created engagement and buy-in among school leaders. Three districts in total described similar collaborative planning experiences.

Beyond planning, however, participants noted that the work of the AIP had led to an improvement process that has engaged a larger group of stakeholders than other efforts. As one district administrator said, the combination of internal collaboration and external support offered an opportunity for growing their collective culture of improvement as well as their technical resources:

I think the AIP process, the monitoring process, the work with [our Plan Manager], what it gave us was …critical partners to really be able to think through the work and have opportunities to have dialogue and discussions around the work and was it something we weren’t seeing. …So I think the whole process created a collaborative relationship that allowed us to really try and get to the heart of what we needed to get done.

Similarly, one of this administrator’s district colleagues reflected that having been through the planning process several years in a row had engendered great confidence among staff in their ability to create and to implement any plan.

In another district, the Plan Manager observed that the recent efforts to improve instruction had involved teachers in a way not previously seen. The Plan Manager noted that the district now had “a much stronger system and structure for collaboration” for teachers that promoted “looking at data together” and planning instructional improvements. As a result, they now had a “structure for shared ownership or shared improvement of instructional leadership.”

In all of these cases, participants described improvement as an effort that involved more collaboration and collective engagement than efforts that came before the AIP.

**Support from Plan Managers**. Second, participants reported that Plan Managers provided invaluable coaching for district leaders and assistance with building systems for improvement and pushed leaders to articulate clear strategies and theories of action. Participants from four of the participating districts said that some combination of the pressure from ESE or the Plan Monitor combined with the support of the Plan Manager made for a powerful improvement experience. Plan Managers provided this kind of capacity-building support in several ways. In a broad sense, Plan Managers helped district leaders to translate written plans and goals into actionable steps and then helped administrators learn to lead those processes. In one case, Plan Managers helped administrators formulate a process for collecting, assessing, and planning around data. In another case, Plan Managers discussed a plan for recruiting and developing qualified staff, with an emphasis on support and evaluation.

In another case, the district’s Plan Manager took on several roles in what the superintendent saw as an understaffed and under resourced central office. In this district, the Plan Manager helped the superintendent to relocate a strong teacher into a “special assignment” role in an effort both to assist with some AIP-related tasks as well as to build that person’s future leadership capacity.

In one district, a principal tried to capture the multifaceted role played by Plan Managers in building not only technical capacity but also the capacity of individuals in the district to take on this work:

[They provide] a lot of technical assistance and support. Honestly, with technology that’s a huge area where they’ve provided a lot of support because the tech systems in our district and the capacity of the people here to use them are really limited. … So they have been really helpful in trying to create the technological systems to support our work and modeling us for us how to do that and getting some of them working. They’ve also done a lot of prompting and probing around process so helping us to again have more effective meetings, have more effective team plans, push through or think through how to move an agenda forward for any of the work that we’re doing in that area.

In sum, stakeholders reported that Plan Managers helped not only to create leadership teams but also, in some cases, to model leadership activities and capacities that district staff were now beginning to assume. They provided districts with a form of technical assistance that built infrastructure for implementing and managing change and built the capacity of central offices to continue to lead and sustain that change.

**Emphasis on** **Communication and Creating Transparency**. Third, the AIP’s emphasis on communication and reporting on common goals helped to create not only additional transparency but also greater collective responsibility for improvement. Districts increased internal communications—to monitors, to leadership teams, to school committees—and these new connections brought about greater awareness of issues and progress, and fostered additional internal accountability.

Initially, the AIPs in each district pushed leaders to communicate strategies and priorities to various stakeholders, such as principals and parents, and to ensure that the plan’s goals were understood. These efforts, at least in some districts, created more avenues for communication. One district leader called this a “trickle-down effect” of communication. In another, a principal noted that she had changed—albeit reluctantly—some of the focus of her weekly letter to parents to include more emphasis on instructional changes that were consistent with the AIP. Principals in another district appreciated the chance to see data from other schools for the first time and to have open discussions about strategies for improvement with their school-leader peers.

One principal described how a district had built several diverse teams to follow specific elements of their AIPs, creating more awareness and buy-in among staff toward the improvement efforts:

[My team] is responsible for oversight of all of the data initiatives in the district. And so that includes the work that is being done by the district data team…, work that’s being done by the individual school instructional leadership teams, and work that’s being done at the classroom level as it relates to data. And so we took…the goals in the AIP for that area, busted them out into specific action items and deliverables that we thought would support that process. …we meet once a month on a Friday afternoon for several hours and we do check-ins and see how we’re going…. And sometimes we’re asking people for input on what they need; sometimes we’re looking at the products that are coming out of schools related to AIP initiatives. Sometimes we’re creating a rubric, a resource, a tool; in fact just this past week I did a presentation with a group of principals at the principals’ meeting that was on giving feedback to grade-level teams on their use of data. And we looked at a video of a data team in practice using a rubric for giving feedback on how the data team was using data in their meeting… It’s a mixture: we have a teacher, couple principals, the district data guy, and a [Plan Manager team] rep[resentative].

Staff from all levels described similar experiences, where the AIP process brought groups of staff together and pushed them to communicate about data and action plans based on those data. One district administrator called the combination of “technical support” with “reporting out [and] the monitoring” to be two “critical” and indispensable aspects of the AIP process. The AIP provided both a push to come together and communicate as well as assistance with forming these channels with partners and stakeholders. Staff noted a desire to continue reports to school committees and to leadership teams in lieu of monitors once ESE removes AIP support and monitoring from their districts. Participants appreciated the openness that was created in the reporting process and wanted to continue to create this kind of public accountability initiated during their AIP participation.

In most districts, stakeholders also reported that the AIP has had a positive impact on the relationship between the superintendent and the school committee. In addition, it has given the school committee a better understanding of the challenges taking place in the schools. Stakeholders from multiple districts reported that, historically, the relationship between the superintendents and the school committee has been poor. One school-level stakeholder said, “in the past there’s been a kind of tumultuous relationship with [the school committee]...we are now moving in the right direction to really collaborate and work together.” Stakeholders from four districts reported that since beginning the AIP process, their school committee has developed a better understanding of the AIP and is better able to relate to school-level stakeholders. Staff from one district reported that school committee members have developed a common language around the AIP that was not there a couple of years ago, and another said that even though his school committee might not be able to recite the four elements of the AIP, they are at least aware of them.

## AIP Impact on Teaching Practices

In ESE’s AIP Guidance document, the first core principle of the AIP states, “The plan must target and transform *instructional practices* at all levels within the district in a way that is tangible to all students, teachers, and families. All stakeholders should feel that something is different about how the district is approaching the business of educating students” (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013, p. 5). With this in mind, we would expect to see the AIP impacting teaching practices and resulting in changes in the classrooms.

To learn about the extent to which the AIP has impacted teaching practices, interviewers asked principals whether their district’s recent improvement efforts had had a positive impact on teaching practices in their school. Interviewers also asked teachers whether the improvement efforts had had a positive impact on their own teaching practices and how the improvement efforts impacted schoolwide teaching practices. Interviewers asked both groups to also share specific goals or strategies that supported any changes they reported. ESE, district leadership, and Plan Managers and Plan Monitors were also asked about whether districts had seen meaningful changes in teaching practices or instructional supports since the AIP began and what specific aspects of the AIP process they thought most contributed to any change.

Overall, stakeholders from all districts reported that the AIP had an impact on teaching practices in their school or district, although the level of impact and specific changes that occurred in teaching practices varied across schools and districts.

### Impactful Changes in Classrooms

The most impactful changes in classrooms reported were the following:

* Instructional shifts related to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks[[11]](#footnote-11)
* Increased data-based decision making
* Higher expectations for instruction

**Instructional Shifts Related to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.** Although not all districts had strategic objectives in their AIPs that explicitly mentioned the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, every district’s AIP did include some mention of implementing an aligned curriculum or common assessments. For some districts, curriculum development was an integral piece of their AIP, while other AIPs simply made mention of monitoring the curriculum development that was already going on in the district. Staff from five districts at both district and school levels were quick to indicate the instructional shifts accompanying the move to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks as one of the biggest changes in teaching practices. As one respondent said, “This year the focus has been on rigor and alignment to the Common Core, so well-structured lessons and engaged students.” One change mentioned by multiple teachers was asking higher-level questions, having students describe their rationale behind an answer, and asking students to explain what they were thinking and what their thought process was to reach their result. This type of instruction was mentioned as being used not only in ELA but also in mathematics as well. In the latter, teachers were expecting students to “understand mathematics versus teachers just saying, ‘This is how you do it and just do what I did and let’s move on.’” This included asking students to “talk in mathematics” and figure out why a solution worked, approaching it from a standpoint of discovery. One teacher said, “The Common Core brought everybody back to a point of thinking about curriculum.” School leaders echoed this sentiment, with one principal saying teachers had taken charge of the curriculum, using it as both “a driver and a creator,” building common standards-based formative assessments by drawing on their increased familiarity with and understanding of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks rather than waiting for an assessment tool to be handed to them by the state or district.

**Increased Data-Based Decision Making.** Stakeholders from five districts also mentioned data as a key factor influencing changes in teaching practices. A principal at one school said that the AIP’s focus on data use influenced teachers to use data to plan student groups and differentiate their instruction, including designing lesson plans with interventions and remediation. School staff said they frequently analyzed test scores and continually changed small groupings of students according to the most recent data. In one school, teachers said that data charts on classroom walls that were added during the AIP “[make] it easier because when they [students] come over they’re really focused on wanting to learn and they’re trying harder in the classroom and they’re always, ‘Can I do this?’ ‘What can I do?’ So they’re attending more to what you’re teaching them.” In addition, principals and teachers in multiple schools began working with a district partner that incorporates additional assessments and data use since starting the AIP process. In those schools, the teachers and principals mentioned a greater awareness and use of the data cycle that is built into the curriculum and examinations that accompany that program. In one district, a district official mentioned that the change in teachers having common planning time once every other week to multiple times per week was “a real benefit in terms of really making sure that teachers had time to plan lessons, to look at student work, to disaggregate data.” An official in another district discussed collaborative data use in “building-based leadership meetings and building-based data team meetings…looking at student data and looking at student work, but also [circling] back to what instructional practices are you using in your class” to reach students at all levels.

**Higher Expectations for Instruction.** When asked whether expectations for their instruction from their school or district changed under the AIP, teachers reported that expectations for the effectiveness of teachers increased, and many spoke about the improvements in their classrooms that these changes helped bring about. Acknowledging the need for new and updated teaching practices, one teacher said, “I think the district is putting things in place that are trying to put us into the 21st century, slowly…. Our children are changing. We have to change with our children.” Principals in five districts agreed that there were higher expectations for teachers under the AIP. Teachers were held more accountable for the growth of their students than in the past and were expected to produce more evidence and data demonstrating the improvements. Three principals said that they—the principals—are responsible for communicating these new expectations to their teachers. One principal spoke about the impact that connecting the new educator evaluation system and the AIP has had on changing expectations of teachers: “I look at it as a two-pronged system for me. I can use the strategic work we’re doing through the improvement plan and hold teachers accountable and give them observations that really say the next thing you need to do for your next observation is you’ve got to include this…. That’s been a huge lever and I always connect the two.”

Some of the specific focuses of instruction that respondents said were put in the forefront during the AIP process included differentiation, literacy, and student engagement. In many districts, specific goals related to these elements of teaching were built into their AIPs. Differentiation and figuring out how to reach students at all levels of academic achievement was mentioned in three districts by principals, teachers, and district staff, often as it related to analyzing data and reorganizing student groups to ensure each student received the support he or she needed. Another common theme across many districts was a focus on literacy. Teachers mentioned integrating literacy across subjects, establishing expectations for students to engage in more reading and writing than in previous years, and offering more scaffolding in providing feedback to students on their reading. Student engagement emerged as a third area of focus in three districts. According to teachers in two districts, staff were using more small-group instruction and student collaboration, and checking in with struggling students more regularly. A district staff member in a third district stated that one impact of the AIP was that “teachers are [more] organized for learning and students have more ownership in learning.”

### Elements of the AIP Process Contributing to Improved Teaching

According to stakeholders interviewed, the aspects of the AIP process that most contributed to improved teaching practices were the following:

* Defined expectations and consistent focus on rigorous instruction
* Accountability and monitoring through data
* Increased interactions and communication between district and school staff

**Defined Expectations and Consistent Focus on Rigorous Instruction.** Six respondents from three districts reported that the AIP process helped establish defined and consistent expectations in the district and schools, with more responsibility placed on teachers for achieving school goals. This included district leaders putting greater emphasis on rigorous instruction and, as one district staff member noted, creating a “sense of urgency [for teachers] and [expecting] a quicker turnaround in understanding what’s happening in the classroom with students…along with a more serious focus on [making] a change to instruction.” Teachers from a school in one district said that the consistency in expectations also included putting a common language around what good teaching looks like and what instructional strategies school and district leaders are looking for from teachers. This common language stemmed in part from the AIP itself, which clearly defined the major foci for the district and articulated to school leaders the expectations of the district staff. The evidence that this district used to measure progress included: “100% of teachers and administrators, K–12, are using common language during CPT [common planning time] to discuss instruction and planning lessons that incorporate the district’s instructional expectations as evidenced by District Leadership’s observation of meetings and review of agendas and minutes, by November 15; 100% of administrators are providing teachers with formative feedback that is specific and grounded in districts instructional expectations as evidenced by review of observation feedback, by November 15; [and] 100 % of administrators’ monthly dashboards show continued improvement in teachers’ implementation of the seven instructional focus areas over September baseline data.” In another district, staff mentioned the use of specific, measureable, achievable, realistic, and timely (“SMART”) goals in the AIP, which included timelines, specific responsibilities, and specific expected outcomes, as being an especially important way in which clear and consistent definitions framed their work.

**Accountability and Monitoring Through Data.** Staff at district and school levels from two districts reported that regular monitoring and data collection were what kept the district and schools focused on the AIP. One teacher said, “I think everybody’s instruction has become maybe more meaningful in the sense that you have to kind of justify why you’re doing what you’re doing. Whether it’s based on the Common Core, whether it’s based on data that you’ve reviewed, I think everybody is more accountable in that sense and instruction is definite.” Data and accountability were linked to teaching practices in one district through the use of monthly color-coded data wall charts showing student reading levels as measured through standardized internal assessments and vendor-provided exams. In another district, teachers submitted data binders to their administrators, providing proof of their data use and ensuring that analyzing student data remained an integral element of teachers’ responsibilities.

**Increased Interactions and Communications Between District and School Staff.** In two districts, staff mentioned a shift in the interactions between district and school staff since the AIP began as particularly impactful. One Plan Manager said that there was a significant change in the way central office staff interacted and communicated with school leaders, which in turn affected interactions between school leaders and teachers. District staff in another district reported that, since the AIP began, they more frequently went into schools and classrooms and worked side by side with principals, ensuring that the feedback principals gave teachers on their instructional practices accurately reflected the expectations of the district. This shift in which district leadership were more frequently in the schools and working side by side with school leaders reportedly helped keep the focus on expectations directly related to the AIP and brought these district-level expectations to the classroom level and the teachers themselves.

Stakeholders also described many specific supports the district provided teachers to implement the AIP-driven changes in classrooms, which are discussed in the next section.

### Supports for Teachers in Changing Instructional Practices

The most impactful supports for teachers in changing their instructional practices provided since the start of the AIP process were the following:

* Learning walk-throughs and classroom observations
* Focused professional development
* Increased time for teacher collaboration

**Learning Walk-Throughs and Classroom Observations.** District and school staff in four districts mentioned classroom observations, which are also called learning walk-throughs in some districts, as a key support to teachers in changing instructional practices. Teachers in one district said that principals were in the classrooms more often and that they received faster feedback and more frequent follow-up on these observations from their school leaders since the AIP process began. In one district where teachers conduct peer walk-throughs, one teacher said, “We don’t necessarily like being walked through, but we like being part of the team. It gives you such a good picture of the building, of what our strengths are, of what kids are able to do across the building…see how one goal translates to other grades.” In other districts, teachers said that walk-throughs done by school administrators were helpful and they felt that the observers had appropriate backgrounds to give them feedback; however, teachers in one district reported that classroom walk-throughs were too stressful and not a positive experience when conducted by district staff due to anxiety among teachers when being observed by strangers who they did not work with on a day-to-day basis. Nevertheless, in general, the expectations for what observers wanted to see when they entered classrooms was often reported as being well communicated, and teachers praised feedback from the observations as being more specific and actionable than what they received before the AIP.

**Focused Professional Development.** In five districts, staff mentioned professional development as another key support to teachers in changing instructional practices. This included professional development for teachers to implement new teaching practices and professional development for principals to identify rigorous instruction and provide growth-producing feedback during learning walk-throughs. Teachers said the professional development was more aligned to expectations their district had for them and more focused on specific topics than in the past. Specific professional development topics mentioned include many of the same areas in which teachers made the most impactful changes in the classrooms: data-based differentiated instruction, small-group work, and literacy instruction training. Teachers in one district also said that professional development sessions geared to their specific grade-level, especially in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade, were a welcome addition since the AIP began.

**Increased Time for Teacher Collaboration.** Teachers in three districts discussed their colleagues as an important source of support and identified more strategic use of common planning time as one way of leveraging this support. Since the AIP, one teacher said, “I think we’re held to higher standards. We need to be on the same page as the rest of the district. We can’t just go in and do your own thing anymore; you have to be aligned.” In addition to common planning time, teachers or district staff in four districts reported that professional learning communities and peer walk-throughs, as well as more informal opportunities for collaboration, helped them learn new teaching practices, share different approaches, and receive feedback and advice on their own instruction from fellow teachers.

One district staff member said that since AIP, there was now not only a culture of “high accountability, but [also] high support. It’s just a whole culture around growth and improvement, the teachers are improving, the kids are improving, instruction is very consistent when you go from room to room to room, lots of discourse, lots of high-level thinking and conversations going on.” The supports available to teachers in building new teaching practices helped them to not only meet increased expectations that were built into the AIP, but also to improve the learning of their students.

Although respondents reported improvements in teaching practices since the start of the AIP, they also identified a few key challenges hindering further improvements in this area that are described later in the “Challenges” section.

## AIP Impact on Student Outcomes

AIR’s evaluation of the impact of AIP on student outcomes was based primarily on an analysis of quantitative data. However, we also examined qualitative data from stakeholder interviews and focus groups to contextualize the results from the quantitative analyses. As mentioned previously, AIR researchers used a CITS analysis to analyze the effects of the AIP process on student outcomes to capitalize on the richness of the historic data before and after the AIP process was initiated. The findings from the CITS analyses are presented first, followed by findings from stakeholder interviews and focus groups.

### Visual Inspection of Historical Trends of Treatment Districts

We first examined the historical trends of achievement and other outcomes of the AIP districts during the study period and used the information to select the most appropriate analytic models. Figures 1 through 5 and Figures D1 through D4 in Appendix D illustrate the mean pretreatment and posttreatment achievement and nonachievement outcomes for the AIP districts and the matched comparison districts. In each of the figures, the horizontal axis represents pretreatment or posttreatment years, where “0” indicates the year the district began implementing the AIP process. Negative integers represent years prior to AIP, and positive integers represent years after the AIP process began. As illustrated in the figures, the pretreatment and posttreatment outcomes were either stable throughout the study period or showed a curvilinear trend; thus, we chose to adopt a baseline mean model because it is the most robust to model misspecification (for example, estimating a nonlinear trend using a linear model) (Bloom, 2003).

**MCAS ELA-Based Achievement Outcomes.** MCAS ELA-based outcomes examined include CPI,[[12]](#footnote-12) percentage proficient or advanced, and percentage warning or failing on the MCAS ELA and mathematics tests. Figure 1 shows the mean pretreatment and posttreatment MCAS ELA-based achievement outcomes for the treatment, or AIP districts, and matched comparison districts. The two trend lines representing the two groups of districts seemed to be parallel during the study period. Comparison districts consistently had better performances than the AIP districts, and the gap between the two groups remained unchanged.

Figure 1. Average MCAS ELA CPI Scores

**MCAS Mathematics-Based Achievement Outcomes.** Similarly, we examined three MCAS mathematics-based outcomes, including CPI, percentage proficient or advanced, and percentage warning or failing. Figure 2 shows the mean pretreatment and posttreatment MCAS mathematics-based achievement outcomes for the treatment and matched comparison districts. The two trend lines that represent the two groups of districts seem to be more or less parallel. Comparison districts consistently performed better than AIP districts, and the gap between the two groups seemed to be the same.

Figure 2. Average MCAS Mathematics CPI Scores

**Nonacademic Outcomes.** As described in the “Data Analysis” section, we also examined three nonacademic outcomes: dropout rates, attendance, and retention rates. Figures 3 through 5 show changes over time for these outcomes in AIP and comparison districts. As shown in the figures, there seemed to be inconsistent changes in the nonacademic outcomes for both groups of districts. For example, the two groups of districts both experienced a decrease followed by an increase in their dropout rates.

Figure 3. Average Dropout Rates

Figure 4. Average Attendance Rates

Figure 5. Average Retention Rates

### Overall Findings

**Student Achievement on MCAS.** The results from the statistical models using the three MCAS ELA-related outcomes indicate that participating in the AIP process did not have a statistically significant effect on student achievement on the MCAS ELA assessment. More specifically, engaging in the AIP process in the time period tested did not lead to greater improvement in schools from the AIP districts than in schools from the matched comparison districts. Figure 6 shows the changes in the average CPI scores, percentage of students performing at the warning or failing levels, and percentage of students performing at the proficient or advanced levels in both groups of districts for the MCAS ELA assessments. As shown, schools from the AIP districts experienced a greater decrease in the CPI scores, a greater increase in percentage of students considered warning or failing, and a smaller increase in percentage of students performing at the proficient or advanced levels. However, none of the differences were statistically significant.

Figure 6. Changes in MCAS ELA Outcomes Between Pretreatment and Posttreatment in AIP and Comparison Districts

The results from the models using the three MCAS mathematics-related outcomes indicate that schools in the AIP districts did not show significantly greater improvement than schools in the matched comparison districts. As shown in Figure 7, schools in the AIP districts experienced a greater increase in mathematics CPI scores and in percentage of students who scored at the proficient or advanced levels and a greater decrease in the percentage of students considered warning or failing. However, none of the differences were statistically significant, which indicates that the AIP process did not produce significantly larger improvement in schools from AIP districts than in schools from comparison districts.

Figure 7. Changes in MCAS Mathematics Outcomes Between Pretreatment and Posttreatment in AIP and Comparison Districts

**Nonacademic Outcomes.** Participation in the AIP process did not have a statistically significant effect on dropout rates, attendance, or retention rates.[[13]](#footnote-13) Figure 8 shows the changes in the average dropout rates, attendance, and retention rates in both groups of districts. As illustrated in the figure, the dropout rates in schools from AIP districts decreased to a greater extent than schools from the comparison districts. However, the increase in attendance and decrease in retention rates in schools from AIP districts were smaller than those of schools from comparison districts. None of the differences in changes were statistically significant.

Figure 8.Changes in Dropout Rates, Attendance, and Retention Rates Between Pretreatment and Posttreatment in AIP and Comparison Districts

**Additional Findings From Subgroup Analyses of MCAS-Based Outcomes.** In addition to the main impact analyses, we conducted subgroup analyses on the MCAS-based outcomes with three student groups: ELLs, low-income students, and students with disabilities. The subgroup analyses identified few statistical differences in the changes in ELA and mathematics achievement outcomes. Those differences that were significant suggested the converse effect from expected: that engaging in the AIP process was associated with a smaller positive change (e.g., smaller increase in CPI scores or greater reduction in percentage of students classified as warning or failing on MCAS mathematics assessments). Schools from AIP districts showed less improvement in the percentage of low-income students who scored at the proficient or advanced levels on the MCAS mathematics assessments than schools from comparison districts. In addition, schools from AIP districts showed less improvement in MCAS ELA and mathematics CPI scores for students with disabilities than schools from comparison districts. However, after correcting for multiple comparison by choosing appropriate *p* values based on the number of comparisons performed, none of these coefficients remained significant. Thus, we conclude that the AIP process did not have significant effects on student outcomes.

### Summary

Overall, the CITS results did not identify any significant positive impacts of AIP on student outcomes. In other words, no improvements in student outcomes can be attributed to the AIP process at this point. However, given that effective school reform models typically take three to five years to affect student learning, this is not wholly surprising; effective district reform models could take even longer than three to five years to affect student learning districtwide (American Institutes for Research, 2011). Even though the CITS analyses showed no statistically significant differences in the impact of AIP on districts compared with the set of matched comparison districts, an analysis of qualitative data suggests that some districts experienced improvements in student outcomes, and staff reports from nearly all districts echoed these findings.

In Fall River, for example, two schools had exited Level 4 status since the AIP process began, and the district had doubled the number of schools that met their progress and performance index[[14]](#footnote-14) target the previous year. Teachers in Holyoke, along with both district- and school-level staff in New Bedford, reported improvements in student performance on interim assessments since the beginning of AIP, as compared to performance in previous years. Randolph staff, despite not seeing any overall improvements in student performance, reported improvements in MCAS ELA performance, at least for the early elementary grades.[[15]](#footnote-15) Salem staff reported some improvements in performance within individual schools but nothing districtwide. Staff did, however, report a dramatic reduction in the dropout rate[[16]](#footnote-16) and reported expecting to see improvements in MCAS performance by the end of the 2014-15 school year, which will be Salem’s third year as an AIP district. District staff in Southbridge also reported improvements in student performance in 2014,[[17]](#footnote-17) and both district- and school-level staff reported already seeing improvements in performance on interim assessments.

Although there was no evidence of statistically significant positive changes in student outcomes across AIP districts overall, it may be that the CITS analyses were not sensitive enough to detect the small, but meaningful, localized changes described previously or that gains of individual schools are cancelled out by the lack of progress of other schools because the CITS analysis examined the average changes across schools. Another possible explanation is that a lack of differences in changes in student outcomes between AIP districts and comparison district may be an indicator of success given the challenges faced by these districts before the AIP process was initiated. Several of these challenges are discussed in more detail in the next section.

## Challenges

Respondents most often cited the following as challenges to successful implementation of the AIP process and, ultimately, improvement in student outcomes:

* Leadership turnover
* Weak teacher talent pipeline—recruitment, development, and retention
* Teacher skepticism about change and challenges gaining buy-in
* Competing priorities within the district
* Mismatch between the level of pressure and amount of support
* Student demographics

### Leadership Turnover

A major challenge when participants were describing the AIP process was the stability of the staff in key leadership positions. In two districts, participants cited central office turnover, including in the superintendent’s office, which has made it a challenge to sustain improvement efforts. In another case, a district administrator cited “huge turnover” among teachers. In all of these instances, participants noted that it was harder for the AIP to take hold because transitions often meant that “there were structures put in place for a year and then those were replaced or gone.”

### Weak Teacher Talent Pipeline—Recruitment, Development, and Retention

Multiple districts cited various issues with recruiting, supporting, and retaining school-level staff responsible for completing the work of the AIP. Plan Managers in two districts cited issues with “talent pipelines,” both in terms of recruitment and development of staff to take on leadership roles in implementing aspects of the AIP. And teachers and principals from two districts noted a lack of staff development efforts for teachers.

Stakeholders in two districts mentioned retention of teachers as another challenge to successfully implementing the district’s AIP. In one district, teachers who remain said many of their colleagues left due to a culture of rigidity in their district that changed expectations from being requested to being required: “One of my big concerns is that because we’re so rigid, people…don’t stay…. We lost lots of veteran teachers who just left and went to other districts. And we’re not retaining [new] teachers either. We’ll get a teacher for their first year or second year and then they’re leaving. And that’s not the way our district used to be.” In another district, the process through which teachers were placed in open positions was blamed for creating an ever-changing staff that made it more difficult to consistently implement the priorities of the AIP. A teacher who had experienced this firsthand said, “Professionally speaking, it’s very difficult for you to make a team and collaborate.” In addition, the constant movement between schools meant “there’s no permanency or constancy for the staff and for the families.” And with staff uncertain of where they will be working year to year, “There’s no commitment or little commitment to the population, to the legacy of what these kids are going to be, to their peers because they likely could be in another school [next] year.” In a third district, staff mentioned the need for stability at all levels, from the district to the classroom, as a necessity to see even more of an impact from the district’s improvement efforts on teaching practices.

With the focus in AIPs on instruction, districts will remain at a disadvantage if central offices continue to shift priorities or if schools are faced with labor tensions, lack of capacity, or instability of their own.

### Teacher Skepticism About Change and Challenges Gaining Buy-In

Stakeholders in two districts cited resistance to change from many veteran teachers as another challenge to changing teaching practices. As one school leader said, “You know when you get teachers that have been teaching for 15 years and now you’re telling the teacher a different way, that’s hard work to get that to change.” One district staff member in another district discussed veteran teachers’ experience with implementing new initiatives and their reluctance to take on yet another new program. “Veteran teachers have seen…different initiatives in the district and in general…they don’t last very long, every five, six years there’s a change, what’s next. So I think there is an attitude sometimes of, ‘Let’s do enough of it so that they think they’re seeing what they want to see, but we’re not going to really embrace and change our practice.’” In addition to initiative fatigue that may have contributed to veteran teachers’ resistance to changes, other teachers decided to simply retire or move to other districts. Two districts noted tensions between union staff and administrators related to hesitancy of staff to buy into the AIP.

Staff from two districts reported that student outcomes may be slow to change because changing the mindset of teachers and building buy-in to the AIP and the AIP process can take time. For example, teachers in one district reported believing that because of the type of students they teach—large numbers of ELLs and students with disabilities— they will never be able to reach the performance expectations laid out in the district’s AIP. District-level staff from another district indicated that the successful implementation of a district’s AIP relies heavily on having complete support and buy-in from all principals: “If we don’t have rock star principals in our schools then it’s really hard to implement from the district level and to run a school from the district.”

### Competing Priorities Within the District

Data showed that there were other noninstructional issues that took time and attention from staff. These concerns were primarily cited by teachers and principals and primarily in two districts. For example, a major obstacle cited by one principal was having sufficient time to commit to these efforts. Her district addressed this issue using what one principal called a “tracker.” The principal logged her activities at regular intervals for an entire week and discussed the results with an administrator. She was surprised to notice the amount of time she spent on noninstructional issues, like discipline and facilities problems. This tool helped her to determine exactly what areas she would try to delegate to allow her to spend more time on instruction. The district’s Plan Manager noted that this tool was slated to be used more frequently with all of the district’s principals.

In addition, district-level staff from two districts and teachers in a third district reported that although AIPs may get at many of the root causes for student underperformance, the AIP process alone does not necessarily address all of the district’s needs in terms of improving student outcomes. For example, according to one district leader, “We don’t have enough staff and our class sizes…every one of them is thirty or more students in it…we have to stay the course [with the AIP], but also there are these external conditions, large class sizes, limited staffing that I think impact our ability to execute the AIP in an accelerated fashion.” District leaders in another district cited issues specifically with textbooks and technology as impediments to improving student outcomes.

### Mismatch Between the Level of Pressure and Amount of Supports

In two districts, teachers reported a mismatch between the increased expectations and the level of support offered to teachers in changing instructional practices. A teacher in one of these districts said, “[We] feel like so much has to be added to [our] classroom, but you don’t really know how to do it properly.” In addition, teachers at this school said the need for more staff to lower class sizes and provide specialized supports to students, including support for ELLs and nonacademic student needs, also contributed to teachers feeling overwhelmed by the level of responsibilities. Teachers in one school in the other district said that new teachers often did not receive training on programs that were already in place in their schools before they were hired, introducing inconsistencies among staff within the same school and magnifying uncertainties about how to implement teaching practices in their classrooms. One teacher at this school said, “I think there hasn’t been enough support both from the district and within the school system for the new teachers, that there isn’t enough cohesiveness whatsoever.” Teachers at this school also expressed dissatisfaction with how much change they were being asked to make for some of the new initiatives they were implementing and a relatively low level of support for making these changes. One teacher said, “There’s a disconnect between how much we’re being made responsible for and…how much we’re going to get support for.”

### Student Demographics

Last, staff from two districts suggested that although the district’s AIP may improve outcomes for some students, the AIP does not necessarily address the district’s unique population challenges. Principals and teachers in these districts suggested that the AIP goals and strategies did not adequately address the needs of the district’s ELLs or take into account needs associated with low socioeconomic status. Staff from these districts also cited a chronic lack of parent support and involvement not necessarily addressed by the AIP goals and strategies. Teachers from one district noted that even though focusing on parent involvement is one of the district’s AIP goals, it has been less of a priority than the other goals.

In addition to the specific challenges cited previously, nearly all respondents suggested that a change in student outcomes will simply take time and that “staying the course” is the key, especially for districts that have experienced significant reform churn and turnover in leadership. According to one Plan Manager, “To see really lasting change I think you’re at three, three to five years because you’ve got to change climate. You’ve got to change relationships. You’ve got to do foundational work.” The AIP, however, had been in place for less than three years, at most, in any given district at the time of this study.

## Indicators of Readiness to Remove ESE Supports and Monitoring

When a district enters the AIP process, the goal is for the district to quickly improve student performance, address systemic challenges, and build capacity and systems to ensure that this progress can be sustained without intensive support and monitoring by ESE. Currently, no specific checklist exists of indicators that a district must meet in order for this intervention to be removed. This is in part because of the unique contexts that led each district to enter the AIP process and because the concept of what it means to “turn around” a district as a whole is still emerging and is too complex to translate into a checklist. However, ESE has articulated some initial criteria to provide districts and their stakeholders with broad targets to aim for (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013, pp. xxvi–xxxi). This “exit” guidance is based on the theory of action that drives the AIP process and provides a series of “benchmarks aligned to the theory of action” that, if demonstrated by a district “without significant support from ESE,” could indicate their readiness to exit from Level 4 district status. In addition, another element of the AIP Guidance document articulates phases that a district may go through as it moves from early implementation of the AIP to embedding in the district a new way of operating (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013, p. xxx).

Because the criteria document from ESE is not a rigid checklist of what specific indicators a district must show for ESE to remove AIP support and monitoring, when interviewing stakeholders we asked them to outline what they thought would theoretically indicate that a district was ready for this transition. These responses were not intended to be specific items that respondents knew ESE would be looking for when making a determination about a district’s status. Instead, they were to be indicators that the respondents felt would be in place in a district that had successfully implemented their AIP and would signify the district was able to continue improving without having formal ESE supports in place. These findings reflect the indicators stakeholders shared.

### Indicators of Readiness to Implement an AIP Without ESE Supports

The most frequently mentioned indicators of a district’s readiness to implement an AIP without ESE supports were the following:

* Embedded systems and structures to continue the work of the AIP
* Improvements in student outcomes

**Embedded Systems and Structures.** Staff in five districts and from ESE mentioned district infrastructure as the most important indicator of readiness to continue the AIP process without direct ESE intervention. One ESE staff member said that a district with the right systems, structures, and processes in place indicates “that people could come together to regularly do this kind of analysis and decision making.” The Plan Manager from one district explained a vision of what embedded structures in place could look like: “They would be creating their lesson plans; they would be referring to student data…then talking about curriculum or…other district practices that they were initiating…. Those things would become very concrete ways that would show things had become [embedded].” Staff in two other districts echoed these sentiments, discussing consistency in practices both across and within schools as the way to tell whether systems had become embedded. In another district, staff mentioned cohesiveness across departments and the breaking down of silos to address the district’s priorities as an indicator of embedded structures. Overall, districts and ESE personnel were in agreement that one of the most important indicators of readiness to transition to full district ownership of the AIP process was, as one ESE staff member put it, “evidence that this continuous cycle of improvement is now part of the culture in the district and it drives their work.”

Staff in five districts and Plan Monitors mentioned district and school staff taking on the work of the AIP themselves as an important indicator of readiness to continue the AIP process without direct ESE intervention. District staff in two districts discussed writing an AIP plan without the assistance of a Plan Manager as a specific way to demonstrate ownership of the AIP work. Doing this, as one district staff member said, shows that the district has developed the “ability to independently produce a plan with measurable benchmarks and produce data on a periodic basis to indicate levels of implementation.” Staff from two different districts cited self-authoring or coauthoring of monitoring reports, including “highlight reports” and quarterly progress reports (QPRs), as another important piece of the AIP work that a district should take on to show they are ready for ESE remove AIP support and monitoring. A district staff member said that although being able to author these monitoring reports was important, beyond that, a district should show a “clear understanding and clear commitment…that data will [continue to] be collected, analyzed, and reported out publicly.” An ESE staff member discussed the importance of a district taking charge of the AIP work. The staff member explained what it looked like when a district was deemed ready to take a more active role in the authoring their own reports as a step toward assuming full district ownership of the AIP process:

The biggest thing we saw was ownership. If you looked at their last quarterly progress report…ratings in terms of each initiative…they’re not totally there yet, they’re [still] struggling in some areas, but the key thing we have seen is that they’re aware that they’re struggling in those areas because they’re collecting really good data [and], they’re taking steps to address that data. The assistant superintendent…has completely embraced this process; the school committee has been involved in this and reports [are] that they’re asking the right questions in many cases.

Because district staff taking on the tasks required by the AIP would demonstrate that there was capacity within the district to continue this work once outside staff had left the district, staff in the five districts discussed above reported that this would be one of the most concrete ways a district could demonstrate readiness to assume full ownership of the process.

**Improved Student Outcomes**. Plan Monitors, ESE staff, and staff from five districts mentioned improvements in student outcomes as another important element that should be present for a district to continue the AIP process without ESE supports and monitoring. Although many said that MCAS scores should be expected to improve for ESE to remove AIP support and monitoring from a district, some also pointed to other student improvements that could serve as indicators of readiness. One district staff member said a district at this stage should show “continuous improvement in student outcomes…along with a whole set of indicators, state assessment results being one, but all of the other things that come along with that. Reduction of dropout rates, improvements in school culture and climate indicators, you know all the things.” In another district, staff pointed specifically to closing achievement gaps as another way a district could show improvements in student achievement that may serve as an indicator of readiness to assume full district ownership of the AIP process. ESE staff pointed out, however, that they were more interested in seeing a “trajectory to improve student achievement,” rather than significantly improved student outcomes necessarily.

Although demonstrating improved student achievement *is* identified in the official ESE AIP “Criteria for Exit,” the other indicators of readiness shared by ESE staff or in the “Criteria for Exit” were not always consistent with those indicators identified by district and school interviewees. These variations are discussed in the next section.

### Variation in Indicators From ESE and District or School Stakeholders

Variation exists between indicators mentioned in the “Criteria for Exit from Level 4 District Status” section of the AIP Guidance document that districts received from ESE and indicators of readiness to exit the AIP process explicitly mentioned by district and school stakeholders interviewed. For example, neither school nor district level stakeholders mentioned monitoring the impact of the initiatives or modifying initiatives to achieve greater impact as indicators of readiness to exit the process, both of which were key indicators in the AIP Guidance document. Indicators that stakeholders mentioned that were not a part of the AIP Guidance document included the embedding of consistent systems and structures across the district and demonstrating financial commitment to continue initiatives through planned budgets. In addition, differences also existed in many of the indicators mentioned by both, such as which data would constitute demonstrating improved student outcomes; the AIP Guidance document, for example, gave more prescribed and narrowly defined data points than stakeholders, who proposed a wider array of potential data that could indicate this improvement.

### Other Indicators of Readiness for ESE to Remove AIP Support and Monitoring

Other readiness indicators mentioned by stakeholders from at least two districts were high-level instruction in classrooms, stability and consistency in leadership, plans for future financial stability of the initiatives, and consistency in perspectives across stakeholders.

**Improved Quality of Instruction.** Staff from three districts mentioned proof of high-level instruction in classrooms as a key indicator of readiness to assume full district ownership of the AIP process. As one district staff member said, “We want to see some evidence… to support that curriculum initiatives aren’t just words on the paper, but are actionable and working in the classroom at the student level,…pre-k through 12.” In addition to seeing this rigorous instruction at work in classrooms, staff from another district reported that seeing data from both students and teachers— the latter coming from learning walk-throughs—that are aligned with the expected high-level instruction is a necessary indicator of readiness to continue the AIP process without direct ESE support and monitoring. A district staff member said they expected to see “student data and teacher data [from] supervision evaluations for staff that’s effective and aligned with what you’re expecting to see with the instruction.” A similar indicator is reflected in both the defining objectives and executing initiatives sections of the ESE criteria; the former says the district should define and implement “effective instruction and what quality implementation of the initiatives looks like,” whereas the latter states that “district, school, and classroom educators [should be] provided with time resources, support, and useful feedback to implement strategic objectives and related initiatives in order to reach the outcomes.”

**Consistent Leadership**. In districts where leadership had been unstable, staff pointed to consistency of leadership at both the district- and school-levels as a necessary element for a district to be ready for ESE to remove AIP support and monitoring. For them, stability meant having experienced principals in place at most schools as well as a superintendent with a long-term contract to remain in the district. Staff believed that having leaders in place across the district that remain after ESE removes AIP support and monitoring would increase the chance of the AIP initiatives and practices continuing. This was precisely the expectation for Gill-Montague; as a prerequisite for transitioning to full ownership of the AIP process, the district agreed to hire “a superintendent with a 3-year contract [and] administrators were given multi-year contracts.”

**Financial Stability**. Stakeholders cited ensuring consistency and stability as being important not only in leadership but also in finances. Stakeholders in two districts cited financial plans that show a commitment to continuing initiatives begun during the AIP as another necessary element to demonstrate readiness for ESE to remove AIP support and monitoring. One district staff member said that a plan for the sustainability of finances was needed to be able to maintain improved student outcomes that had been driven by the implementation of new programs. This sentiment was shared in another district where a district staff member said they thought that “showing in the budget that we’re going to continue to put into place some of the supports that have worked to help the AIP move forward” would show they were ready to transition to full ownership of the AIP process. Demonstrating evidence of financial stability of the AIP initiatives, however, is not explicitly mentioned in the ESE criteria.

**Common Vision and Buy-In**. To keep the work that began under the AIP moving forward, staff from multiple districts mentioned the need for stakeholders across the district to be on the same page about their expectations for the future of their district. One district staff member said that in the schools one should ask, “Do [teachers] understand the urgency around the change, is there a common vision and understanding of the strategies?” Beyond the school level, another district saw it as imperative that there be a functional working relationship among the administration, the union, and the school committee. “If those three brokers are aligned, if those three brokers are using the same sort of language, if those three brokers realize a sense of urgency is required, if they all agree on the target and need to be moving in a particular direction, then that would be one thing to say, okay there is potential sustainability for the movement.” A similar but narrower indicator is included in the ESE criteria regarding defining objectives and that the “district operates with a clear and widely understood definition of effective instruction and what quality implementation of the initiatives looks like.”

### Summary

Although some elements of what would indicate a district is ready to “exit” the AIP process were consistent between ESE’s “Criteria” document (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013, p. xxx) and those mentioned by stakeholders, specifics often differed between the two. In addition, some indicators that stakeholders thought were important to be in place in exiting districts were not mentioned at all in ESE’s document. These inconsistencies could inform document revisions as well as provide guidance to shape communications from ESE to districts regarding the necessary indicators they must demonstrate before they can transition to full district ownership of the AIP process.

## **Promising Practices for Effective Implementation of the AIP Process**

In addition to asking stakeholders about the impact, if any, of the AIP process on district capacity, teaching practices, and student outcomes, AIR asked stakeholders to describe the process for plan development, implementation, and monitoring, as well as whether they believed these practices were effective. The questions focused on understanding which key staff members at various levels (school and district) were involved in each phase of the process, what their primary roles and responsibilities were, insights into effective execution during each phase of the process, and how, if at all, their answers to these questions changed over time. Based on stakeholder feedback and specific examples, AIR staff compiled two to four promising practices for each phase of the AIP process: development, implementation, and monitoring. These promising practices, along with both authentic examples and counterexamples where appropriate and available, are presented next. Note that in a few cases, no appropriate counterexample was available. Promising practices could encapsulate multiple activities mentioned by stakeholders and are not always specific to a single district, but should be able to be applied in various contexts. The promising practices and examples are intended to go beyond the standard expectations for implementation described in the AIP Guidance document (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013) and provide ESE and participating districts with meaningful examples of how to effectively implement the AIP process.

### Plan Development

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| In Terms of Effective Plan Development, Districts Should Strive to… | In Terms of Plan Development, Districts Should Avoid… |
| Involve key stakeholders in the plan development process—at the district and school levels, and other stakeholders—to accomplish the following:   * Ensure buy-in and commitment to the key strategies and initiatives for improvement. * Build capacity for developing a focused improvement plan once ESE removes AIP support and monitoring   *Example: Several districts reported involving additional stakeholders, beyond district leaders and Plan Managers, in the plan development process, including principals and teachers, and reported that involving stakeholders was a critical strategy for establishing widespread buy-in to the AIP and AIP process. One district that involved their school committee members in the AIP development process reported that this involvement made school committee members feel more invested in the process.* | Developing a plan without input from key stakeholders at the district, school, and community levels.  *Example: Stakeholders reported that in some districts, the superintendent or the Plan Manager developed the AIP without input from other stakeholders, which ultimately slowed and in some cases stalled the district’s ability to implement a strong AIP.* |
| Use Plan Manager or Management Team during plan development process as both a mentor and liaison between ESE and district.  *Example: In one district, a new assistant superintendent reported working closely with the district’s Plan Manager, using the Plan Manager as a mentor and building her own capacity to ensure continuous district improvement once the ESE removes AIP support and monitoring.* | Relying solely on Plan Manager or Management Team to identify root causes and develop AIP.  *Example: Districts that relied solely on the Plan Manager to develop the AIP struggled to develop goals, strategies, and initiatives that key stakeholders could buy into and implement and have not built capacity within the district to develop focused improvement plans once ESE removes AIP support and monitoring.* |

### Plan Implementation

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| In Terms of Effective Plan Implementation, Districts Should Strive to… | In Terms of Effective Plan Implementation, Districts Should Avoid… |
| Clearly communicate expectations for district- and school-level staff in terms of AIP implementation.  *Example: In one district, the superintendent shared the AIP goals with all teachers on the first day of school and has since visited each school individually to talk with teachers about the AIP.* | Using the AIP as a district-only document or distributing the AIP to school staff without explanation or follow-up.  *Example: As of spring 2014, the principal in one district reported that he had not yet seen the most recently approved AIP. As a result, he was not able to share expectations with teachers, and teachers did not understand or buy into the AIP process.* |
| Provide appropriate supports to help staff meet those expectations.  *Example: Common planning time was one approach several districts used to address new instructional expectations.* | Expecting changes in practice without training and support.  *Example: In one district, teachers reported that the AIP places a greater emphasis on data use, but they have not received any additional training related to data use.* |
| Ensure that principals are invested and supported so that they can take ownership over implementation.  *Example: One district now requires principals to prepare a weekly staff memo that addresses expected instructional shifts, and two districts reported that regular principal meetings are now used primarily to discuss specific strategies and initiatives included in the AIP and to provide professional development related to those strategies.* | Relying solely on district leaders and Plan Managers to ensure effective implementation of the AIP, especially given that, by design, the AIP should “transform instructional practices at all levels within the district in a way that is tangible to all students, teachers, and families” (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013, p. 3).  *Example: Principals and teachers in one district school said they were not aware of the content of the AIP and could not say what initiatives coming to the school from the district were related to it.* |
| Embed appropriate accountability measures at both the district and school level.  *Example: Stakeholders from several districts reported an increased use of teacher and principal evaluations and formal and informal classroom observations since beginning the AIP process.* | Incorporating only the minimum accountability measures required by the AIP, in a compliance manner, or relying on the same pre-AIP accountability measures and expecting different results.  *Example: Principals in one district only regularly reviewed data on attendance, suspensions, and dropouts, rather than more in-depth data including interim assessment data and teacher ratings from walk-throughs.* |

### Plan Monitoring

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| In Terms of Effective Plan Monitoring, Districts Should Strive to… | In Terms of Effective Plan Monitoring Districts Should Avoid… |
| Leverage the Plan Monitor as someone who can:   * Challenge the district with tough questions about progress and evidence of progress * Provide objective outside perspective * Provide feedback and constructive criticism. * Act as a sounding board for discussing challenges   *Example: A monitor pushed a principal in one district to provide data that showed many aspects of the school, including current student and teacher performance, instead of only the standard attendance and discipline data routinely offered.* | Viewing the Plan Monitor as simply a compliance role. By design, the Plan Monitor should encourage “collegial, reflective discussion with the district” (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013, p. 10), not enforce compliance. Unfortunately, some districts failed to develop this positive relationship with the Plan Monitor and viewed the Monitor as burdening the district’s progress.  *Example: An antagonistic relationship between the superintendent and Plan Monitor in one district led to little collaboration between the two parties and no reflective or productive discussions.* |
| Actively participate in planning for monthly highlight meetings and preparing periodic reports for the school committee (e.g., QPRs), leveraging them as opportunities to reflect on and communicate progress.  *Example: Although the leader in one district indicated that he would not be upset if highlight meetings were eliminated altogether, he also acknowledged they were “valuable” and “part of the training wheels” for AIP.” By Year 2 of AIP, districts making progress reported working collaboratively with the Plan Monitor to prepare for highlight discussions and progress reports.* | Relying solely on the Plan Manager or Plan Monitor to develop agendas for monthly highlight meetings and to prepare QPRs. Districts that fail to participate actively in preparing for monthly highlight discussions or QPRs are suggesting by their actions that they do not see value in reflecting on progress or communicating to the public where they are struggling and succeeding. |
| Focus on manageable topics for each meeting and involve relevant stakeholders.  *Example: One district reported that “last month we focused on ELL, so I had our director of ELL come in and really talk about her work within the AIP.” Staff from another district said that now “principals come and do the highlight meetings, ELL director, special ed directors…as many of us as possible.”* | Discussing all goals, strategies, and initiatives at each monthly highlight meeting. As one district leader explained, “AIP is so big, you can kind of get lost in the conversation.” |
| Incorporate firsthand observations, such as learning walks, especially during Year 1 of the AIP process.  *Example: Staff from one district reported conducting learning walks as part of an early monthly highlight meeting to provide the Plan Manager and Plan Monitor with a firsthand look at instruction in the district.* | Assuming, especially in Year 1, that the Plan Manager and Plan Monitor fully understand the nuances of the district’s issues. |

### School Committees

In addition to monitoring by Plan Monitors and ESE, the school committee also plays a significant role in monitoring progress in AIP districts. Promising practices for further leveraging the school committee in the AIP process are described, with examples (and counterexample where appropriate) in the following table.[[18]](#footnote-18)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| In Terms of Effectively Leveraging the School Committee, Districts Should Strive to… | In Terms of Effectively Leveraging the school Committee, Districts Should Avoid… |
| Ensure that the goals of the AIP are clear to the school committee.  *Example: Stakeholders from four districts indicated how important it is to make sure school committee members understand the goals of the AIP and are constantly focusing discussion on education, instruction, and student achievement: “Education and instruction are talked about every meeting…getting in front of them what does this big document mean and how does it relate to that classroom teacher and student.” In one district, school committee members have even been invited to attend a few learning walks with superintendents to give them a better understanding of the AIP goals.* | Assuming that the school committee understands the goals of the AIP and how the AIP relates to improving instruction.  *Example: Stakeholders in one district said that their school committee still seems to only see the surface level of the AIP and does not understand the complexities or nuances involved.* |
| Focus on building relationships between district staff and school committee members as part of the AIP process.  *Example: Two districts organized full-day retreats for the superintendent and school committee members to jointly discuss and focus on the AIP, with the ultimate goal of facilitating communication and building a more positive relationship between district leadership and the school committee.* | Assuming that the AIP process alone will address any longstanding issues between district staff and school committees.  *Example: One district suggested that many of the poor relationships between the leadership and the school committee originated because “[ESE] designed [the AIP] as an arrangement between the superintendent and the state.”* |
| Address any school committee concerns about the content, frequency, or structure of regular progress reports to ensure that committee members are maximally engaged in the process.  *Example: In one district, the AIP Plan Monitor now highlights the quarterly progress report rather than reading it verbatim.* | Providing progress reports in a way that does not resonate with school committee members.  *Example: One district reported that the AIP Plan Monitor reads the QPR verbatim, so that it is accurately reflected in the public record. Unfortunately, district staff reported that this resulted in resentment from committee members over being spoken to in an overly simplistic manner.* |

## Voluntary AIP

Given the time and resources the AIP process currently requires for full implementation, stakeholders at all levels and from all districts were asked whether they thought a streamlined version of the AIP process could be implemented voluntarily in other districts (Level 3 districts, for example) and still be an effective improvement tool. District leaders from six of seven districts indicated that all components are critical to the AIP process and that nothing could or should be dropped. However, state-level stakeholders and AIP Level 3 and Level 4 support staff (including both Plan Managers and Plan Monitors) offered a few recommendations for ways to streamline the existing AIP process for use in Level 4 and other districts.

**1. Build capacity for the district to develop a focused district improvement plan**

Currently, most AIP districts have an assigned Plan Manager responsible for helping district leadership to develop a district plan, within the timeline established by ESE, that meets the criteria laid out in the Level 4 District Plan Rubric. The level of Plan Manager involvement in developing the plan and ownership over the final plan, however, varied widely across districts, with reports of some Plan Managers writing, not just facilitating development of, the district plan.

The core foundational theory of action is the same, it’s always about creating a cycle of continuous improvement and helping to build capacity of leaders to understand what each of those points of reference are and create opportunities for that work to happen in their district.

*—An ESE staff member*

In pursuit of a voluntary version of the AIP, stakeholders from five districts, along with both ESE and AIP Level 3 support staff, proposed building capacity for plan development, including the initial identification of root causes for student underperformance, among district leaders and other key staff in lieu of providing support using a dedicated Plan Manager. Respondents pointed out the importance of building the capacity of district leaders to develop a strong district improvement plan, “Not the fluffy stuff that goes up on the wall, but a real concrete plan that…is based in data,” with one respondent explaining:

The process of articulating a theory of action, identifying strategies that will bring that theory of action to life, identifying the early evidence and final outcome is something every single district could use and there are people already doing it… but there are a lot of places who are poorly performing but not designated as Level 4 that don’t have a clear articulation of what the work should look like, so I think it could be useful in that respect.

One added advantage of this approach, according to one respondent, is that “It’s theirs [the District Plan] and it’s not imposed.”

**2. Eliminate ongoing external support for plan implementation**

Although according to ESE staff, most districts like having a dedicated Plan Manager, one AIP district has never had a Plan Manager, and district leaders there did not indicate the lack of support as a hindrance to their ability to implement the AIP process. Early reports from staff supporting similar improvement efforts in Level 3 districts also suggest that a dedicated Plan Manager might not be necessary to successfully implement a district plan once the plan has been developed. However, the support from a Plan Manager was also cited as one of the most helpful aspects of the AIP process, suggesting that for some districts, this additional level of support is necessary.

A respondent from one district indicated that in lieu of a dedicated Plan Manager, someone at the district level should be associated with and committed to the district plan and serve in a support role to district leaders and school-level staff as needed. A respondent from another district pointed out that external support for implementation from state-level staff would not be necessary either.

**3. Encourage regular, but not necessarily external, progress monitoring**

Respondents from three districts, along with ESE staff, indicated that although the external monitoring currently provided by the Plan Monitor is, in most districts, quite useful, districts do not necessarily need such frequent monitoring as the current AIP process requires and, in many cases, districts can use their own staff to monitor progress.

ESE staff suggested providing districts with clear guidance or best practices for monitoring progress and recommended that districts implement some form of quarterly monitoring, at minimum, by someone removed from the day-to-day implementation of the district plan. Respondents from two districts agreed with this suggestion for less-frequent monitoring by someone designated by district leadership, not a state-designated Plan Monitor. Staff from a third district suggested incorporating an annual conversation between ESE and the district about their progress as a sufficient approach to monitoring.

In general, respondents noted the importance of regular progress monitoring but believed that districts themselves were not only capable but also willing and committed to monitoring progress themselves. Only one respondent suggested that some type of regular, formal monitoring was not necessary at all.

## Limitations of Study and Suggestions for Additional Research

This research had three notable limitations: the size of the AIP district sample, representation within the sample, and the timing of the study.

Size of the AIP District Sample

Because the AIP process was rolled out in 2010, only seven total districts have participated. As evidenced by the district snapshots included in the report, the characteristics of these seven districts vary widely in terms of not only size and location but also the student population, number of struggling schools, and reason for the district’s Level 4 designation. Participating districts and schools also vary in the stability of their leadership and the capacity of that leadership to design and implement a change process. Initial reviews of district needs varied, identifying issues such as financial management, subgroup underperformance, and a lack of internal accountability. As a result, our ability to generalize across the sample and to determine, quantitatively, the impact of AIP on these districts compared with a set of matched comparison districts was severely limited; each AIP district has its own set of distinct challenges that despite statistical matching cannot easily be “matched” with another district in the state.

### Representation Within the Sample

In addition to the small district sample size, representation within the sample was somewhat limited. Although the sample for this research included a broad selection of participants within all of the available AIP districts, most participants were selected purposively, not randomly, by ESE staff. Some school-level participants were selected by principals or central office staff. In addition, emphasis on elementary school stakeholders was heavy; 12 elementary schools were represented in the sample, whereas only three of 19 participating schools were high schools[[19]](#footnote-19).

Furthermore, three specific groups of stakeholders, whose perspectives on the AIP process may be important to consider, are not represented whatsoever in this report: district department heads, school committee members, and community members. Future research efforts should consider surveying key stakeholders from these groups. For example, leaders of district offices of curriculum, student services, and data likely play a significant role in developing and implementing the AIP and would have insight into the levers that help schools get the most traction. In addition, surveying a larger group of teachers and principals in each district would also be useful for better understanding the ways in which this process reaches from the district level to schools and classrooms. ESE might also want to consider surveying students to better understand how the AIP process impacts not only student outcomes but also student experiences and perceptions about the quality of instruction received. Last, ESE might want to follow-up with leaders of AIP districts who have moved onto other districts, to determine which of the AIP practices, if any, they implemented in their new districts.

### Timing of the Study

Finally, the timing of the study seemed to be too early to detect any notable student-level impacts, according to many district-level participants, or statistically significant impacts as indicated by the quantitative analyses. At the time of data collection, most districts were just completing their third year of the AIP process; one district had just completed its second year. Several participants felt that it was far too early in the process of implementation to make a determination about the efficacy of the AIP process. Although ESE hoped to see improvements in student outcomes at the end of three years, the findings suggest that these changes will take more time. Research has shown that programs targeting ELL students may need four to seven years to help those pupils to attain English proficiency (Hakuta, Butler, & Witt, 2000) and that comprehensive school reform programs may need to be implemented for five years or more to show impacts (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). Consequently, ESE might want to consider looking at the impact on student outcomes at the end of five to seven years.

Subsequent investigations of the AIP process should consider larger, stratified quota or theoretical samples of more participants (particularly from the high school level) in addition to the inclusion of school committee members, community members, and other key stakeholders. Furthermore, ESE should consider conducting a secondary review later in the AIP process to ascertain its impact particularly on student outcomes.

# Conclusion

Although the current CITS analysis did not show any significant impact on student outcomes for AIP districts, stakeholders at all levels in nearly all districts reported that since beginning the AIP process, AIP districts have increased district capacity and improved teaching outcomes. Some districts even reported limited improvements in student outcomes not measured by the MCAS, including attendance and interim assessment performance. These reports suggest that AIP districts are, in fact, already witnessing meaningful districtwide improvements.

In addition, and as a way of concluding, the next section summarizes stakeholders’ overall perceptions of the effectiveness of the AIP process, provides their assessment of how the AIP process compares with other similar districtwide improvement efforts, and lists stakeholder-generated recommendations for improving the process.

## Perceptions of Effectiveness

Stakeholders were asked whether the AIP process has been “worth it” and, as a follow-up, whether the district could have made as much progress without the AIP process.

I think that there are some people who really didn’t know what to do. There are some people who were afraid to do what was being asked of them. And there were some people who didn’t want to do what was being asked to do. So there [are] different layers of complexity to [the] change process.

*—A district staff member*

At least one stakeholder in each of the seven districts indicated that the AIP process had been “worth it” and that the district could not have made as much progress without the AIP process in place. Principals in five districts and teachers in a sixth district reported that although the AIP process was difficult at times, the AIP process was exactly what the districts needed to spark rapid change. One principal explained that because of AIP, she now believes “you have to make a plan, you can’t just wing it, and you have to look at the data to make a plan. What teachers perceive to be true and principals is not always the way it is.” Although the plan development process may have been time-consuming, as one district leader pointed out, “it was a worthwhile process.”

A principal from one district attributed the success of AIP to the fact that it forces schools to focus on districtwide priorities. As the leader in another district explained, before the AIP, “It was kind of each individual school did their own thing and that was the problem, so it’s really helped bring people together around a cause.” According to teachers in one district, although the final district plan might have asked a lot from teachers, “Everything they asked us to do is good teaching practice.” Another district leader reported that his district “definitely needed some district resources and feedback” to kick-start rapid improvement, and “a lot of that’s come through the AIP.”

Leaders from two districts pointed to the Level 4 designation alone, not necessarily the AIP process, as what most spurred the district to make serious changes; the AIP process simply gave them the tools and supports to do so. District leaders from three districts were hesitant to attribute progress directly to the AIP process at all, with one leader explaining that the work “would be done regardless of whether AIP existed or not.”

## Comparison With Other District Improvement Efforts

To better understand each participant’s background, participants were asked in the beginning of the interview or focus group whether they had any experience with other district improvement efforts or initiatives. Stakeholders who reported some experience with similar initiatives were asked later on in the interview or focus group to share their perspective on how the AIP process compares with similar initiatives in terms of effectiveness or potential to effect change.

Stakeholders from five districts, including both district leaders and principals, described the AIP process as more effective than similar initiatives. Stakeholders from two districts, including one principal and one Plan Manager, pointed to the increased focus of the district plan as the primary reason they believe the process to be more effective than others. One district leader pointed specifically to the way the AIP process forces districts to align and integrate all of their improvement initiatives, explaining that “other efforts from the department around district improvement that were prior to the AIP…had been almost linear and hadn’t forced districts to think in an integrated way.” Another district leader attributed the effectiveness of the AIP process to the fact that it forced him to spend more time in schools with principals and teachers, noting that, “Here I’m in buildings every two weeks so principals always have the ability to ask questions and help build their capacity around that.” A third district leader credited the AIP process with keeping the district plan “constantly in the forefront…it became the document that everybody was talking about all the time.”

ESE staff with significant experience implementing and supporting other district improvement efforts also described the AIP process as the best district improvement approach yet, noting “I think this is one of the most effective tools the department has right now…. In doing this work since 2005, I have not seen districts change this dramatically in a year ever under any circumstances past or present ever.”

Leaders from two districts described the AIP process as equally effective as, but no more effective than, other district improvement efforts. No respondents described the AIP process as less effective than similar district improvement efforts.

## Recommendations for Improvement

Based on the feedback and findings presented in this report, ESE staff can reflect on the AIP process as it currently exists, four years after the process was first implemented, and thoughtfully consider whether there are specific ways in which the process can be further improved to better meet the needs of various stakeholder groups in participating districts.

In addition, as part of the data collection efforts for this report, stakeholders were explicitly asked whether there were any ways in which the AIP process, or specific components, could be improved. The most commonly cited suggestions for improvement are listed for ESE’s immediate consideration.

1. **Require districts to engage a wide range of stakeholders early in the AIP process.** Staff in three districts, including district-level staff, Plan Managers, and principals, suggested involving a wider range of stakeholders in the plan development process for AIP to both increase buy-in to the plan and the process and to get a sense from staff “on the frontlines” whether the goals and strategies included are realistic and actionable. Many of these stakeholders noted that strategies specifically related to effective communication of the plan to principals, teachers, parents, and community members should be explicitly embedded into the plan itself.
2. **Ensure meaningful ESE involvement in the plan development and approval process.** Staff from five districts suggested ways in which ESE’s involvement in the plan development and approval process, specifically, could be improved. These recommendations came from both district-level staff as well as Plan Managers. Staff from two districts suggested having districts present draft improvement plans for a collaborative discussion with ESE, as opposed to submitting the plan for approval. According to one district leader, “The interaction that comes from [presenting the plan] I think benefits both the department in its understanding and…the district[’s] grasp of what needs to be done and what the department’s expectations are.” Staff from three other districts advised ESE to focus more on the content of a district’s improvement plan and less on strict adherence to the AIP template or editorial preferences. According to one district leader, “we need to have less reverence for the plan as an object and more attention to the processes we’re using for planning.” Some staff described ESE’s review of their district’s plan as “nitpicky.”
3. **Structure the AIP plan development and approval timeline so that it aligns strategically with school calendar.** Staff from three districts, primarily principals, noted shortcomings with the timeline associated with the AIP process thus far. According to staff in these districts, the district’s improvement plan must be approved before the school year starts so all staff, including principals and teachers, have ample time to prepare for implementation. According to a principal in one district, “We should not be setting goals for our school year on October 1st. We should have already had them and hit the ground running in August.” This earlier calendar is reflected in current AIP deadlines, which fall in early June, in mid-July, and on August 1.
4. **Require only quarterly, not monthly, highlight meetings and focus on deep reflection annually.** Although staff generally reported AIP monitoring to be valuable, Plan Managers from two districts suggested that monthly highlight meetings, particularly after the first year of AIP implementation, could be too frequent; quarterly meetings might be more useful. According to these staff, time spent preparing “highlight reports” could be better spend implementing improvement strategies, and many short-term goals might require more than one month to achieve. The Plan Manager for one of those districts also suggested that annual reporting should require deeper reflection and close collaboration between ESE and district staff to analyze year-end data, evaluate the district’s progress, and identify any critical areas of need to concentrate on moving forward. This may require revisiting and modifying school goals midyear to assess whether the changes were appropriate given the most recently available data.

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# Appendix A. Focus Group and Interview Protocols

The protocol used for interviews with superintendents and assistant superintendents is included here, to illustrate the types of questions asked. All other protocols used for the study are included in a separate [addendum](http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/category.aspx?section=program) to this report.

**Evaluation of Massachusetts Accelerated Improvement Plan Process:**

**Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent Interview Protocol**

**Introduction**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and I work with American Institutes for Research (AIR), an independent research organization that has been contracted by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to conduct a third-party program evaluation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan, or AIP, process. I am here today as a member of the AIR program evaluation team for the AIP study. Thank you for taking this time to speak with me about your experience and opinions regarding the AIP process.

**Study Purpose**

As you may already know, since 2010, ESE has overseen the development and implementation of AIPs in eight districts designated as Level 4 following a district review. AIR’s charge is to help ESE better understand the influence of the AIP process on district improvement and the ways in which different variables have affected how the process impacts district capacity and, ultimately, student outcomes. Your input will help shape the AIP process for districts that are currently involved and for districts designated as Level 4 as a result of district review in the future.

**Confidentiality**

All of the information we obtain will be kept confidential and will be used only by members of the research team for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, will not attribute any quotes to individuals, and will not identify the positions of the individuals interviewed. We will identify the districts, but will make every effort to ensure information shared does not identify individuals.

**Permission to Record**

The interview will take about 60 minutes. If you do not mind, I would like to record our conversation simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording except for transcribers of the material; these recordings are for the research team only. If you want me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. May I have your permission to record this conversation?

Before we get started, do you have any questions for me?

Ok, I am turning on the recorder, and we will begin the interview.

***Prior to the interview, review the background of the district’s involvement in AIP including the year AIP began and extant documentation on the specific needs and challenges in the district (district review), and strategies for improvement (AIP), and probe accordingly. In all questions, listen/probe for:***

* ***Impacts of turnover in district leadership***
* ***Impacts of turnover in plan manager/monitor***
* ***What was an issue early on vs. what remains an issue now?***
* ***Any time they say something about ‘the plan’ – please clarify what exactly they mean by that – do they mean the written document, or how it’s implemented, supported, and/or monitored?***

**Background**

I would like to start by talking a little bit about your background and role in the district.

1. How long have you worked in the district? How long have you been in your current role in this district? What prior experience do you have (what roles) in this district? Have you held a leadership role in other districts? If so, in what role(s)? *[Probe for prior experience with district-wide improvement initiatives.]*
2. *[Assistant Superintendents Only:]* Can you describe your primary roles and responsibilities in your current position?

**AIP Plan Development (10 minutes)**

Given that the first major phase of the AIP process is Plan Development, I would like to start by spending some time talking about the development of your AIP. We will then talk about AIP implementation and impact, followed by questions about your Plan Manager/Management Team and Monitor, and will wrap up by talking a little bit about sustainability.

1. [Southbridge and Gill-Montague only] How did the district decide to focus on the strategies and initiatives included in your AIP?
   * *[Listen for who was involved in developing the plan and why, but don’t prompt for it if it doesn’t come up.]*
   * Was there ample opportunity during plan development to identify existing barriers to implementing the AIP?
   * Did the development of the plan help the district reflect on systems/structures, identify root causes of underperformance, and make plans to address them?
2. Can you describe how you received feedback from ESE on your plan during the process of plan development and approval? How helpful was the feedback and how did you use it?

*Listen/probe for:*

* + *Examples of ways the AIP and/or implementation improved as a result of feedback;*
  + *Specific aspects of the feedback that hasn’t been useful, if applicable;*
  + *How the feedback could be more useful, as appropriate –* ***If they have feedback, have them map out an actual process for feedback on plan development that they would find more useful – e.g. first X happens, then Y, then Z;***
  + ***Whether ESE expectations for the plan were clear, and whether this has improved over time;***
  + *And the different roles of Plan Manager, Plan Monitor, and ESE Malden staff in giving feedback to the district.*

1. Do you feel the district has gotten better at developing a focused plan with a few clear priorities and measurable outcomes? If so, in what ways? To what do you attribute this improvement?

**AIP Plan Implementation (10 minutes)**

1. Who are the key individuals responsible for ensuring effective implementation of the plan, and what are their primary responsibilities?

*[Listen/probe for:*

* + *Who do they decide to involve in the leading the work, when, and how? Do they have folks show ownership then delegate to them, or delegate to them first and then let them develop ownership?*
  + ***How broad the meaningful involvement is across the district,*** *how much they rely on the Plan Manager.**[Listen (but don’t probe) for how this relates to who was involved in developing the plan.]*
  + ***To what extent are the priorities, strategies, and goals in the AIP understood by stakeholders? How do you know?***
  + ***To what extent have stakeholders used the strategies and resources in the AIP to inform and alter their work? Probe for specific examples.***
  + ***To what extent has the AIP encouraged the district to reconsider how they organize, structure, and staff their central office.]***

1. How does the AIP process align, integrate, enhance, or conflict with other major improvement initiatives your district is undertaking (e.g., Educator Evaluation, New Curriculum Frameworks, PARCC, and RETELL/WIDA)?
   * *[If they just say the AIP aligns]* Are there any specific statewide initiatives that detract from or impede your district’s ability to implement the AIP?

**AIP Plan Impact (15-20 minutes)**

Now, I want you to reflect on your AIP work and experience thus far. I am interested in your thoughts on the ways in which this work has or has not impacted district and school practices. *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]*

1. What permanent structures and systems for improvement has the district put in place in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem) for instructional support and supervision, data use, etc.? Please provide specific examples of what has changed. *[Probe for changes in how they structure and use their district and/or school leadership teams, including how they leverage principal meetings.]*

8a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process helped the district establish these systems and structures? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

8b. Districts are always faced with difficult decisions. Do you notice ways in which the district is making decisions or prioritizing issues differently as a result of the AIP process (for example during plan development, or after a highlight discussion or QPR presentation)? Please give examples.

8c. Over the last 3 years (2 years for Salem) in what ways, if any, are school leaders functioning differently, as a result of the AIP process?

1. Has the district seen meaningful changes in teaching practices and/or instructional supports across the district in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
   * *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact?

9a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process helped with these improvement? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

1. Has the district seen meaningful changes in student outcomes across the district in the past 3 years (2 years for Salem)? Please provide specific examples of what has changed.
   * *[If yes]* What specific aspects of the process do you think most contributed to that impact?

10a. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all and 5 is to a great extent, to what extent has the AIP process helped the district improve student outcomes? By AIP process we mean the Plan itself as well as the manager, monitor, and related activities. Please provide specific examples of how it helped.

* *[If ‘yes’ to teaching practices but ‘not yet’ for student outcomes’] –* How long do you think it will take for improved teacher practices to result in measurable student outcomes? Why is that?
* *[If no or ‘not yet’]* Why do you think the AIP has not yet had any impact on *[ask as appropriate]* instructional supports, teaching practices and/or student outcomes? And what do you think will need to change, with regards to your district’s plan or the AIP process, to see improvement in these areas?
  + *[Listen for:]* When do you think there will be an impact on instructional supports, teaching practices, and/or student outcomes?
  + To what extent do you think the AIP gets at root causes of student underperformance?

1. In what ways, if any, has this process helped your school committee increase its focus on school and district improvement? Please provide specific examples.

*[Listen for changes in ways School Committee is supporting district improvement efforts.]*

* + What is the ideal role of the school committee in the AIP process?

1. In what ways, if any, has participation in the AIP process increased the district’s capacity to do this kind of work without support from ESE (i.e., planning and executing plans for improvement)? Can you provide specific examples?
   * *[Listen for changes in:*
     + *Communication with stakeholders*
     + *Expectations. Organization, and/or role of district-level staff*
     + *Expectations and/or role of school-level staff*
     + *Use of data at the district, school, and classroom level to fully understand an issue, inform a plan, monitor progress, and inform adjustments to practice*
     + *Use of district/school leadership teams*

*Note that these next four are part of our theory of action:*

* + - *Define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning*
    - *Execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation*
    - *Monitor systematically the impact of the initiatives*
    - *Modify initiatives to achieve greater impact]*

1. The AIP process involves many components, from templates to technical support to public monitoring. Thinking of ALL aspects of the AIP process, which aspects (if any) have had the biggest positive impact on district improvement? Which aspects (if any) have detracted the most from your district improvement efforts?

*[For impact questions please listen and when necessary prompt for the following components of the plan. Specifically probe all bolded components. If respondent says that the plan itself has had the biggest impact, probe for what specific things about the plan have been impactful, including the benchmarking and progress reports included, and how the plan is used – following on the already reported utility of the plan as a communication tool, as a document that provides a cohesive model and message, etc. Probe for what sets ‘the plan’ apart from any other district improvement plan or other similar improvement plan required by the state. Are the template and guidance materials alone enough to gain the traction they have seen?]*

* + ***ESE AIP Plan Template and guidance materials***
  + *Process of developing a focused plan*
  + *Clearly articulated benchmarks*
  + *Feedback from ESE – written and in person*
  + *Initial on-boarding for new superintendents by ESE*
  + *Ongoing use of data at the district level to monitor implementation and impact*
  + *Implementation support from a Plan Manager*
  + *Focus on refinement and continuous improvement*
  + *Focus on outcomes and results*
  + *Outside perspective of monitor*
  + *On-site observations by Plan Monitor*
  + ***Monthly monitoring and feedback (highlight discussions)***
  + ***Written Quarterly Progress Reports***
  + ***Presentations to school committee***
  + *Periodic convenings with other AIP districts, Plan Managers, Plan Monitors, and staff from ESE and DSACs (fall 2012 and spring 2013)]*

**AIP Support and Monitoring** *[Use information from the previous discussion to prompt and fill in some of the details in this section.]***(10 minutes)**

1. Moving on to think specifically about your plan manager/management team, please briefly describe how your plan manager/management team works with your district and/or school staff to help implement and monitor the effectiveness of your AIP. *[Listen for who is doing the preparation and for who is talking during highlight discussions and how, if at all, this has changed over time.]*
   * *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
   * *With whom does the manager/management team work? How frequently?*
   * *Has the manager been consistent over time (including the manager(s) themselves and the configuration of manager teams), and if not, does this matter?]*

*[For 14a-b listen/probe for their support for plan design/development, communication, implementation, monitoring, including helping the district to set up systems to do this work on their own.*

14a. In what way has the manager/management team most helped your progress in implementing your AIP? *[Probe for specific examples of how the manager/management team is building capacity, as opposed to being capacity.]*

14b. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is low and 5 is high, how would you rate the overall quality of the support offered by the manager/management team, and why? *[Probe for specific examples that support assessment of quality.]*

1. Thinking specifically of your Plan Monitor, please briefly describe how your plan Monitor works with your district to monitor effectiveness of your AIP implementation?
   * *[Listen for and probe if not mentioned:*
   * *With whom does the monitor primarily interact (e.g. who participates in highlight discussions or monitor’s observations of key district activities)?*
   * *Has the monitor been consistent over time, and if not, does this matter?*
   * *Do the manager and monitor seem to work together, and if not, does this matter?]*

*[For 15a-b: Listen/probe for what happens: In highlight meetings, in observations of key district activities, in written quarterly progress reports, in school committee presentations.* *During highlight discussions, who is doing the talking and how, if at all, has this changed over time?]*

15a. In what way has the monitor most helped your progress in implementing your AIP?

15b. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is low and 5 is high, how would you rate the overall quality of the questions and feedback provided by the monitor, and why? *[Probe for specific examples that support assessment of quality.]*

**Sustainability (5 minutes)**

Before we wrap up, I would like to ask you a few questions about how this work has changed over time and how continued improvement in the district can be sustained.

1. In terms of sustainability, what indicators do you think would signal that a district is ready to continue this work without the AIP support and monitoring provided by ESE?
   * What do you think would serve as adequate evidence for ESE to determine that these indicators are in place?
2. What tangible systems or structures have you put in place to continue to manage and monitor the plan without the AIP supports provided by ESE?

**Closing (5 minutes)**

1. *[If they mentioned any experience with other approaches to district-wide improvement in response to Q1]* Earlier, you mentioned some experience with district-wide improvement efforts in [XXX]. On a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is not at all effective, and 5 is very effective, how effective is the AIP process compared to those? Please briefly explain your thinking.
2. Could the district have gotten to where you are without the AIP process? Has it helped or hindered district’s overall progress and achievement? Please provide examples.
   * *[Listen/probe for how central the AIP has been to district work.]*
3. In what ways, if at all, has your philosophy about or approach to district improvement changed as a result of your involvement in the AIP process?
4. Is there any aspect of how the AIP process is designed and/or implemented that could be improved? If yes, can you describe this? *[Reference the list of components above and prompt if necessary. Probe for what else the plans, in particular, ought to include.]*
   * Are there any specific supports that you wish you had received, but did not, as part of this process? If so, what are those supports, and why do you think they are important to successful implementation of an AIP?
   * Is there any aspect of the process that could be dropped while still getting the same positive results? *[NOTE: Push hard here on why they think it wouldn’t harm implementation to drop whatever they come up with.]*

Thank you again for taking the time to speak with me today.

# Appendix B. Codebook

| Node | Clarification of Code (If Necessary) |
| --- | --- |
| **1. Background** |  |
| Experience with district improvement |  |
| Role |  |
| District’s strategies for improvement | Includes description of major goals and strategies in AIP. |
| District–school alignment |  |
| Alignment to individual educator goals |  |
| Communication of goals and strategies |  |
| Change from previous year |  |
| **2. Plan Development** | \*Code manager and monitor reports about involvement in plan development here. |
| Who was involved |  |
| How were strategies chosen |  |
| Challenges |  |
| Feedback from ESE |  |
| Clarity of expectations |  |
| Suggestions for improvement |  |
| Impact on work |  |
| Approach | Includes comments about funding decisions. |
| Most important supports |  |
| Least important supports |  |
| **3. Plan Implementation** | \*Code manager and monitor reports about involvement in plan implementation here. |
| Who is involved | Include comments about school committee involvement in implementation. |
| Challenges |  |
| Expectations and buy-in |  |
| Change in stakeholder work | Responses about to what extent stakeholders are *using* strategies. |
| Impact on expectations |  |
| School leaders |  |
| Support from district |  |
| Teachers | Include comments about support from school. |
| Support from district |  |
| Ratings |  |
| Aware |  |
| Understood by stakeholders |  |
| Buy-in | Include any comments related to buy-in, in addition to ratings. |
| Alignment to other initiatives |  |
| To state initiatives |  |
| To district initiatives |  |
| Teacher perceptions of alignment |  |
| Conflicts and barriers |  |
| Support for implementation | From either state or district; may include additional resources, professional development, etc. |
| Most useful |  |
| Least useful |  |
| Family and community |  |
| Change from previous |  |
| District follow-through or degree of implementation |  |
| Overall rating |  |
| Reason for change |  |
| Approach | Includes general comments about approach to implementation |
| Most important supports | Includes comments about AIP supports (from ESE, manager, monitor, plan, etc.) relevant to implementation. |
| Strategies to ensure effective implementation | Includes specific actions taken or strategies used to ensure effective implementation. |
| Least important supports |  |
| **4. Plan Impact** |  |
| Teaching practices |  |
| Rating |  |
| Most important AIP aspects |  |
| Student outcomes |  |
| Rating |  |
| Most important AIP aspects |  |
| Root causes |  |
| Challenges and barriers |  |
| Systems and structures | Include comments describing the systems and structures that have been put into place. |
| Rating |  |
| Most important AIP aspects |  |
| Decision making |  |
| Likely to be sustained |  |
| Capacity |  |
| Teachers’ capacity for continuous improvement |  |
| District capacity to do this work on own |  |
| Principals’ capacity to be effective instructional leaders |  |
| School capacity to engage in self-directed inquiry |  |
| Most impactful aspects |  |
| Least impactful aspects |  |
| **5. AIP Support and Monitoring** | Code most or all comments about Plan Manager and Plan Monitor role and the quality of support from other stakeholders here. Responses from managers and monitors, themselves, can be coded under the other parent nodes whenever possible, with the exception of comments *about* the manager (for monitors) and about the monitor (for managers). Double code as needed. |
| Plan manager |  |
| Role and approach |  |
| Rating |  |
| Impact on district’s work |  |
| Expectations |  |
| Supports from ESE |  |
| Most helpful |  |
| Least helpful |  |
| Plan monitor |  |
| Role and approach |  |
| Rating |  |
| Impact on district’s work |  |
| Expectations |  |
| Supports from ESE |  |
| Most helpful |  |
| Least helpful |  |
| Highlight discussions | Includes comments about who is preparing and reporting and whether that has changed over time. Comments about change over time should also be coded to Change over Time node. |
| Manager and monitor relationship |  |
| QPRs | Includes comments about who is preparing and reporting and whether that has changed over time. Comments about change over time should also be coded to Change over Time node. |
| **6. School Committee** | Includes all comments about school committee role, including impact on role and changes over time. |
| **7. Change Over Time** |  |
| Plan development |  |
| Plan implementation |  |
| Manager support | Includes comments about manager turnover. |
| Monitor support | Includes comments about monitor turnover. |
| Approach to school or district improvement |  |
| Other |  |
| **8. Sustainability** |  |
| New systems and structures | Includes comments about the “district way.” |
| Change in leadership | Includes comments about what would happen if district or school leaders were to change. |
| Indicators of readiness to “exit” |  |
| **9. Comparison With Other District Improvement Efforts** |  |
| **10. Overall Impact of AIP** | Includes comments about whether effort is worth it. |
| **11. Ways to Improve** | Include anything that related to lessons learned. |
| Plan development | Includes comments about ways to improve feedback from ESE. |
| Support from manager |  |
| Support from monitor |  |
| Other |  |
| **12. Voluntary AIP** |  |
| **13. Miscellaneous** | For relevant text that does not fit into any other nodes OR that cuts across major nodes (e.g., plan implementation and plan impact). |
| **14. Other** | For text that is not relevant and to ensure that all text in transcript is coded. |
| **15. Quotes** |  |
| **99. Level 3 Perspectives** | For Level 3 (and possible ESE) interviews only. |

# Appendix C. Approach to Impact Analysis

AIR conducted a CITS analysis within a hierarchical linear modeling approach that accounts for the nested structure of the data to estimate the impacts of AIP involvement over time for districts to measure two- and three-year effects on outcomes relative to preadoption baseline. Specifically, the baseline mean model for testing AIP’s three-year effect on the percentage of students performing at the proficient or advanced levels on the MCAS in ELA or mathematics can be specified based on three years of baseline data (2007–08 to 2010–11) and three years of follow-up data (2013–14).[[20]](#footnote-20)

The following exhibit shows how this model will be specified relative to baseline. The level 2 coefficient (γ11) estimates the difference in outcomes between schools from the treatment districts and schools from the comparison districts.

Hierarchical Linear Model for Assessing the First-Year Effect of AIP on the Percentage of Students Performing at the Proficient or Advanced Levels on MCAS ELA Assessment

|  |
| --- |
| Level 1 (cohort level)  *Yij* = β0*j* + β1*j*(FY1)*ij* + β2*j*(*X*)*ij* + *rij*  where   * *Yij* is the percentage of students being proficient or advanced for cohort *i* in school *j*; * FY1 is a dummy variable indicating whether cohort *i* in school *j* were the cohorts after the adoption of AIP (i.e., “the follow-up cohorts”, defined the same way for both schools from AIP districts and comparison districts): FY1 = 1 for the follow-up cohorts and 0 for baseline cohorts; * β0*j* is the average outcome across the three baseline cohorts (i.e., the baseline mean) in school *j*; * β1*j* is the difference in the outcome between the follow-up cohorts and the baseline cohorts in school *j*; * β2*j* is the relationship between cohort characteristics and the outcome; and * *rij* is a random error associated with cohort *i* in school *j*.   Level 2 (district level)  β0*j*= γ00 + γ01(AIP)*j*+ γ02(District Pair 2)*j*+ γ03(District Pair 3)*j*+ γ04(District Pair 4)*j*+ γ05(District Pair 5)*j*+ γ06(District Pair 6)*j*+ γ07(District Pair 7)*j*+ *u*0*j*  β1*j*= γ10 + γ11(AIP)*j*+ γ12(District Pair 2)*j*+ γ13(District Pair 3)*j*+ γ14(District Pair 4)*j*+ γ15(District Pair 5)*j*+ γ16(District Pair 6)*j* + γ17(District Pair 7)*j* + *u*1*j*  β2*j*= γ20  where   * AIP is a treatment indicator: AIP = 1 for schools from treatment districts and 0 for schools from comparison districts; * γ00 is the baseline mean across all schools in the comparison district within the first matched district pair (e.g., Fall River–Chicopee); * γ01 is the difference between schools from AIP districts and comparison districts in the baseline mean within the Fall River–Chicopee pair; * γ10 is the average deviation in the three follow-up years from the baseline mean across all schools from the comparison district within the Fall River–Chicopee pair; * γ11 is the difference between all schools from the AIP district and schools from the comparison district in the deviation in the three follow-up years from the baseline mean within the Fall River–Chicopee pair; * γ20 is the average relationship between cohort characteristics and the outcome across all schools; and * *u*0*j* and *u*1*j* are two random error terms associated with school *j*. |

# Appendix D. Additional CITS Analysis Figures

Figure D1. Percentage of Students Performing at Proficient or Advanced Levels on MCAS ELA Assessments

Figure D2. Percentage of Students Performing at Warning or Failing Levels on MCAS ELA Assessments

Figure D3. Percentage of Students Performing at Proficient or Advanced Levels on MCAS Mathematics Assessments

Figure D4. Percentage of Students Performing at Warning or Failing Levels on MCAS Mathematics Assessments

# Appendix E. AIP District Snapshots

Note that italicized text in the following tables indicates substantive changes to the district’s AIP from previous years.

| Fall River | 2011–12 | 2012–13 | 2013–14 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| District Review issuesa | * Ineffective district leadership, insufficient support for principals, and failure to evaluate programs and services * Lack of professional leadership and effective systems, structures, and procedures in district’s HR department. * Lack of adequate financial systems and procedures, and part-time chief financial officer * Deficiencies in the evaluation of staff at all levels * Lack of alignment between school committee actions, district’s improvement plan, and schools’ improvement plans * Lack of effective leadership and adequate support for English language learners and students with disabilities * Lack of adequate and affordable transportation, especially for high school students | | |
| Previous Turnaround Plan | * Recovery Plan 2009 * Fall River Public Schools District Improvement Plan 2010–13 | | |
| Superintendent | Meg Mayo-Brown | No change | No change |
| Superintendent date hired | 2009 | NA | NA |
| Key AIP strategies | * Strengthen ELL expertise of teachers and staff in coordination with policies, procedures and plans to improve the achievement * Strengthen expertise of teachers to improve achievement of students with disabilities * Develop curriculum aligned with MA DESE Framework * Strengthen educator capacity to use student assessment data to improve instruction and achievement | * *District systems developed and or strengthened during Recovery support effective school-based implementation of School Improvement Plans through enhanced leadership capacity and administrator quality* * *Ensure success for all students through high quality, rigorous teaching and learning leading to high academic achievement* * *Ensure success for all students through the development of students’ social and emotional wellness* * *Improve quality of all educators* | No change |
| Plan Manager | None (plan development supported by ESE targeted assistance staff) | No change | No change |
| Plan Monitor | Yes | No change | No change |

a A summary of issues identified by ESE is provided in the [Fall River Center for School & District Accountability Progress Report 2011](http://www.fallriverschools.org/Final%20Fall%20River%202010-2011%2010%2013%2011%20final.pdf).

| Gill-Montague | 2011–12 | 2012–13 | 2013–14 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| District Review issuesa | * The district’s curriculum is not consistently aligned with state standards. * The professional development plan is not able to address district needs. * The district does not have a clear system for analyzing data. * The teacher evaluation tool does not promote growth or overall effectiveness. * The school committee has not provided sufficient leadership to enable the district to make academic progress. The committee’s inability to effectively address and resolve issues related to grade configuration and elementary school building closings impedes the district’s progress and undermines public confidence and support. | | |
| Previous Turnaround Plan | * Gill-Montague Regional School District Turnaround Plan 2008 | | |
| Superintendent | Nadine Ekstrom (interim) | Mark Prince (interim) | Michael Sullivan |
| Superintendent date hired | 2011 | 2010 | 2013 |
| Key AIP strategies | * To improve the performance through high quality instruction measured through a system of data collection and analysis * To utilize student outcome data to modify curriculum, improve teacher and learning for all students, and identify professional development needs * To provide professional development resulting in improved teaching practice and student outcomes as measured by classroom observations, teacher evaluations of professional development, and improved student outcomes * To create a teacher evaluation tool that promotes collaboration, student centered learning, and the use of research based instruction practices that result in improved student outcomes | * To improve the performance of all students through high-quality instruction measured through an *aligned curriculum and standards based lesson plans* * To improve the performance of all students by thoughtfully analyzing student performance data and using the results to inform modifications to curriculum and instruction * To provide professional development resulting in improved teaching practice and student outcomes * *To function as a united, goal-oriented, forward moving, and civil school committee that makes decisions around student needs* | ESE removed AIP support and monitoring. |
| Plan Manager | Individual | None | NA |
| Plan Monitor | Yes | No change | NA |

a A summary of issues identified by ESE is provided in the [Gill-Montague Level 4 Monitoring Summative Report 2011–12](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/msr/2012-0674.pdf) and [Gill-Montague District Leadership Evaluation Report 2007](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/evaluation/07_0674.pdf).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Holyoke | 2011–12 | 2012–13 | 2013–14 |
| District Review issuesa | * Low student achievement across the district * High number of special education and ELL students are in the Warning/Failing category on the MCAS * Lack of consistent district wide instruction, assessment, and intervention policies and procedures * Lack of clear expectations for use and dissemination of data, monitoring procedures, and sufficient professional development support for the analysis and use of data * Insufficient levels of training and staffing to the high-need population | | |
| Previous Turnaround Plan | * Holyoke Public Schools Turnaround Initiative 2005–08 | | |
| Superintendent | David Dupont | No change | Sergio Paez |
| Superintendent date hired | 2010 | NA | 2013 |
| Key AIP strategies | * Building instructional leadership capacity * Building a districtwide system of assessment and inquiry * Focus on literacy in Grades K–3 * Focus on literacy in Grades 4–8 | * No change | * Building instructional leadership capacity * *Use data effectively through common assessments and data cycles* * Focus on literacy in Grades K–3 * Focus on literacy in Grades 4–8 |
| Plan Manager | Team | Change in composition of team | Change in composition of team |
| Plan Monitor | Yes | No change | Change |

a Asummary of issues identified by ESE is provided in the [Holyoke Level 4 Monitoring Summative Report 2011–12](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/msr/2012-0137.pdf).

| New Bedford | 2011–12 | 2012–13 | 2013–14 |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| District Review issuesa | * Limited principal oversight and accountability * Lack of leadership and capacity at the central office to support an improving educational system * Little evidence of characteristics of effective teaching * Limited use of formative assessment data to inform instruction * Limited efforts to improve the quality of teachers’ instruction * High dropout, retention, suspension, and absence rates, especially at the high school | | |
| Previous Turnaround Plan | None | | |
| Superintendent | Mary Louise Francis | Michael Shea (interim) | Pia Durkin |
| Superintendent date hired | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 |
| Key AIP strategies | * Prepare all students for college and career success by implementing rigorous standards * Develop a collaborative culture of using data to improve instructional practice and decision making * Expand school and staff capacity to deliver effective engaging instruction to all students * Raise expectations for student achievement and increase student ownership of their learning | * Prepare all students for college and career success by implementing rigorous standards * Develop a collaborative culture of using data to improve instructional practice and decision making * Expand school and staff capacity to deliver effective engaging instruction to all students * Raise expectations for student achievement and increase student ownership of their learning *in collaboration with families and community organizations* | * Prepare all students for college and career success by implementing rigorous standards *and monitoring student progress in attaining those standards to a level of proficiency* * Develop a collaborative *and accountable* culture of using data to improve instructional practice and decision making * Expand *district*, school, and educator capacity to *develop*, deliver, and *supervise* effective engaging instruction to all students * *Create, communicate, build, and support momentum for the vision of NBPS that will be embraced by the community and all of its stakeholders* |
| Plan Manager | Individual | Changed to team | No change |
| Plan Monitor | Yes | Change (brief interim monitor, then permanent monitor) | Change |

a A summary of issues identified by ESE is provided in the [New Bedford Level 4 Monitoring Summative Report 2011–12](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/msr/2012-0201.pdf).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Randolph | 2011–12 | 2012–13 | 2013–14 |
| District Review issuesa | * Number of students across grade levels are not achieving at high levels, students not college and career ready * MCAS scores below state averages * Gaps in academic achievement among student sub-groups (students of different race and income levels) * Efforts towards improved performance of students with disabilities has not resulted in improved MCAS scores * Limited evidence of instruction that fosters the development of 21st century skills * PD offerings have not been explicably aligned to data to address student needs * Accountability systems are not in place to ensure effective supervision and evaluation of district actions | | |
| Previous Turnaround Plan | * Randolph Public Schools District Turnaround Plan (2008–10) | | |
| Superintendent | Oscar Santos | No change | Steven Moore (interim) |
| Superintendent date hired | 2010 | NA | 2013 |
| Key AIP strategies | * Ensure success for all students through high-quality learning and teaching * Ensure success for all students through high-quality professional development * Ensure success for all students through high-quality accountability systems | * No change | * Ensure success for all students through high-quality learning and teaching * Ensure success for all students through high-quality professional development * Ensure success for all students through high-quality accountability systems * *Ensure success for all students through high-quality engagement strategies that support literacy* |
| Plan Manager | Individual | Pair | No change |
| Plan Monitor | Yes | No change | No change |

a A summary of issues identified by ESE is provided in the [Randolph Level 4 Monitoring Summative Report 2011–12](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/msr/2012-0244.pdf).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Salem | 2012–13 | 2013–14 |
| District Review issuesa | * No clearly defined philosophy/plan to raise student achievement * Do not have administrative capacity to effectively guide, supervise, and evaluate the staff to implement reform and improvement initiatives * Lack a fully developed curriculum that is vertical and horizontally articulated and consistently implemented * Lack a common definition of high-quality instruction * Accountability system does not consistently demonstrate the characteristics of a highly effective system * No full-time human resource director and no published procedures to guide recruitment, screening, interviewing, and hiring * Professional development opportunities are available but not centralized in strategic priorities, planning, implementation, funding or impact | |
| Previous Turnaround Plan | None | |
| Superintendent | Stephen Russell | No change |
| Superintendent date hired | 2011 | NA |
| Key AIP strategies | * Develop and implement an aligned curriculum and high-quality instructional practices and expectations across the district * Establish a data-driven system that assesses and supports learning and improves instructional practices throughout the district * Establish high-quality leadership across the district that supports and monitors the continuous improvement of teaching and learning | * Develop and implement an aligned curriculum and high-quality instructional practices and expectations across the district * Build a data-driven system that assesses learning and *informs adaptive instruction and tiered systems of student support* throughout the district * Establish high-quality leadership across the district that supports and monitors the continuous improvement of teaching and learning |
| Plan Manager | Individual | No change |
| Plan Monitor | Yes | Change |

a A selection of key issues identified by ESE is provided in the [2011 Salem Public Schools District Review](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/nolevel/2011-0258.pdf).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Southbridge | 2011–12 | 2012–13 | 2013–14 |
| District Review issuesa | * Inconsistent curriculum, quality of instruction, and student support programs * High turnover of curriculum programs and professional development initiatives * Lack of integrated professional development systems * Data only loosely informing practice * Accountability for outcomes is not real. * Too few students graduate, and fewer are college and career ready. * Professional development is needed to support administrators’ work to implement and sustain change initiatives | | |
| Previous Turnaround Plan | * Southbridge District Turnaround Plan (2005–11) | | |
| Superintendent | Eric Ely | Terry Wiggin (temporary acting) | Basan Nembirkow |
| Superintendent date hired | 2010 | NA | 2013 |
| Key AIP strategies | * Implement high-quality curriculum and instruction programs to support the achievement of all students * Establish a data-driven culture to support and monitor the achievement of all students * Provide high-quality professional development programs to support the achievement of all learners/students | No change | * *Develop, refine, and implement curricula for all K–12 core subjects and instructional practices aligned to Common Core and WIDA Standards* * *Expand use of data to foster a cycle of continuous improvement aimed at assessing and improving instructional practices* * *Improve educator quality and ability to implement rigorous and engaging instruction* * *Increase parent and community involvement to enhance student learning* |
| Plan Manager | Individual | Team | Team |
| Plan Monitor | Yes | No change | No change |

a A summary of issues identified by ESE is provided in the [Southbridge Level 4 Monitoring Summative Report 2011–12](http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/review/district/reports/msr/2012-0277.pdf).

# Appendix F. Characteristics of Matched Comparison Districts

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Adams-Cheshire | Brockton | Chicopee | Easthampton | Lowell | Marlborough | Pittsfield | MA Average |
| Enrollmenta | 1,390 | 17,011 | 7,779 | 1,561 | 14,031 | 4,535 | 5,879 | — |
| Percent English language learners | 0.4% | 20.0% | 4.5% | 1.9% | 29.4% | 14.5% | 4.0% | 7.9% |
| Percent of students with disabilities | 20.3% | 13.2% | 17.9% | 17.6% | 15.1% | 19.1% | 17.8% | 17.0% |
| Percent low income | 45.3% | 80.7% | 62.8% | 34.7% | 75.1% | 45.1% | 55.7% | 38.3% |
| Percent high needs | 52.7% | 84.2% | 68.4% | 44.8% | 82.1% | 57.5% | 62.0% | 48.8% |
| Percent proficient or higher MCAS ELA | 52.0% | 48.0% | 62.0% | 59.0% | 50.0% | 62.0% | 60.0% | 69.0% |
| Growth ELA | 35.0% | 54.0% | 45.0% | 43.0% | 47.0% | 52.0% | 44.0% | 50.0% |
| Percent proficient or higher MCAS mathematics | 37.0% | 38.0% | 50.0% | 51.0% | 47.0% | 53.0% | 51.0% | 60.0% |
| Growth mathematics | 38.5.0% | 52.0% | 47.0% | 50.0% | 50.0% | 54.0% | 41.0% | 50.0% |
| Percent proficient or higher MCAS science | 30.0% | 31.0% | 37.0% | 48.0% | 27.0% | 47.0% | 42.0% | 55.0% |
| Attendance rate | 94.4% | 94.3% | 93.5% | 95.7% | 93.9% | 94.4% | 94.3% | 94.9% |
| Graduation rateb | 81.8% | 72.7% | 78.1% | 88.3% | 73.8% | 81.6% | 84.0% | 86.1% |
| Dropout ratec | 2.5% | 3.9% | 4.0% | .9% | 3.7% | 2.0% | 2.1% | 2.0% |
| Number of Level 1 schoolsd | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 6 | 0 | 2 | — |
| Number of Level 2 schools | 0 | 7 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 5 | — |
| Number of Level 3 schools | 3 | 11 | 8 | 2 | 10 | 1 | 5 | — |
| Number of Level 4 schools | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | — |
| Number of Level 5 schools | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | — |
| Number of superintendents (2009–14)e | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 9 | 3 | — |
| Principal turnover rate (2010–14) | 23.2% | 27.2% | 8.0% | 20.0% | 17.6% | 25.6% | 20.0% | 17.6% |
| Teacher turnover rate  (2010–14) | 9.8% | 9.2% | 8.2% | 9.8% | 9.2% | 9.8% | 9.6% | 11.6% |

a All enrollment, demographic, MCAS, and school accountability level information reflect 2013–14 school year data.

b Based on cohort, four-year graduation rate (2014) is shown.

c Grades 9–12 dropout rate (2013–14) is shown.

d Schools with insufficient data were not included.

e Acting and interim superintendents are included.

LOCATIONS

Domestic

Washington, D.C.

Atlanta, GA

Baltimore, MD

Chapel Hill, NC

Chicago, IL

Columbus, OH

Frederick, MD

Honolulu, HI

Indianapolis, IN

Naperville, IL

New York, NY

Sacramento, CA

San Mateo, CA

Silver Spring, MD

Waltham, MA

International

Egypt

Honduras

Ivory Coast

Kyrgyzstan

Liberia

Tajikistan

Zambia

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1. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/framework/framework.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. One participating district implemented the process without a Plan Manager; another participating district began with a Plan Manager and then continued the process without one after the first year. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Level 3 districts that choose to engage in the AIP process receive support from ESE (through ESE’s regional District and School Assistance Centers); this support is less intensive than what a Plan Manager provides to Level 4 AIP districts. Level 3 districts’ AIP implementation is not monitored by ESE, and there is no external reporting to the school committee. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. An eighth district, Lawrence, was not included because of the unique nature of the Level 5 work in that district. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Level 3 support staff refer to individuals contracted by ESE to support improvement efforts similar to the AIP process in Level 3 districts. At the time of data collection, most of these districts were in the plan development phase or in the early stages of plan implementation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Districts included in Phase 1 data collection are Fall River, Holyoke, New Bedford, Randolph, and Salem. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The observation of Randolph’s AIP monthly highlight discussion meeting was for informational purposes only; no formal data were collected during the observation. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The 2013–14 achievement data had been published, but the 2013–14 nonacademic outcome data were not yet available when the impact analyses were conducted. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pretreatment refers to the years prior to the district engaging in the AIP process and posttreatment refers to the year during which the AIP process was initiated and later years. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Approved AIPs are available online: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/accountability/dr/>. The accountability reports that led to ESE intervention in all AIP districts also are available at that link. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks incorporate Common Core State Standards in addition to some standards that are unique to the state. What districts refer to as Common Core is most often the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Massachusetts uses the 100-point CPI to measure progress toward the goal of narrowing proficiency gaps. The CPI assigns 100, 75, 50, 25, or 0 points to each student participating in MCAS and MCAS-Alternate Assessment tests based how close they came to scoring Proficient or Advanced. The CPI is calculated by dividing the total number of points by the number of students in the group. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Note that non-MCAS outcome analyses were conducted using only two years of posttreatment outcome data. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The progress and performance index is a measure of the improvement that a school (or a subgroup of students) group makes toward its own targets over a two-year period on up to seven indicators: narrowing proficiency gaps (ELA, mathematics, and science), growth (ELA and mathematics), the annual dropout rate, and the cohort graduation rate. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In fact, Randolph experienced a 5.7 percent increase in students performing at the advanced or proficient level on the third-grade MCAS ELA after engaging in the AIP process, compared with a 1.2 percent average increase among all AIP districts. During the same period in time, the state experienced a 2.7 percent increase. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The dropout rate in Salem dropped from 2.9 percent in 2012 to 1.5 percent in 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Specifically, the percentage of students performing at the advanced or proficient level on MCAS ELA and mathematics in 2014 increased by 5 percentage points and 3 percentage points, respectively, as compared to 2013. However, the average posttreatment performance for students in Southbridge was worse than the average pretreatment performance in all of the three performance indicators. The percentage of students performing at the advanced or proficient level and the CPI scores decreased and the percentage of students performing at the warning or failing level increased since the start of AIP. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Note that school committee members were not interviewed as a part of this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This difference in numbers was decided upon because there are fewer middle and high schools in each district. It was also expected that differences might be evident more at the elementary school level because they are smaller in size. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Two-year effects of AIP on non-MCAS student outcomes such as attendance and dropout rates were estimated because the data for the 2013–14 school year were not yet available at the time of analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)