An Evaluation of the Commonwealth Pilot Schools Initiative

Policy Brief

Key Findings Following Three Years of Study

A briefing to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to inform ongoing dialog and strategy as it pertains to whole school reform and improvement in Massachusetts schools

September 2010

Introduction

The Commonwealth Pilot Schools Initiative (the Initiative) was a Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) whole school reform initiative active from school years 2007-2008 (SY08) through 2009-2010 (SY10). Intended to introduce substantive reform into schools struggling with persistently low student achievement, the Initiative comprised a total of five schools in two cohorts. Each school had been in underperforming status for four years or more prior to its entry into the Initiative.

The present briefing synthesizes findings from a three-year study of the Initiative and its impacts. It is intended to inform policy makers' and implementers' understanding of the findings of that evaluation and their implications for the design, implementation, and management of future whole-school reform initiatives. It was prepared by the UMass Donahue Institute (UMDI or the Institute), which served as statewide evaluator for the Initiative.

The Commonwealth Pilot Schools Model

The Initiative was patterned on a model first implemented in the Boston Public Schools (BPS). Its underlying philosophy is a belief that if "schools are provided maximum control over their resources… school engagement and performance will improve."[1] Program guidelines specify that Commonwealth Pilot schools would receive increased flexibility in five operational areas: (1) staffing and hiring, (2) school schedule and calendar, (3) curriculum and assessment, (4) governance, and (5) budget. Schools received implementation support from the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE)—an organization that has served as coordinator and advocate for the Boston Pilot Schools—as well as targeted assistance grants from ESE.

In March 2010, ESE announced that the Initiative would be phased out at the end of SY10 when new regulations regarding the designation of schools for intervention and turnaround took effect. The four schools participating in the Initiative at the time of its phase-out are expected to continue their ongoing reform through the state's new accountability and assistance framework.[2] Under the framework, the two schools that had shown recent increases in MCAS performance were designated Level 3. The other two schools will continue their turnaround process as part of a group of 35 Level 4 schools identified for intensive intervention and turnaround over the next three years. These schools were designated as such as a result of low performance on MCAS tests over the previous four years and lack of evidence of substantial improvement over that time.

Purpose of This Report

Under the direction of ESE, UMDI designed and implemented a comprehensive formative and summative evaluation of the Initiative. The mixed methods study integrated school-, student-, and educator-level data collected from a variety of sources, including ESE; extensive interviews and surveys of school leaders, staff, and implementation support providers; and an ongoing review of school documents.

The Initiative provides a tremendous opportunity to learn from participating Commonwealth Pilot schools' experiences such that the introduction, design, and implementation of new models for school reform may proceed as smoothly and effectively as possible. This final evaluation briefing documents critical Initiative-level findings emerging from the three-year study and discusses their potential implications for the design, implementation, and management of similar whole-school reform initiatives. It is organized into three succinct sections, as follows

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[1] Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. 2007 *Guidelines for Commonwealth Pilot Schools Option.*

[2] The fifth school, Academy Middle School, was closed at the end of the 2008-2009 school year, its second year in the Initiative.

- Impacts

- Conversion and Implementation

- Lessons for Whole School Reform

For an expanded view of evaluation findings, including those related to implementation and preliminary outcomes, and an in-depth examination of student achievement trends through the Initiative's third and final year, please consult the research publications website of ESE's Office of Strategic Planning, Research, and Evaluation (http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/topic.html). Included under the "Commonwealth Pilot Schools" heading is a series of interim evaluation products.

Throughout this report, a school's first, second, and third years of Commonwealth Pilot implementation are discussed as Year One, Year Two, and Year Three, respectively. To the extent possible, MCAS results from the year prior to the school's entry into the Initiative are used as baselines to assess progress. Because the Initiative comprised two cohorts, the school years reflected in these implementation periods differ. For four schools in the Initiative's first cohort—Academy Middle School in Fitchburg, John J. Duggan Middle School in Springfield, Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical High School in Springfield, and The English High in Boston—Year One through Year Three reflects the period SY08 through SY10. The pre-conversion baseline year for these schools is SY07. For the school in its second cohort—Homer Street Elementary School in Springfield, which did not experience a Year Three—Year One through Year Two reflects the period SY09 through SY10. The pre-conversion baseline year for Homer Street is SY08.

Impacts

The Commonwealth Pilot Schools Initiative was intended to improve student achievement in persistently underperforming schools by creating conditions that would allow leaders to substantively alter school culture and practice. Although improvement was observed in MCAS results at some schools, when set in the context of trends at other underperforming schools, progress at Commonwealth Pilots was unremarkable at all but one school. However, even at this school, trends begun during the Initiative would need to continue for an extended period in order for the school to move out of the ranks of underperforming schools.

While the Initiative had yet to show substantial MCAS impacts at the time of its phase-out, progress was reported with regard to several intermediate outcomes related to vision, culture, and practice. These gains were typically incremental in nature and not sufficiently large to leverage dramatic changes in student achievement outcomes in the short-term. Not surprisingly, the school at which returning staff demonstrated the most enthusiasm with regard to the trajectory their school's vision, culture, and practice was also the school where the most substantial student achievement impacts were observed.

English Language Arts Performance

During their tenure in the Initiative, three of the five schools—Duggan, Putnam, and The English—experienced increases in their overall English language arts (ELA) Composite Performance Indices (CPI), as shown in Table 1.[3] However, these increases do not represent a change in trajectory, as they are generally consistent with previously established improvement trends in those schools. In fact, beginning in its second year in the Initiative, Putnam saw a leveling off and reversal of its prior improvement trend. It is notable that Academy and Homer, which experienced post-conversion declines in ELA achievement, were also following previously established trends. Both of these schools exited the Initiative following their second year—one as a result of its closure and the second as the result of its designation as a Level 4 school under the state's new accountability framework.

Table 1: Overall ELA CPI at Commonwealth Pilot Schools

	Baseline	Year One	Year Two	Year Three	Change (from Baseline)
Academy Middle School, Fitchburg	70.8	68.1	66.8	n/a	-4.0
Duggan Middle School, Springfield	62.2	68.4	74.0	71.6	9.4
Putnam V-T High School, Springfield	68.0	77.3	77.4	75.5	7.5
The English High, Boston	68.2	68.9	72.7	73.1	4.9
Homer Street Elementary, Springfield	58.2	56.3	51.9	n/a	-6.3

Source: ESE Information Services. MCAS Performance Results for SY07 through SY10 (Cohort 1) and SY08 through SY10 (Cohort 2). Change is relative to baseline and reflects the mostly recently available data, Year Three for Duggan, Putnam and English and Year Two for Academy and Homer.

To understand the extent to which changes reflect progress beyond what might have been expected had the schools not participated in the Initiative, observed trends at each Commonwealth Pilot were compared to those at a cohort of similar underperforming schools.[4] When considered in this context, gains were notable at only one school, Duggan Middle School. However, the school's improvement in Years One and Two was not sustained

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[3] CPI is a calculation used to summarize MCAS achievement and illustrate progress towards proficiency. CPI scores included in this policy brief reflect overall scores for all tested grade levels at the school.

[4] Comparison schools comprised those with the same grade configuration that had a similarly low performance profile at the time of the Commonwealth Pilot's entry into to the Initiative. For a complete description of the methods used to select comparison schools, please see the evaluation's *Analysis of School-Level MCAS Results*, available at http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/topic.html.

through the Initiative's final year, which interviewees characterized as one of growing uncertainty amidst increasing speculation that the Initiative would be discontinued.

Trends in student growth in ELA, shown in Table 2, also provide only limited evidence of improvement across the schools. These ESE data only recently became available and exist in relation to only a limited number of school years, as shown in the table. Median student growth percentile (SGP) scores were fairly flat when considered in light of ESE guidance that changes in SGP of less than 10 points are unlikely to be educationally meaningful.[5] The most notable change was a one-year increase at The English between its Years Two and Three. This period marked the school's transition from its original Commonwealth Pilot design plan to a new three-year turnaround plan with an explicit focus on targeted literacy gains in its first year of implementation.

Table 2: Median ELA Student Growth Percentile (SGP) at Commonwealth Pilot Schools

	Baseline	Year One	Year Two	Year Three	Change
Academy Middle School, Fitchburg	n/a	28.0	26.0	n/a	-2.0
Duggan Middle School, Springfield	n/a	39.0	44.0	41.5	2.5
Putnam V-T High School, Springfield	n/a	n/a	40.0	40.0	0.0
The English High, Boston	n/a	n/a	32.0	39.0	7.0
Homer Street Elementary, Springfield	27.5	22.0	22.0	n/a	-5.5

Source: ESE Information Services. MCAS Performance Results for SY07 through SY10 (Cohort 1) and SY08 through SY10 (Cohort 2). The change column reflects the change over the entire period for which data are available, namely, Year One to Year Two (Academy), Year One to Year Three (Duggan), Year Two to Year Three (Putnam and The English), or Baseline to Year Two (Homer).

Mathematics Performance

Trends in mathematics varied substantially by school (Table 3). Following conversion, CPI in the subject remained flat at The English, declined at Academy and Homer, and continued a preexisting improvement trend into Year One before declining in Years Two and Three at Putnam. The fifth school, Duggan, which entered the Initiative with particularly low mathematics performance, showed consistent progress in the subject in each of the three years following conversion. This school, which placed a specific emphasis on improving mathematics instruction beginning in Year Two, was the only one at which improvement during the period exceeded that observed at a cohort of similar underperforming schools.

Table 3: Overall Mathematics CPI at Commonwealth Pilot Schools

	Baseline	Year One	Year Two	Year Three	Change (from Baseline)
Academy Middle School, Fitchburg	51.9	46.6	49.2	n/a	-2.7
Duggan Middle School, Springfield	32.1	36.3	43.6	48.7	16.6
Putnam V-T High School, Springfield	61.4	70.0	66.6	64.5	3.1
The English High, Boston	65.7	66.5	66.4	66.6	0.9
Homer Street Elementary, Springfield	51.9	50.6	43.6	n/a	-8.3

Source: ESE Information Services. MCAS Performance Results for SY07 through SY10 (Cohort 1) and SY08 through SY10 (Cohort 2). Change is relative to baseline and reflects the mostly recently available data, Year Three for Duggan, Putnam, and English and Year Two for Academy and Homer.

As shown in Table 4, trends in student growth in mathematics were also mixed. Median SGP scores increased at the two middle schools, both of which had markedly low median SGP scores in the first year for which these data were available. Interestingly, Duggan showed a particularly large gain in mathematics growth in Year Two, although its growth in the subject regressed substantially the subsequent year, such that its overall gain was just

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[5] SGP scores, which range from 0 to 99, provide a measure of students' relative gain in achievement compared to their academic peers, i.e. students with a similar performance profile on their most recent MCAS.

shy of the 10-point threshold established by ESE. The other middle school (Academy) was closed in June 2009 (the end of its Year Two). At the remaining three schools, scores either fell or were flat over the period for which data were available.

Table 4: Median Mathematics Student Growth Percentile at Commonwealth Pilot Schools

	Baseline	Year One	Year Two	Year Three	Change
Academy Middle School, Fitchburg	n/a	23.0	34.0	n/a	11.0
Duggan Middle School, Springfield	n/a	19.0	39.5	28.0	9.0
Putnam V-T High School, Springfield	n/a	n/a	51.0	42.0	-9.0
The English High, Boston	n/a	n/a	39.5	37.0	-2.5
Homer Street Elementary, Springfield	28.0	26.0	24.5	n/a	-3.5

Source: ESE Information Services. MCAS Performance Results for SY07 through SY10 (Cohort 1) and SY08 through SY10 (Cohort 2). The change column reflects the change over the entire period for which data are available, namely, Year One to Year Two (Academy), Year One to Year Three (Duggan), Year Two to Year Three (Putnam and The English), or Baseline to Year Two (Homer).

Intermediate Outcomes with Regard to Vision, Culture, and Practice

To measure the extent to which anticipated improvements in school culture, capacity, and practice were realized, the Commonwealth Pilot Schools evaluation engaged leaders and staff in an annual survey. The survey included a broad range of indicators addressed to all staff as well as series of more targeted measures in which returning staff were asked to reflect on the extent to which nine key aspects of their school had changed relative to the previous year. Because contextual factors at critical points in the study confound the interpretation of changes with respect the more comprehensive set of indicators, the latter measures provide the most appropriate means of assessing change post-conversion.[6]

Overall, improvement was evident in nearly all measures of school vision, culture, and practice. Across the Initiative as a whole, average school-level change scores—measured using a five point scale that ranged from "much improved" (+2) to "much worse" (-2)—were positive in each year of implementation. The exception was with regard to student behavior, the results for which were slightly positive in Year One, essentially unchanged in Year Two, and slightly negative in Year Three. Underlying this finding is the fact that in Years One and Two, improvement was reported at the two schools that systematically downsized enrollment as part of the conversion process, while behavior reportedly worsened or stayed the same at the other schools. By Year Three, returning staff at two of the three schools still participating in the Initiative reported a worsening of student behavior, including at one of the schools that downsized. No change was reported at the third.

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[6] The survey was first administered in Year One of a school's implementation, such that data regarding baseline measures of staff perceptions for these indicators were unable to be collected. Further, the announcement of Level 4 determinations and the Initiative's discontinuation and/or uncertainty about status at the time of the spring 2010 survey confound the interpretation of these results.

Table 5: Average School Change Score, as Reported by Returning Staff, on a Scale of -2 (Much Worse) to 2 (Much Improved)

	Year One	Year Two	Year Three
Our school's freedom to make important decisions	0.89	0.44	0.38
Our focus on student needs	0.87	0.80	0.60
Staff collaboration	0.87	0.66	0.41
The quality of our instruction	0.80	0.76	0.64
Our sense of direction	0.77	0.64	0.50
Our approach to student support services	0.63	0.54	0.34
The curriculum in your subject area	0.51	0.63	0.61
Our use of assessment data	0.39	0.93	0.66
Student behavior	0.20	0.04	-0.27

Source: UMDI Analysis of Commonwealth Pilot Schools survey results. For ease of interpretability, these data are reported as non-weighted average school scores, as reported annually by returning staff on a scale of -2 to +2, with positive scores reflecting improvement and negative scores reflecting worsening. Scores at or around 0 reflect no or minimal change.

While Initiative-level results indicate that important intermediate impacts were attained, the extent, and even the direction, of impacts varied considerably across schools. Overall, progress tended to be incremental in nature with three of the five schools typically demonstrating change in the range of "somewhat improved" or below. Duggan served as a notable exception, with returning staff reporting substantial improvements in several aspects of vision, culture, and practice in its first year in the Initiative. Other evidence collected through the evaluation indicates that this school, which also showed the greatest progress in its MCAS achievement, benefitted from an engaged leader who articulated a plan to recruit staff who believed in the school's intended approach to reform. At the fifth school, Academy, impacts were mixed and appeared to reflect the school's struggle to implement its design plan.

Survey results reveal a deceleration in the rate of improvement over the course of the Initiative. As Table 5 shows, for most indicators, the largest gains were reported in Year One, with the reported extent of improvement decreasing over successive implementation years. An exception to this trend at the Initiative-level was observed with regard to curriculum and the use of assessment data, for which overall improvement scores increased between Years One and Two. This is consistent with data collected through the evaluation that suggests that many changes to curriculum, instruction, and assessment were planned for Year One, but deferred until Year Two.

Exceptions to this Initiative-level trend were observed at two schools. In the case of one school (Academy), this reflected slight improvement in six of the nine indicators in Year Two following an initial implementation year in which many aspects of vision, culture, and practice had reportedly worsened. In the other case (Homer), survey results suggest an increase in the rate of progress with regard to sense of direction, staff collaboration, and quality of instruction, in addition to curriculum and data use, although the reason for the acceleration was not immediately clear. In both cases, the schools were in the midst of their second and final year of the Initiative when the survey was administered, and it is not known whether and how knowledge of impending changes in those schools' status may have influenced survey results.

Conversion and Implementation Progress

Evidence collected through the evaluation suggests that the Initiative facilitated improvements in vision, culture and practice at participating schools, although the extent and scope of these outcomes varied considerably. Furthermore, these intermediate impacts have yet to manifest in widespread gains in student achievement, although one school did show evidence of considerable progress that appears to have been attributable to its participation in the Initiative.

While disappointing, these findings are not surprising when considered in light of implementation progress. Schools encountered varying degrees of success in the implementation of their Commonwealth Pilot redesign plans, and even where things went well, change proved a gradual process. In nearly all cases, intended changes with regard to curriculum, instruction, and assessment were still in the process of being refined and implemented at the time of the Initiative's phase-out. A number of contextual factors appeared to influence the extent of implementation progress, which may be instructive to future reform efforts.

Pre-Conversion Planning

Prior to conversion to Commonwealth Pilot status, districts established local agreements that would facilitate the exercise of autonomies central to the model. Schools formed design teams to articulate redesign plans with intensive support from CCE coaching teams. In some cases, implementation led to substantial changes to school staffing and student enrollment which may have carried implications for other district schools that absorbed these displaced populations.

Redesign plans were developed under extreme time pressure. These plans articulated ambitious strategies for whole school reform and often called for near-simultaneous development and implementation of an array of substantive changes to school staffing, structure, operations, and capacity. Interviews revealed great concern that this aggressive schedule did not allow sufficient time for a rigorous self-assessment of assets and needs nor for the consideration of multiple approaches to reform. Furthermore, leaders noted that, in many cases, plans underestimated the extent of the challenge and/or the practical limitations that would be encountered in pursuit of reform.

As part of conversion, schools experienced turnover rates ranging from 16% to 73%. In order to remain at their respective schools following conversion, existing staff were required to sign work election agreements (WEAs) defining teacher working conditions, often including new schedules or instructional obligations. Leaders were not under obligation to rehire staff, as new autonomy allowed them to release educators whose skills or vision for improvement did not align with the school's needs or direction.

However, in many cases, context limited leaders in their exercise of autonomy over staffing, including reductions in force and unique aspects of some schools that limited the extent to which staff could be reassigned. As a result, the extent to which staff departures were initiated by school leaders or by individual staff members varied considerably. The most marked difference was observed at the middle schools, one of which had turnover that was almost entirely staff initiated and one of which saw most teachers leave at the leaders' initiative.

Guidelines regarding school size led to serious discussions of the merits and challenges of downsizing. Three schools entered the Initiative with student populations above the recommended maximum enrollment of 450, and to comply with guidelines, student enrollment was dramatically reduced at two schools. Even with the substantial reduction in population, enrollment at one of these schools remained nearly double the Initiative's guidelines. At a third school—a vocational technical school with strong demand in its community—enrollment changes were deemed impractical. That school proposed to reinforce its existing smaller learning community structure to create a more personalized school setting in lieu of downsizing.

Enrollment and staffing changes required considerable accommodation at the district-level. Because professional status teachers exiting under Commonwealth Pilot agreements were entitled to positions elsewhere in their district, districts were required to reassign a large number of educators as Commonwealth Pilots converted. After conversion, the number of teachers transferring within their respective districts decreased substantially, with most exiting staff leaving for positions outside of the district or the profession. This trend diminished the need for other district schools to absorb staff previously assigned to a Commonwealth Pilot in later years of implementation. Districts also needed to accommodate students from downsized schools, a change that may have had implications for staffing and enrollment patterns at other underperforming schools in at least one district.

Year One: Building a Foundation for Reform

In their first year as Commonwealth Pilots, schools turned their attention to the implementation of design plans, which outlined a series of structural and instructional reforms. In Year One, great progress was realized in the development of new structures, but it was not always a straight or easy path, and some schools experienced greater success than others. Leaders and staff of all five schools reflected at length on the magnitude of the change process and on the need to develop internal capacity to leverage the potential of these structures to support school improvement before tackling other more complex tasks.

Schools' initial focus was on the hiring and integration of new staff. With staff turnover rates exceeding 60% at two schools, including one in which a new principal was hired in June 2007, filling staff vacancies presented a considerable challenge. One school began Year One with vacancies in several key positions in support of its expanded day, which ultimately had substantial implications for system capacity, building management, and staff morale at a critical point in the change process.

Organizational structures were substantially revised in four of the five schools. Two high schools adopted Smaller Learning Community (SLC) structures and one middle school adopted a new "house" and teacher team structure. The remaining middle school also grappled with a new organizational structure as it began implementing an Extended Learning Time grant. All of these changes represented significant reforms in their own right, with the potential to profoundly influence instructional planning, decision making, and delivery. Each of these reforms required extensive organizational and staff development.

Revised school day schedules were implemented at four schools, with mixed impacts on instructional time. Expanded day schedules were implemented at two schools, both of which benefitted from substantial funding through other initiatives. Lacking such financial resources, time for instruction was decreased at two others in favor of increased collaborative professional time. The fifth school opted not to proceed with many of its intended scheduling changes following a self-assessment of its capacity to enact them. Instructional time was also affected by new student advisory and/or related programs in four schools (a fifth continued its existing advisory program).

New scheduling strategies enabled substantial increases in collaborative professional time at all schools. The implementation of expanded time for professional collaboration was accomplished through, among other strategies, the introduction of a weekly late start or early release day for students at four schools and through the creation of additional afterschool time at the fifth. This time was largely used for professional development and for collaborative planning at the school, SLC, department, or grade level. Initially, much of this professional development activity focused on establishing new structures and on increasing staff capacity to leverage those structures in support of school improvement.

New governance structures were established to support school- and community-based decision making. Governance boards and leadership teams were established at all five schools by winter of Year One. With substantial outside facilitation and support, these boards developed capacity and focus throughout the year. Governing boards worked primarily on issues related to school policy, such as approving annual work election agreements and school budgets, and evaluation of the school principal. Leadership teams focused more directly on operational matters and/or staff communication.

Time and expertise were stretched to a breaking point, particularly at schools from the first cohort. In this context, expectations of progress vis-à-vis implementing new curricula, assessments, and instructional practices were revised as the challenge and need to first accomplish "foundation" tasks became clearer. Notably, the one school in the Initiative's second cohort chose to maintain its existing instructional philosophy and district curriculum, focusing its efforts on improving the quality and consistency of instructional delivery.

Years Two and Three: Solidifying Foundations, Impacting the Classroom, and Managing Uncertainty

Commonwealth Pilot schools continued their change process in a second, and for some, third year, with each having curriculum, instruction, and assessment among its focal points. However, schools encountered significant turmoil and uncertainty regarding their own status beginning in SY09 and intensifying in SY10. While leaders of all schools reported progress with respect to the implementation of critical priorities regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment, none felt as though they were near an end point in their improvement process. Furthermore, some schools continued to exhibit an emphasis on developing school leadership and planning structures. This was particularly true at the increasingly large and organizationally complex vocational school.

Three of the schools undertook an examination of existing curricula as a basis for assessing needs; two of these schools made substantial progress in this regard. One school implemented a comprehensive ELA curriculum developed by its faculty under the guidance of its ELA program director and revised curricula in other core subjects to support the explicit focus on improving literacy and increasing responsiveness to the needs of its English language learners. A second school engaged in curriculum mapping, adopted "power standards" (which continue to be refined), and developed a number of interdisciplinary "learning expeditions." This school also developed and implemented student assessments in its core subject areas, which it believed were more timely and better aligned with the school's curriculum than standard district assessments.

Less progress was achieved with regard to curriculum at the three other schools. One of these experienced high turnover within its administrative leadership team and was still working to develop its SLC and instructional leadership structures. At this school, vocational and academic classroom teachers worked with CCE staff to begin curriculum evaluation and mapping, a process still in its beginning stages at the Initiative's end. At the other two schools, an elementary and a middle school, both of which spent only two years in the Initiative, implementation efforts were focused on improving classroom management and implementing the existing curriculum.

Substantial uncertainty and tumult emerged in SY09, with announcements of planned changes occurring during the school year. For a variety of reasons, one district elected to close its Commonwealth Pilot school, while another announced that it would no longer provide funds to support its extended day schedule and would replace the principal, changes that led to a dramatic reduction in instructional and planning time as well as the introduction of a new three-year turnaround plan. As these externally imposed changes became evident, they created a major distraction to leaders and faculty and diminished focus on, and in some cases, commitment to, design plan implementation in Year Two.

The Initiative lost substantial momentum in its final year. Commonwealth Pilot schools spent much of SY10 in the midst of considerable uncertainty regarding their status for SY11, which had negative implications both for morale and for ongoing implementation of their plans for redesign. Furthermore, the Initiative lacked an organized closeout process that would have allowed for systematic and thoughtful planning related to the sustainability of progress in the absence of autonomies and other supports provided through the Initiative. An exception was observed at the school implementing a new three-year turnaround plan, which was developed possibly in anticipation of its designation as a Level 4 school under the state's new accountability framework.

Observations Related to Planning and Implementation

The experience of schools participating in the Initiative highlights a variety of implementation and context-related factors influencing school-level implementation success, which may be instructive to future reform efforts. An overarching finding derived from these schools' experience is the need to address reform systematically, allowing time for planning and for the development of key structures and capacity in advance of the pursuit of changes requiring high levels of staff expertise and collaboration, which may not be in place at the onset of reform.

School and staff readiness to undertake critical tasks varied considerably. Factors such as high rates of staff turnover, limited skills and experience among many new and incumbent staff, lack of past experience with and structures to support school-based decision-making models, practical limits on leadership and staff capacity to manage and assimilate change, and leadership transition (at one school) served to complicate and limit implementation progress. Each school displayed unique assets and limitations that affected their readiness to undertake critical tasks, but these factors were not always accounted for in school design plans.

Uncertainty regarding the extent of autonomy granted to schools complicated implementation. Despite ongoing communication between ESE, CCE, and leadership in each district, schools expressed uncertainty regarding the extent of autonomy granted to them in all areas, but most particularly in relation to budget and to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This hampered their ability to move forward with intended changes and to align budgets and other resources with those changes. Interview data suggest that the tension regarding district accommodation of school-level autonomies continued throughout the Initiative, although reports varied by school, even within districts.

Some schools lacked sufficient consensus with regard to aspects of their design plans. At one school, the principal was selected subsequent to the design planning phase, while at another the principal was noted to have limited engagement in the planning process. Where leadership was retained and active in the planning process, high staff turnover rates may also have complicated the equation. Only one school featured a leader who was highly engaged in the planning process and who, at the outset, articulated and implemented a plan to recruit staff who believed in the school's specific approach to reform. That school showed the greatest evidence of staff commitment to the new school design.

School and district characteristics may complicate implementation of key aspects of the pilot model. Application of the model in vocational schools or schools that exceed enrollment guidelines (450 students), or in districts with a limited number of schools or in which a reduction in force occurs, may result in more complex implementation needs (such as building SLC structures) or complicate use of hiring or budget autonomy. The local labor market also appeared to have a substantive impact on the extent to which staffing autonomy could be effectively leveraged, whereas high in-district student mobility was cited as an important consideration with regard to the exercise of autonomy to deviate from established district curricula and assessment protocols.

Outside facilitation and expertise were vital. Comprehensive school reform is an extraordinary undertaking, even under the best of circumstances, and each of these schools entered the reform process following years of unsatisfactory accountability determinations. In this context, participating schools and districts required additional technical expertise to plan and implement aspects of their redesign plans. In most cases, educators appreciated the outside perspective school change coaches could provide, although this expertise cannot replace an internal willingness to reform.

The scope of change being pursued overwhelmed some schools. Even with substantial technical assistance, the complexity of this undertaking was sometimes underestimated. One school attempted to simultaneously implement both an Extended Learning Time grant and its Commonwealth Pilot design plan, which were thought to be complementary. Unfortunately, concurrent implementation of two major redesign initiatives dispersed limited human resources, including administrative attention, too thinly, with adverse impacts on implementation and school stability.

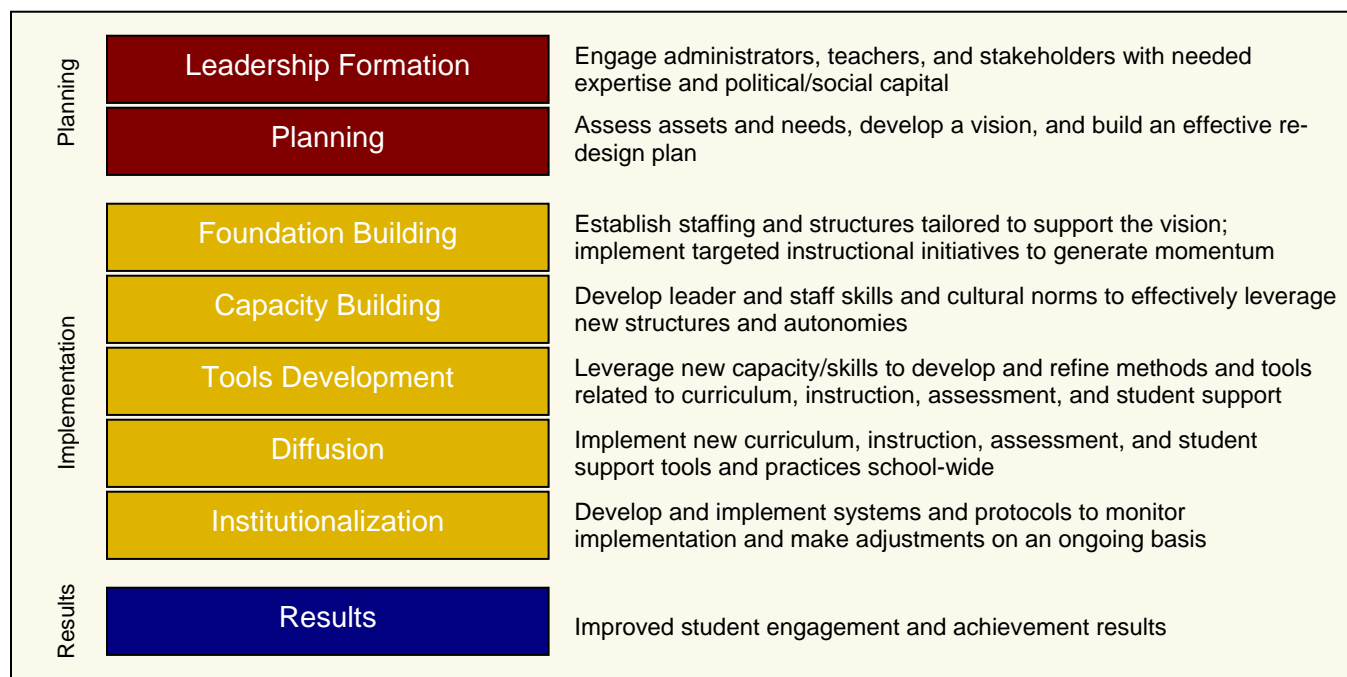<div style="background-color:#7a1515; color:white; padding:10px;">

Lessons for Whole School Reform

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The experiences of schools participating in the Commonwealth Pilot School Initiative emphasize the nature of change as a multi-step process that is highly customized, open-ended in its duration, and subject to contextual factors not entirely within the school's control. This suggests the need for a phased and nuanced approach to school reform that extends from an objective assessment of school needs and contextual factors and allows for the development of the capacities, tools, processes needed to leverage meaningful and sustainable gains in student achievement.

Identifiable Steps of Development

In examining these schools' experiences, several key developmental steps are evident, which are highlighted in Figure 1. School turnaround of this nature begins with the engagement of the leaders with institutional knowledge and political and social capital to articulate a clear and compelling vision for change. In this way, change can be built upon an awareness of the specific strengths, weaknesses, assets, and deficiencies that exist at both the school and district level, and there can be reasonable assurance that priorities for reform and technical assistance are grounded in knowledge of local context. From this point, new staff, structures, capacities, and tools can be developed and implemented strategically, with each phase supporting the success of the next and eventually leading to the goal of true whole-school reform and sustainable gains in student achievement.

Figure 1: Identifiable Development Steps of Commonwealth Pilot Schools

Phase	Step	Description
Planning	**Leadership Formation**	Engage administrators, teachers, and stakeholders with needed expertise and political/social capital
	Planning	Assess assets and needs, develop a vision, and build an effective re-design plan
Implementation	**Foundation Building**	Establish staffing and structures tailored to support the vision; implement targeted instructional initiatives to generate momentum
	Capacity Building	Develop leader and staff skills and cultural norms to effectively leverage new structures and autonomies
	Tools Development	Leverage new capacity/skills to develop and refine methods and tools related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student support
	Diffusion	Implement new curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student support tools and practices school-wide
	Institutionalization	Develop and implement systems and protocols to monitor implementation and make adjustments on an ongoing basis
Results	**Results**	Improved student engagement and achievement results

These steps comprise a systematic approach to change that is grounded in Commonwealth Pilot schools' experiences and is customizable to individual school and district needs. Throughout the development process, the role of leadership and technical assistance remains ongoing as each school's change process must be managed to ensure that it builds successfully toward improvement and avoids implementation "meltdown." This management process should be informed by field-level knowledge of what is working, what is not, and why, so that adjustments can be made as early as possible.

An overarching implication of this process is that assessment, evaluation, and accountability need to be build into each of the discrete steps. The articulation of clearly defined short-term (implementation), mid-term (culture and practice), and long-term (student engagement and achievement) benchmarks could anchor assessment of progress toward improvement and help schools realistically assess their own progress at each phase of development. Highlighting short-term progress may be particularly important in the early phases of implementation as leaders attempt to solidify staff buy-in and generate a positive momentum for change.

Other Implications for School Turnaround Programs and Policy

Other observations emanating from this study may be relevant to ongoing management of school reform initiatives. These include:

Successful change begins with an objective, deeply informed understanding of need and required support. Assessment of district and school structures, skills, resources, and capacity can provide a greater understanding of a school's readiness to begin the proposed change process and of a district's ability to support the proposed change. Such a process would also help to define the technical assistance or support necessary to successfully pursue that change. This suggests the need for diagnostic tools and assessment protocols that can be applied at both the school and district level as well as an expanded timeline for initial planning that provides time for the administration of these tools. The goal of assessment is to ensure an effective school design process, including a realistic plan for addressing critical gaps prior to engaging in more substantive reform.

Further, the assessment process may help identify whether schools and districts have characteristics and sufficient underlying capacity to make them suitable candidates for the type of substantive reform associated with the type of improvement initiative being proposed. Notable factors that appeared to influence suitability with regard to this particular initiative included district size, school size and/or structural complexity, school specialty, the presence of engaged and politically capitalized leadership within schools, the sufficiency of administrative resources, and the commitment of school and district leaders to the Initiative's autonomies or other requirements.

Changes of great magnitude may commonly require an external imperative or other catalyst, as well as ongoing technical assistance at both the school- and district-level. The autonomies associated with the Commonwealth Pilot Schools Initiative required concessions on the part of school districts and school staff that may have been beyond the scope of what could be obtained in routine bargaining situations. Despite all parties being deeply invested in school improvement, these concessions were difficult to secure, as they affected chain of command, policy, and working conditions, which are deeply institutionalized in public education. Absent an external impetus and clear accountability for change, certain autonomies may be difficult to realize, particularly those related to staffing, budget, and curriculum and instruction.

Furthermore, to the extent that conversion led to a substantial migration of students and staff, the process also had impacts on other district schools. Requiring districts to articulate a master plan to manage the change process early in the planning phase, and providing technical assistance in support of those plans may benefit school-level design plan implementation and, in some cases, help to mitigate possible adverse effects on other schools.

Clearly defined school and district accountability benchmarks and exit criteria are needed at the onset of an Initiative. As schools applied for Commonwealth Pilot school status, their design plans were carefully reviewed by an appointed committee of the Board of Education. However, accountability protocols associated with design plan implementation were never clearly articulated, and the Initiative lacked a specified framework of short-term (implementation) and mid-term (culture and practice) performance benchmarks. Lacking these benchmarks, the achievement of adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets became the de facto success criteria in the short term, which no school accomplished. In this context, failure to make AYP may have overshadowed significant intermediate accomplishments and contributed to uncertainty on the part of schools and districts with regard to their performance and continued participation in the Initiative.

Expedient solutions to financial resource constraints may in the long term complicate the implementation and sustainability of school reform. Decisions that seem expedient may be problematic if they undermine the design process or the ability of a school to focus its resources, including administrative attention, on successful implementation of their design plan. In two instances, schools' plans leveraged financial resources associated with other initiatives. In each case, this co-mingling resulted in a substantial disruption in the school reform process by creating multiple sets of obligations and/or making reform contingent on the criteria and continuation of an external program. Although it is tempting to leverage any possible resource in support of school improvement, the implications of pursuing these resources for design plan implementation and sustainability should be carefully considered.

Uncertainty regarding commitment to the model can greatly complicate implementation. Despite the provision of substantial technical assistance and targeted assistance grants to the five participating schools, some leaders and staff expressed uncertainty as to whether ESE was fully committed to the Commonwealth Pilot School model. The year-to-year approach to funding grants and technical assistance providers amplified this uncertainty and complicated ongoing planning and implementation processes. This uncertainty regarding ESE's commitment may have left space for some district and even some school leaders to "push back" with regard to aspects of the model, which in turn compromised staff buy-in and/or hindered leaders in their ability to develop and use autonomies. Further, absent the commitment of key district and school officials, technical assistance and funding are unlikely leverage meaningful change.

Program characteristics may have significant implications for evaluation. At its onset, the Commonwealth Pilot Schools Initiative was conceived as an ambitious experiment in school-based reform. Over the course of the Initiative, engagement with school personnel and the collection of data pertaining to implementation and outcomes yielded important insights into whole-school reform of this nature. However, rigorous quantitative analysis with regard to the effectiveness of this particular intervention model was limited by both the relatively small number of participating schools and issues related to the fidelity with which some of the model's core elements were implemented.