



**A Study of MCAS Achievement and Promising Practices
in Urban Special Education**

Summary of Field Research Findings

A Cross-Case Analysis of Promising Practices in Selected
Massachusetts Urban Public Schools

October 2004



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Cooperating Districts and Schools

Further, we wish to recognize the tremendous cooperation of staff of several districts and individual schools, each of which shared time and perspective that influenced the design or findings of this research.

Chelsea Public Schools: District Office, Hooks Elementary, Berkowitz Elementary, Williams Middle School.
 Everett Public Schools: District Office, Whittier School and Lafayette School.
 Framingham Public Schools: District Office, McCarthy and Wilson Elementary, Walsh Middle School
 Boston Public Schools: The Mary Lyon School
 Pittsfield Public Schools: District Office, Morningside Community School
 West Springfield Public Schools: West Springfield Middle School
 Chicopee Public Schools: District Office.

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I. Introduction

This study, which remains ongoing, was undertaken by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute at the direction of the Massachusetts State Legislature through funding provided in an earmark within the budget of the Massachusetts Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA). The goal of this study is to identify educational practices that are supportive of Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) achievement among elementary and middle school students with special needs in urban public schools in Massachusetts. In order to meet this goal, the Institute, in collaboration with EQA, designed a research plan for fiscal year 2004 that consisted of two broad phases.

This first phase of research included a quantitative analysis of 2002 and 2003 student-level MCAS and student profile data provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education (DOE). These data were used to identify urban districts with promising English language arts (ELA) and math achievement among students with special needs. This analysis provided insight into the profile and performance of urban students with special needs, and identified several districts that would make suitable candidates for field research, based upon the relatively strong performance of this student subgroup.¹ Ultimately, three school districts were selected for multi-school site visits (Chelsea, Everett, and Framingham) and two were selected for single school site visits (Boston and Pittsfield).²

As the first phase of this study was driven by quantitative data analysis, the second phase was purely qualitative. These qualitative data are the basis for this report. The featured districts and schools cooperated with a site based interview process that engaged a wide range of leaders, teachers, and instructional and other support staff during the spring of 2004. A structured interview protocol was designed to engage educators in a discussion of the practices that they considered essential to the MCAS achievement of students with special needs in their district or school. In total, the research team visited ten schools in these five districts and interviewed over 140 school personnel. A small number of parents of students with special needs were also interviewed at each school.

Reliance on the opinions and perceptions of educators from schools with relatively strong performance is both a strength and a limitation of this study. The research model utilized quantitative analysis to identify appropriate case study sites and qualitative research to identify *what is working* with regard to MCAS achievement and urban special education. Through these interviews, educators shared their immensely practical and informed perspectives on the practices that are making a difference for students with special needs in their districts or schools. At the same time, their excitement was tempered as they touched upon the weaknesses of their systems. To address the chief weakness of the research model, the very limited ability to audit practices or conduct extensive classroom observation, only those themes that were consistently identified by staff at each site were considered credible findings and are identified in this report.

Ultimately, the research team hopes that this report will fulfill its intended purpose to inform the public view of what practices may be implemented to better support the educational achievement of students with special needs and to accelerate the diffusion and adoption of common elements of success by other urban districts.

¹ The MCAS performance of elementary and middle school students with special needs in each district was compared to socio-economically similar communities, as defined through a methodology developed by Dr. Robert Gaudet. In this context, each of the featured districts/schools showed relatively strong performance when compared to peers.

² A more detailed explanation of the field research site selection process appears in the companion to this report, *A Study of MCAS Achievement and Urban Special Education: Data Analysis and Site Selection Methodology*.

II. Summary of Field Research Findings

This section features the results of a cross-case analysis of field research findings and, as such, offers a broad perspective on the practices identified by educators as central to the MCAS achievement of their elementary and middle school students with special needs. Findings are organized into two sections, which include a review of *Practices that Support Success* and discussion of several *Points of Concern* identified through the interview process.

The findings presented in this section were reviewed and discussed with a distinguished panel of experts, including current or former urban and special education practitioners, researchers, advocates, and state agency staff. Through the panel discussion, it became clear that the practices identified in this summary are indeed logical and vital elements of an educational system that is prepared to effectively support the success of all students. At the same time, it was noted that many districts and schools struggle to secure and organize the resources required to implement and maintain these system elements. Indeed, even the featured districts may not be considered entirely successful with regard to implementing and maintaining these systems.

At least three other salient points emerged from the review panel discussion. The first of these is that many of the featured practices reflect leadership action and orientation, whether at the district or building level. Second, it is apparent that several of the schools featured have enjoyed access to what may be considered exceptional resources to support key initiatives or moderate class sizes, which may add to the challenge of replicating this success in other urban districts. Finally, the points of concern identified by this study offer fertile ground for further research to support education practice and policy.

Following is a list of practices that were consistently identified as central to the success of these districts and schools in supporting the MCAS achievement of students with special needs. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of each practice and some of the most relevant examples of practice identified in the district and school case studies. As these key findings illustrate, there is no single blueprint for advancing the achievement of students with special needs in socio-economically complex urban areas. However, to the extent that urban districts face a litany of common conditions and problems, the practices identified herein may be put to productive purpose in other districts, as well.

- A Pervasive Emphasis on Curriculum Alignment with the MA Frameworks
- Effective Systems to Support Curriculum Alignment
- Emphasis on Inclusion and Access to the Curriculum
- Culture and Practices that Support High Standards and Student Achievement
- A Well Disciplined Academic and Social Environment
- Use of Student Assessment Data to Inform Decision-Making
- Unified Practice Supported by Targeted Professional Development
- Access to Resources to Support Key Initiatives
- Effective Staff Recruitment, Retention, and Deployment
- Flexible Leaders and Staff that Work Effectively in a Dynamic Environment
- Effective Leadership is Essential to Success

Practices that Support Success

- **A Pervasive Emphasis on Curriculum Alignment with the MA Frameworks**

Among the most immediate findings in the field research process was a tremendous emphasis at both the district and school levels on curriculum alignment with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. In the three district-level case studies—Chelsea, Everett, and Framingham—staff at all levels perceived their districts as early adopters in this regard. In these districts, as well as the individual school case study sites (Mary Lyon School and Morningside Community School), staff emphasized that MCAS achievement begins with a properly aligned curriculum, which, by definition, should reflect the core knowledge areas probed by the MCAS examinations.

While it cannot be said that every educator interviewed wholly embraced MCAS as an accurate measure of all students' knowledge, there was a strong consensus that curricula and instructional lesson plans should be evaluated and re-evaluated for fidelity with the Frameworks and that attention to this task is fundamental to the MCAS achievement of all students, including those with special needs. This is particularly important in districts or school buildings that utilize a diverse and evolving set of instructional programs to deliver their curriculum, as was frequently noted in the case study schools. Across districts, the diversity of instructional programs used to deliver the curriculum was tremendous.

- **Effective Systems to Support Curriculum Alignment**

To the extent that curricula are properly aligned with the Massachusetts Frameworks, district-level MCAS success is dependent upon compliance at the school building and classroom levels. In each of our district-level case studies, and, to some extent, in our individual school case studies, staff described effective district and/or building level systems that support lesson planning even as they reinforce the consistent application of the core curriculum. These support and monitoring systems varied in approach, but share the common element of staff whose positions are accountable for supporting and monitoring curriculum at the school building or classroom level.

Some discussion of the diverse approaches to this critical task is warranted. The Framingham Public Schools have K-8 Curriculum Resource Specialists in the areas of English Language Arts and Social Studies, Math, and Science. Each year, these district staff conduct several full-day visits to each school and meet with teachers to answer curriculum related questions, review instructional materials and programs to ensure they meet standards, and make recommendations concerning professional development opportunities. One principal who welcomes this process noted, “We’re told what to teach, not how to teach it.”

Other districts and schools have similar controls in place. In Everett, the task of curriculum monitoring falls more directly to the District Curriculum Coordinator, who is hands-on in her approach and works directly with individual schools at all grade levels. In Chelsea, elementary schools have building level Literacy and Math Leads, who work with all teachers to support their implementation of the curriculum through coaching and the development of curriculum resources. Some of these Leads prepare weekly homework packets for students that reflect both the priorities of the curriculum and the specific formats and language of MCAS.

At virtually all of the schools studied, principals and key members of leadership expressly related personal responsibility for ensuring that teachers are effectively supported in their instructional plans and teaching. They related the use of half- or full-day professional development and curriculum days for this purpose. Teachers also frequently emphasized the need to stay focused on the curriculum, noting that they often use common planning time to discuss curriculum issues with their peers.

- **Emphasis on Inclusion and Access to the Curriculum**

The provision of meaningful access for students with special needs to the general education curriculum was among the critical concerns addressed in the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. All of the case study districts and schools expressed a commitment to inclusion, and related various ways in which they believe the distinctions between regular and special education are blurred through the use of flexible groupings that integrate students with special needs and other students in an included environment throughout the school day. These groupings of students frequently change throughout the day, based upon students' relative strengths with regard to different elements of the curriculum. Interviewees reported considerable attention to the delivery of the general education curriculum to all students, including those who spend substantial time outside the regular classroom, although instruction was sometimes delivered with substantial accommodations. Among the most common phrases heard during discussions of curriculum access was "they are all our kids."

With regard to inclusion strategies, no two districts were quite the same, with examples ranging from total inclusion of all students with special needs at the Mary Lyon School in Boston, to a more modest level of inclusion in Chelsea, where Title I and other resources are utilized to bring multiple staff into the regular classroom to support inclusion and other students within the classroom. A brief review of the approaches to inclusion that were observed and discussed through the field research process will help to highlight the range of models used in these schools.

The Mary Lyon School, which was founded as a unique program-based school in 1992, provides a full inclusion environment for students with special needs. All classroom teachers hold dual certification as regular and special education teachers. The program model at this school does not include resource rooms or pullout programs and all students receive services in the same environment. Class size is limited to 15 and there are always two to three staff in the classroom. The model has shown impressive results and its staff is extremely enthusiastic with regard to its efficacy, but its replicability may be limited due to the exceptional resources it requires.

Selected elementary schools in Everett and Framingham also show substantial attention to inclusion. In each case, at each grade level a class (or classes) is designated as a full inclusion class. In these classrooms, students with special needs receive instruction in the same environment as regular education students for the full school day. At the same time, these schools also maintain resource rooms and provide pullout services to other students with special needs. For these students, inclusion is pursued more selectively, based on their strengths and abilities and in accordance with their individual education plan. In Everett, which uses a K-8 building format, these practices extend into middle school. Framingham's Walsh Middle School (grades 6-8) does not offer full inclusion classes at present.

The most interesting divergence in the approaches of the inclusion model in these two cities may be the approach to staffing inclusion classes at the elementary level. In Everett, inclusion classes are staffed by a single regular education teacher, who receives mentoring and support from an inclusion specialist who visits the class to aide instruction on a regular, but not daily, basis. These specialists typically work with up to three inclusion classes in two grade levels each. This model is in contrast to a more resource intensive model used in the case study schools in Framingham, in which the regular education teacher is supported by a full-time inclusion specialist and, in some cases, other staff as the characteristics of the student population might require.

The Morningside Community School in Pittsfield offers another model of inclusion. Morningside houses a district-wide program for students in grades 3-5 who are emotionally or behaviorally disturbed. Teachers in this program have worked closely with other teachers to develop what is, in essence, a two-way inclusion model that proactively seeks to integrate program participants into the standard classroom, and also welcomes regular education students who might benefit from more intensive instruction. In this way, the program serves all students who are struggling to mastery of content—particularly in math—and creates a pathway of inclusion for students with special needs.

Finally, across all schools, resource room and other special education staff are required to pursue the same curriculum as is used in the regular classroom, with modifications based on student abilities. In most of these schools, resource room staff work within the same support and monitoring systems that are in place for other classrooms. Unfortunately, a cross-case perspective shows uneven opportunities for special education staff—particularly resource room teachers whose students span multiple grade levels—to participate in common planning with other grade level teachers, which can complicate the task of coordinating lesson plans.

- **Culture and Practices that Support High Standards and Student Achievement**

State and federal accountability requirements remove local discretion with regard to aligning resources behind the success of all students, including those with special needs. That said, school leaders and most staff in the case study schools related a firm and convincing belief that students with special needs should pursue mastery of the general curriculum and that most of them can succeed on MCAS, if properly prepared. For some teachers, this belief translated into an obvious emotional investment in the success of their students, particularly those who struggle to mastery. In general, the consistency of staff comments suggests that these school leaders have established high expectations and a sense of shared responsibility among staff of all grade levels for the MCAS performance of all students. As one principal put it, “I expect teachers and students to all work to the top of their abilities.”

In addition to offering students with special needs access to the general education curriculum, as discussed above, all schools recounted a litany of MCAS preparation strategies. These strategies addressed a wide range of potential stumbling blocks to student success including: the need to develop the foundation literacy skills required by both the ELA and math tests; the question formats employed in the tests; the criteria used in response grading; the academic language utilized in test instructions and questions; and the test anxiety felt by some students. The fairly common strategies implemented to prepare students for MCAS were embedded in the curriculum and in the day-to-day life of all students, particularly those in grade levels corresponding to the MCAS examinations.

In response to the prerequisite need for literacy in order to succeed on either the ELA or the math exam, these districts have all adopted what is now the common practice of increasing the amount of instructional time and staff resources devoted to literacy. Reading is emphasized throughout the day and time set aside for ELA instruction is considered untouchable, meaning that students are not pulled out for special services during these blocks of time. Several schools have responded to the need for increased ELA instruction time by offering before or after-school literacy skills programs, and some have replaced snack or other break times with added time for literacy instruction. Although teachers consistently agreed with the need for this added instructional time, some lamented what they perceived as a loss of fun in the day for young students.

With a pervasive focus on ELA, other subjects, including math, have received less attention. While no interviewee questioned the prudence of the ELA-first strategy, some noted a need for increased emphasis on math and science preparation, and most of these schools have recently begun to allocate additional resources to math instruction, in particular. Presently, scheduled time for math instruction is also considered untouchable in some schools, although this was often cited as a recent or emerging development.

With regard to preparation for the formats, response standards, language, and instructions found on the MCAS exams, districts employ a wide range of programs, from school-wide writing prompts, to mock tests using past exam content, to “word of the week” initiatives. In general, these practices ramp up at the beginning of grade years in which testing is performed, but content and certain foundation skills, such as using graphic organizers and performing word-based computation, are embedded in early grade level instruction as well.

Some schools offer MCAS workshops targeted to parents to familiarize them with the exam process and to support and encourage them to play a role in their child’s success. These preparatory exercises are intended to increase familiarity with the challenges of MCAS and to help reduce test anxiety. Test anxiety was not

consistently noted across case study sites, but staff at several schools did note it as a concern. Some of the steps taken to reduce anxiety include student meetings with adjustment counselors, parties and celebrations, and MCAS rallies, where, in one case, students defeat a costumed “MCAS Monster” by answering its questions correctly.

Accommodations also play an important role in supporting MCAS achievement among students with special needs. Interviewees generally consider standard accommodations beneficial to students and reported that accommodations, both for MCAS and a student’s day-to-day instruction, were decided as part of the IEP process (as is required by law). The most common accommodations cited included small group settings, familiar test proctors, frequent breaks, and clarification of instructions. Noted with less frequency were the use of scribes, strategy cards, graphic organizers, and test readers. Of great significance, staff of numerous schools reported that accommodations are used more effectively than they were in the past, as the range of acceptable accommodations has become better understood. While accommodations are quite common, leaders in Framingham and at the Mary Lyon School expressed concern that accommodations can be overused, and have developed review systems to ensure that proposed accommodations are appropriate.

Finally, it should be noted that there was a minority of interviewees who expressed concerns regarding the use of MCAS as the criteria for success against which all students are measured. Many of these staff clarified their opinions by stating that they want to push students with special needs to achieve at the highest level possible, but that mastery may be beyond the reach of some students. Their concern was generally related in terms of creating opportunities for students to feel successful, rather than reinforcing their perception that they are falling short. Notably, when asked about the benefits of MCAS, an overwhelming majority of interviewees indicated that they feel it has helped to increase the expectations for students with special needs, which they consider a positive development for many, although perhaps not all, of these students.

- **A Well Disciplined Academic and Social Environment**

There is a popular notion that students with special needs may bear some predisposition to exhibit disruptive behaviors in the classroom. Based on the opinions of educators in the case study schools—which ranged from grades K-8—this is not at all the case. In fact, when asked about disciplinary issues caused by students with special needs, the most frequent responses were, “we really don’t have any” and “we’re more likely to see behavioral problems in our other students, who do not have IEPs.”

While interviewees across case study sites frequently offered diverse perspectives on topics addressed through the interview protocol, the comments related to student discipline were extremely consistent. They considered their buildings to be very well disciplined environments in which students find the structure they need in order to focus on their work. This is remarkable because several of these schools have programs targeted to students with behavioral issues, including students with and without identified special needs. Why are discipline issues not a factor within these schools? Leaders and staff provided some explanation.

At the Morningside School in Pittsfield, staff recounted a time several years ago when the building was “out of control.” At that time, student discipline issues would sometimes overwhelm members of the staff and make it difficult to effectively educate students. In this environment, behaviorally challenging students were often “sent out” of the classroom quickly. A new principal introduced a simple philosophy, The Golden Rule, and made it the mantra of the school. He also empowered the highly qualified staff of the building’s district-wide behavioral program to work with both students and teachers, with the goal of creating an environment in which both students and staff were accountable for, and mindful of, how they behave and interact with one another. Over the course of time, a more civil culture emerged, one that staff lauded and eagerly discussed.

The principal in Framingham’s Wilson Elementary School also sought to create a better disciplined environment and took concrete steps to make it happen. He modified the building approach to behavior management, shifting from a punishment focus to a reward and incentive approach, wherever possible. He also instituted a “Responsible Decision Making” process that would help students better understand the consequences of their actions. This

system focuses on creating student insight, but also offers concrete consequences to students who do not control their behavior.

This approach of setting out clear standards for conduct was also evident in Chelsea's Berkowitz Elementary School, where the behavior management approach is built on the idea that students want and need structure. At this school, the rules are made clear and inappropriate behavior is not tolerated. Berkowitz hosts a district program for students with serious behavior management issues. This self-contained classroom is not limited to students with special needs and maintains full access to the general curriculum, with a low staff to student ratio to allow for more proactive behavior management.

Other schools also attributed their positive school climate to specific elements of their operation. At Mary Lyon, the model is to work out discipline issues in the classroom and all teachers have received training in how to de-escalate conflicts in support of this model. At Walsh Middle School, home to a large district-wide program for behaviorally disturbed students, a Resiliency Program was developed, which provides extensive support, including weekly student/staff meetings and contracting methods, to those students who most need it. In the words of the building principal, "managing the most difficult students effectively really changed our culture."

- **Use of Student Assessment Data to Inform Decision-Making**

Over the past decade, there has been a tremendous increase in the amount of student related data collected by schools. The question that persists is whether those data are put to productive purpose. In all of the schools we visited, staff reported routine use of data to inform their work; noting that it shapes the curriculum, lesson planning, approaches to instruction of individual students, and the identification of students who may be at-risk academically. As such, data has come to play a central role in informing district, school, and class-level strategies to improve student learning and, by extension, success on MCAS.

In the business of student assessment, there is still room for art, as well as science. Staff described, at length, the roles that MCAS, periodic literacy and math assessments, and pre-referral and formal student evaluations for special education services play, and attached value to each. But they also emphasized that teacher notes and informal observations help to complete the picture of how and why a student is performing at a given level. Following are examples of the manner in which student assessment data are utilized and influence the ongoing enterprise of education.

Although MCAS offers a summative perspective on student performance, the results are not available at the student level for months after test administration. Our interviews suggest that MCAS data are most frequently used, in the words of a leader from Everett's Lafayette Elementary School, "to diagnose holes in the curriculum." This was a consistent finding of the interview process: MCAS served as a useful tool to discern where the curriculum did not adequately support mastery of a subject. Within most schools, data analysis begins as a centralized process, and then data are shared with building staff who meet to review and diagnose the problem together. This type of review generally occurs during a full- or half-day in-service meeting and results in a strategic plan for enrichment of the curriculum in strategic areas.

Leaders and grade level staff of every school listed a range of assessment tools used to identify a benchmark of student performance in literacy and math at the beginning of the school year, with follow-ups conducted at regular intervals during and at the end of the school year. Notably, the approach to literacy assessment most frequently relied on externally developed test products, such as DIBELS and DRA; while math assessments were most frequently reported to be tools developed by district or building specialists. In all cases, staff indicated that these assessments offer valuable information, highlighting student strengths and weaknesses, which support the flexible grouping and re-grouping of students throughout the school year.

These tests, as well as teacher observations, also play a central role in the identification of students who are at risk of falling behind their peers academically. As such, they contribute to the academic intervention process by sharpening the focus on the specific skills or content with which a student is struggling. Once initiated, the academic intervention processes reported by school districts consistently required parent notification and brought together a multi-disciplinary intervention team to develop strategies to support the student's mastery of the curriculum. If these strategies are unsuccessful, a student may be referred for a formal evaluation and an IEP Team is convened. It is through this formal evaluation process—prescribed by law—that the school and the student's parent or guardian identify and agree upon an IEP to guide the student's ongoing education. The one red flag to be considered, as noted by some staff and parents, is the potential for delays in the initiation or completion of the academic intervention process that frequently precedes a formal evaluation.

Finally, interview findings suggest at least one other way in which student assessment data are used to inform decision-making in the case study districts. They are used to target both individual and school-wide professional development strategies. This is a natural outgrowth of the MCAS data analysis and strategy sessions mentioned above. As strategies to modify curricula or reinforce specific elements of instruction are developed, the issue of teacher readiness is assessed. In this context, the results of assessment data, particularly MCAS, were noted to play an important role in the establishment of professional development priorities and initiatives.

- **Unified Practice Supported by Targeted Professional Development**

“We are all on the same page,” was a resounding theme heard throughout the interview process. While extensive interviews did uncover differing interpretations within buildings on some issues and processes, there was nonetheless a clear sense that staff were operating from the same playbook, with the same end goal. Teachers in these schools seemed to carry a mission—evident in their enthusiasm to discuss their school—to work together to make *all* of their students successful. This sense of common purpose was more powerful and convincing in some schools than others, but it emerged as a distinct theme at most sites.

Several factors may contribute to the sense that school staff are a team working toward a common goal. Staff frequently acknowledged the role of leadership in creating a sense of common purpose and, in a few instances, cited the School Improvement Plan (SIP) as a guiding document. More frequently than the SIP, staff noted leaders' emphasis on a consistent and well-coordinated curriculum as a key. As noted previously, case study districts and schools showed evidence of closely managed and coordinated curricula, and invested in staff and other resources to ensure that these curricula were well-communicated and supported.

Interview findings indicate that one of the principle means by which the curriculum is diffused is through professional development. To that end, all of the case study districts reported key professional development initiatives targeted to large segments of staff. These initiatives most frequently related directly to curriculum and instruction, and reflected a literacy focus. According to some interviewees, it was through coordinated and consistent professional development that staff in their building began to develop common methods, language, and perspectives, which they believe support a consistent and effective approach to education.

Professional development is acquired and diffused through a range of methods. In some cases, all district or school staff may be invited to an intensive training during the summer months, while in others, a handful of staff may be sent out for intensive training, to return as trainers themselves. Both models were observed in many locations and each has merit with regard to either time or cost efficiency. Each can also have drawbacks, as summer training programs were found not to be universally available to those staff not on teacher contracts (paraprofessionals and Title I teachers) and train-the-trainer programs require substantial follow-up to ensure that knowledge is effectively diffused among staff.

In-service professional development days and faculty meetings provide another vehicle through which staff can meet to discuss critical issues (such as MCAS data analysis), share knowledge, or coordinate efforts concerning

curriculum and instruction. Recognizing the value of this time to plan and share knowledge, elementary schools in Chelsea—with the agreement of staff—shifted the focus of these in-service days away from routine staff updates to more substantive issues such as those just described. Less critical updates are now provided via printed materials.

This desire to create more time for direct communication among staff was of universal interest to schools. Staff at the Wilson Elementary School expressed tremendous appreciation for additional grade-level and school-wide planning time available this year. This time was created through the hire of four permanent substitutes to allow regular meetings of grade-level staff to support planning, peer observation, and other activities. Unfortunately, as much as the staff value this time and feel that it has supported unified practice, it is unlikely to be available in the coming year, as these substitutes were funded by a grant offered to the school when it was declared “underperforming” two years ago. (This year the school was invited to apply to become a COMPASS school based upon its marked improvement in MCAS achievement.)

- **Access to Resources to Support Key Initiatives**

One of the most striking aspects of the site visit process was the observation that staffing and other resources varied widely between and within buildings. With regard to resources to support the curriculum, literacy time was generally well supported, whereas math, science, and social studies received a smaller share of resources. While in part a function of educational strategy, this is also a manifestation of available resources. In some schools, during literacy time, classroom teachers were supported by a Title I specialist, as well as a SPED or ELL teacher or aide. This use of Title I and other staff resulted in reduced staff to student ratios, which can be critical to the instruction of students for whom MCAS is a formidable challenge. These resources were not available for all subjects, as schedules were carefully managed to facilitate support of literacy instruction.

Acknowledging the trend in classroom resources directed to literacy, it is also clear that the resources available in these schools are highly variable. For example, the average class size at the Mary Lyon School is 15, which is substantially lower than in the other schools included in this study. Framingham and Everett both offer full inclusion classes (although more widely in Everett), but the Framingham model includes a standard classroom teacher and a full-time inclusion specialist (at minimum), while the Everett model includes a regular classroom teacher whose work is supported by an inclusion specialist who works with up to six different inclusion classes at two grade levels. Staff of many schools noted that tight staffing plans resulted in limited planning time, forcing many staff to meet to plan outside of the normal workday.

Some districts and schools have shown unusual success in securing critical outside resources to make expanded programming or materials available to students. Chelsea is one excellent example of this phenomenon. Thanks to the assistance of Boston University and grants from the Annenberg Foundation, students have exceptional material resources for both the core curriculum, and arts and music programming. Similarly, the Annenberg Foundation has provided substantial support to the Mary Lyon School. Some schools, such as Morningside in Pittsfield, have proven adept at securing competitive grants, including Bay State Readers and, more recently, Reading First, to support curriculum and professional development.

Finally, while it is unclear what effect a well-maintained building may have on student achievement, the physical condition of most of the schools we visited was noted to be exceptional, with many recently built or renovated. As such, they provided bright and cheery environments that might support a positive feeling among those who work in or attend these schools. In contrast, the district offices we visited tended to be modest and in marginal repair, suggesting that capital resources have been directed first and foremost to instructional facilities in these districts.

- **Effective Staff Recruitment, Retention, and Deployment**

No discussion of the factors affecting the MCAS performance of any student would be complete without an acknowledgement of the quality of instruction. Interviewees everywhere emphasized the quality of school staff as

a key element in the MCAS success of their students with special needs. There are, undoubtedly, many fine teachers, specialists, and administrators working at each of the case study locations, and it is likely that their efforts, as much as any other factor, are what drive the achievement of students with special needs. With this in mind, it is important to consider the hiring, retention, and deployment practices of the case study districts and schools.

District and building leaders noted that to build a quality staff, you must hire the right people, support their success, and retain only those who prove effective in their role. In Framingham, district and building staff highlighted early recruitment and hiring as a key to their success in attracting talented teachers. To support this model, the District Director of Human Resources actively recruits in January and February at colleges and job fairs, while principals work with interns from nearby Framingham State College. Each of these strategies was said to attract a large volume of qualified—and in the case of interns, tested—job candidates. The HR Director pre-screens candidates for the schools, which then assemble a review team to meet with the best applicants. At one of the case study schools, 300 applications were received for four positions available in Fall 2004. All of these positions were filled by the preceding June.

Administrators also noted their role in supporting the success of their staff, not only through professional development and mentoring programs, but also through judicious deployment. Leaders in Framingham and Everett made special note of this as they described the development of their inclusion models. They select the teachers who are best suited to work in full inclusion classes, carefully considering the available candidates' expertise and disposition toward the job. In Everett, the process is so rigorous that they will move staff between buildings to ensure that the right person is in the right place. Leaders in Chelsea also cited deployment as critical, emphasizing the need to match skills to role. An example was noted at Hooks Elementary School where the principal had to hard-sell a talented teacher to come out of the classroom and take on the critical and differently demanding role of literacy coordinator.

At Morningside and Mary Lyon, leaders and staff cited hiring, in particular, as critical to success. At Mary Lyon School, all teachers must be dual certified, a uniquely high standard in public schools statewide. At Morningside, the behavioral program staff so widely acknowledged as critical to the school's success in advancing inclusion and the MCAS achievement of students with special needs were both recruited from a private residential program that required expertise working with emotionally and behaviorally disturbed students.

- **Flexible Leaders and Staff that Work Effectively in a Dynamic Environment**

The research team observed a very dynamic situation with regard to curriculum, class configuration, program location, and the racial and ethnic composition of the case study districts and schools. Even in apparently well-managed districts, schools are scrambling to respond to the many demands for change and improvement, even as the populations they serve, and the tools they use to serve them, evolve. This suggests that modern educational systems are increasingly dynamic and require great flexibility from leaders and staff. In fact, this flexibility was in evidence across our case study sites, many of which were self-described early adopters of the State Curriculum Frameworks and quick to embrace MCAS, among other practices.

Concerning curriculum, most of these schools are in the midst of implementing major initiatives intended to improve student achievement, and are working to both provide appropriate training to staff and assess the effectiveness of the initiatives through data analysis. At the same time, classroom models are evolving to provide greater inclusion of students with special needs. In some instances, full inclusion classes are being added year-by-year, starting with kindergarten or across all grades in a single year. In others, co-teaching models are being refined to support more and more effective inclusion time within the school day.

Among the case study districts, nearly all serve either large or rapidly expanding populations of students who are English Language Learners (ELL). These districts are coping with new legal requirements regarding bi-lingual

education and must enhance their ability to identify students with special needs from within this population. Interview comments suggest that some schools have more developed systems and resources to support these students than do other schools. Overall, schools related their commitment to serve these students, but some expressed concern that they lack the personnel resources to adequately identify and support ELL students with special needs.

Finally, schools are working to implement and/or design an expanding array of student progress measurement tools. One school, Morningside, is a pilot site for new technology tools that allow real-time analysis of student assessment data, reducing the cycle time associated with data collection, analysis, and instructional response. This, and other innovations, may offer great value to teachers and students, but also requires flexibility as it is piloted and implemented.

- **Effective Leadership is Essential to Success**

It could be said that each of the preceding practices is the result of effective leadership. Across case study sites, district and school leaders were observed to have very clear direction and a strong commitment to building systems that support the success of all students. The presence of effective leaders is not surprising, as most research into high performing schools highlights the crucial role of leaders in developing and implementing a vision for their district or school building.

The sometimes frustrating aspect of this observation is that leadership is difficult to replicate and a leadership style that works well in one setting may not work as well in another. For this reason, the findings of this study emphasize the institutional structures and culture established within the case study districts, rather than the attributes of the leaders who have developed or supported them. It is hoped that this emphasis will enhance the ability of policy makers and school officials to consider and act upon these promising practices.

As practical as this focus may be, it remains important to acknowledge that the district and school leaders engaged through this study were frequently praised by staff for providing passionate and consistent direction to their schools. Among these leaders, most possessed deep backgrounds in administration and/or in special education, and many had very long tenures within the districts they serve. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these leaders related a strong sense of purpose and personal accountability for the success of their students and staff, and staff noted numerous ways in which their work was facilitated by leaders' efforts and support.

Points of Concern

As eager as district and school staff were to share their opinions of what is going right in their efforts to support the MCAS achievement of students with special needs, they also related the need for continued progress in the development of educational environments that provide effective support to these students. While the purpose of this study was explicitly *not* to focus on district and school shortcomings with regard to supporting MCAS achievement, it is very appropriate to share the concerns expressed by district and school leaders, staff, and parents of students with special needs, to the extent that they are generalizable.

- **Resource Constraints Threaten Effectiveness**

Among the greatest concerns expressed by interview subjects were the, in some cases, substantial budget reductions of the past two to three years. Numerous staff indicated that that class sizes have increased and fear that this will hinder their ability to provide the quality of instruction required to support all children's achievement. In at least one system, the positions of some of the staff who monitor and support the curriculum at the building level may be eliminated in the coming year. In another case, a district superintendent noted that the purchase of key curricular materials has been deferred for the past two years, concurrent with reductions in staff. Another key concern was the loss of funding for before and after-school MCAS remediation programs, which were noted frequently to be an important component of the student achievement support system.

At least two other observations can be made with regard to this issue. First, it is notable that extraordinary resources have been directed toward literacy, but that the well of support is not as deep with regard to instruction of other subjects. Some schools and districts noted that the great emphasis on literacy has come, in some respects, at the cost of focus on other subjects. Second, some schools and districts identified substantial outside resources that greatly support curriculum and instruction. Unfortunately, access to—or at least success in pursuing—those foundation or grant funding opportunities does not appear to be evenly distributed.

- **Systems May Not be Adequate to Support ELL Students with Special Needs**

This research was not intended to directly study the complexities of serving ELL students in urban public schools; however, educators' comments suggest that many districts and schools lack the resources and expertise to effectively identify students with special needs within the ELL population. Even in districts that described considerable resources directed toward this task, staff related concerns that ELL students with special needs may be misidentified, under-identified or identified late. Comments of staff in the case study schools suggest that the myriad legal and educational issues affecting ELL students with special needs warrant careful consideration.

- **Parent Engagement**

Schools universally expressed a desire for greater engagement with students' parents or guardians, but characterized it as a sometimes difficult task. Most schools appear to expend substantial effort—including home visits, transportation, and providing a place for siblings to play—to ensure that parents are present and engaged in the IEP process, with some success. School staff related numerous attempts to attract parents to the building on a more regular basis through parent workshops, after school programs, arts and music events, and parent resource centers. All of these efforts were described as helpful, but none were lauded as simple solutions to the problem.

Parent Advisory Councils were discussed as vehicles for parent engagement, but, among the case study schools, were not successful in consistently engaging a substantial number of the parents of students with special needs. The school with the most proactive parent communication strategy, Mary Lyon School, develops individual student communication plans to manage parent engagement with every family; however, that school is notable for its low classroom staff to student ratio, which may afford instructors more flexibility to pursue this active strategy.³

³ Because few parents were interviewed, the ability to generalize their opinions on the efficacy of parent engagement is limited.

- **Student Supports are Lost at Key Transition Points**

Both elementary and middle school teachers expressed concern that students with special needs are particularly vulnerable at educational transition points, such as the move from elementary to middle school or middle school to high school. One district, Everett, moved purposefully to a K-8 school configuration to reduce the number of transitions for students during early adolescence, and district leaders believe this has had a net positive effect. Nonetheless, program supports that exist at one level do not always exist at the next grade level, leaving some students without key resources that supported past performance. Given the ubiquitous dip in MCAS performance during middle school years, this issue of transition may merit further inquiry.

Student mobility offers a different transition challenge to students and schools alike. The critical question is how to effectively immerse a student who may come from outside Massachusetts, in particular, such that they can assimilate the specific content and test strategies required by MCAS. This is of particular concern for students who may be ELL and/or come from outside the United States. Based on available data, it is unclear whether such student transitions affect system level performance in a significant way; however, the personal performance implications for transitioning students who have special needs may be assumed to be substantial.

- **Common Planning Time for Special Education and Grade Level Teachers**

Throughout the interview process, staff referred to the important role of common planning time in maintaining active communication and collaboration among teachers, and noted it as an important factor in instructional quality and consistency. In general, schools have implemented block and other scheduling plans to provide grade level or subject specific common planning time on a regular basis. However, many teachers noted that they also rely heavily on informal meetings to accomplish needed co-planning, particularly for planning with resource room teachers and other staff who work with multiple grade levels or subject areas.

Because special and regular education teachers must usually collaborate extensively in the education of students with special needs, the lack of schedule-supported common planning time presents concerns. Staff indicated that this problem is primarily logistical, rather than cultural. The hiring of permanent substitutes to create meeting time at Framingham's Wilson Elementary School, and the negotiation of extended school hours to create before and after school meeting time at Mary Lyon School, each provide a possible model for resolving this problem, but each solution has resource implications.

- **Program Mobility and Cohort Effects Complicate School-Level Performance Review**

The site selection methodology that supported this case study research began with a district level analysis of 2002 and 2003 ELA and math MCAS achievement in grades 4, 7, and 8. Only after district selection was completed were individual schools considered for selection into the case study process. Prior to selection, the research team considered the schools' two year MCAS performance and profile of students with special needs to identify any cohort factors that might obviously be influencing student success. This district approach was critical to the project, as school level performance within the special needs sub-group is very sensitive to cohort effects.

These cohort effects are attributable to at least three major factors. First, the number of students with special needs at any one grade level in any one school building is generally quite small (<25), particularly at the elementary level. Second, the characteristics of the population of students with special needs can vary widely from one year to the next, limiting the comparability of cohorts. Finally, in addition to naturally occurring fluctuations in the profiles of these small cohorts, many districts are actively working to create new programs to draw students back from out of district placements or find it necessary to move existing district-wide programs from one school building to another. These factors require a cautious approach to comparison of the MCAS achievement of students with special needs from one year to the next at the school building-level.

III. Field Research Methodology

Field Research Overview

This research is intended to identify urban districts and schools that demonstrate relatively strong MCAS performance among elementary and middle school students with special needs, and to engage educators in those districts in a discussion of the practices that they consider to be essential to the MCAS achievement of this student subgroup, which has historically struggled with MCAS. Accordingly, the first phase of this research project included an extensive analysis of 2002 and 2003 student-level MCAS data. This analysis indicated that some urban districts are more successful in supporting the MCAS achievement of students with special needs than other districts, even when performance is adjusted for community demography and social factors.⁴

Through this analysis, several districts were identified as suitable candidates for field research. From these, a total of ten schools in five districts were selected and ultimately agreed to participate in the field research phase of the study. This phase consisted of an on-site interview process that engaged a variety of district and school staff. At the district level, interviewees typically included the superintendent, special education administrator, curriculum director, and other staff recommended by the district office. At the school building level, they included building leaders, literacy and math coordinators, regular and special education teachers, guidance and social workers, and, in some cases, special education aides. School leaders also arranged interviews with a very limited number of parents of students with special needs.

The interview process was guided by a set of structured protocols, all of which began with the central question to be addressed through this field research: “MCAS data suggest that, compared to similar urban districts, something pretty special is happening here. What do you think is the cause of your special education students' MCAS achievement?” From there, each of the protocols—which were tailored to the responsibilities assumed of each job title—addressed a range of topics including the:

- Structures that support curriculum alignment within the district and school
- Collection and use of student assessment data
- Process for identifying students with special needs (including students with limited English proficiency)
- Structures to support access to the general curriculum
- MCAS preparation strategy and activities
- Professional development strategy
- Level of collaboration among SPED and regular classroom teachers
- Discipline within the building and among students with special needs, in particular
- Issues that must be resolved to further enhance student success

The interview protocols were developed jointly through a series of meetings among members of the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute’s research team. During these meetings, the purpose and meaning of each question and line of inquiry were fully discussed. From among the team, the two staff with greatest responsibility for the development of the protocols served as interview team leaders. Together, these team leaders conducted and reviewed the initial site visit interviews in Chelsea, which further ensured a consistent understanding and presentation of the interview questions in an applied setting.

⁴ The method and results of these analyses, as well as the district and school field research site selection process, are described in the companion to this report, *A Study of MCAS Achievement and Urban Special Education: Data Analysis and Site Selection Methodology*.

The interview process was conducted between March and June 2003, during times identified as most convenient by each of the individual districts and schools. It included a one to two day site visit to each school, during which an interview team toured the facility and performed a series of group interviews that ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in duration. To facilitate a coherent conversation, each interview group included up to five staff who functioned in similar positions—for example, regular education teachers, special education teachers, and student support services personnel. In nearly all cases, interviews with staff were not conducted in the presence of leaders.

All interview candidates were informed that their comments were confidential and that no remarks would be attributed directly to an individual or group of easily identifiable individuals. The exception to this policy was for district and building principals and other leaders whose positions were so unique that confidentiality could not be assured. District officials were interviewed at their offices in individual and/or group formats as a follow up to the school interview process. In total, the research team visited ten schools in five districts and interviewed over 140 school and district personnel. A small number of parents of students with special needs—not sufficient to support generalizable findings—were also interviewed at each school.

The reliance upon the opinions and perceptions of educators from schools with relatively strong performance is both a strength and a limitation of this study. The research model relied on quantitative analysis to identify appropriate case study sites and qualitative research to identify *what is working* with regard to MCAS achievement and urban special education. Through interviews, educators in relatively successful schools shared their informed perspectives on the practices that are making a difference for students with special needs. At the same time, they were also quite candid about the weaknesses of their systems. Their overarching message was: “We’re doing some good things, but there remains room for improvement.” To address the chief weakness of the research model, the inability to formally audit practices or conduct classroom observation, only those practices that were consistently identified as present and salient across interview groups at each site were regarded as credible findings and incorporated into this report.

Understanding the strengths and the limitations of the interview data, members of each field research team performed a joint summary of the findings following each individual school and district visit, using a standard summary protocol. These summaries, as well as individual written notes,⁵ became key sources of data when the full team undertook a cross-site analysis of findings in early June 2003. This discussion and analysis was conducted over the course of several full days of meetings and produced a set of overarching findings that formed the basis for the *Summary of Field Research Findings* that appears in this report. This summary of findings was shared with a group of notable experts in the field of special education in June 2004 and benefited tremendously from their insightful inquiries and suggestions.

Notes on the Profile and Performance Data

The field research site selection process was supported by an extensive analysis of student MCAS results. The source for these data was a file prepared by the Massachusetts Department of Education in November 2003. Referred to as the MCAS megafile, this file includes student level MCAS results and Student Information Management System (SIMS) data for grades 4, 7, and 8 over the course of three years (2000-2001 through 2002-2003). Notably, two key profile variables came from different sources. The source of student placement data, which are generally considered highly reliable, was DOE’s SIMS data file; the source of disability type data, which are somewhat less reliable, was MCAS exam records.

⁵ In order to elicit the highest degree of candor possible, interviews of school and district staff were not recorded. On each team, one member served as lead interviewer, while a second (and in some cases third) served as recorder.

Student profile and MCAS performance data generated through analysis of the MCAS megafile are presented in the district and school overview sections in each of the cases featured in this report. When viewing these data, it is important that the reader pay careful attention to the source notes that accompany each table. With regard to both profile and MCAS performance tables, the data represent the distribution of personal attributes or performance among students in grades 4, 7, and 8 only, as these were the records available in the MCAS megafile that served as the source data for this research.⁶

In each case's district overview, profile data include all grade 4, 7, and 8 students with special needs, including those who receive services through out of district placements, as it is important to consider the full distribution of student placements and disability types in comparison to state averages. However, the subsequent school-level overview sections omit students placed out of district from school-to-district comparisons of placement and disability type. This is necessary because the megafile links students in out of district placements to their sending district, but not to their sending school. Omission of students in out of district placements, therefore, allows a meaningful comparison of the disability type and placement of students with special needs within the subject school and its larger district. One other aspect of the school level data tables is notable; they limit the view of data to the grades served by the school and, in those tables, district level data are also adjusted accordingly.

By design, this study omits students in out of district placements from the analysis of the MCAS achievement of students with special needs. This is reflected in the MCAS performance data tables in both the district and school overview sections of each case study. This approach was used to ensure that the site selection process focused on the performance of students who were educated directly in the district (and school). This decision was guided by available resources and the overarching purpose of the study, which was to focus on internal district and school practices that support MCAS achievement among students with special needs. This decision is in no way intended to diminish the importance of this group of students, which accounted for approximately 5.6% of students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8 in academic year 2002-2003.

Notes on District and School Sample

In addition to a review of MCAS achievement, the district and school site selection process was informed by a review of the profile of students with special needs within each district. Only those districts with a distribution of disability types generally consistent with statewide averages were considered candidates for field research. In this way, the research focused on districts that approach coding in a fashion that is likely to be consistent with statewide criteria; although confirmation of assumptions regarding fidelity to coding criteria was neither the purpose nor an outcome of this study. Because the unusual distribution of disability types in some districts⁷ are unlikely to be a result of truly unique population characteristics, these findings present a concern for research that relies upon these data.

The following tables display the distribution of students with special needs in urban Massachusetts school districts by disability type and placement. In each table, the first column of data displays these population characteristics across the 33 districts classified as "urban" in this study.⁸ The second and third columns display district distributions of these data for the five case study districts, with Boston featured in isolation from the other four districts. This isolation was required due to the relative enormity of the Boston Public Schools, which serve over 2 ½ times as many students as the other four case districts combined and nearly 20% of all students with special needs among the 33 urban districts, which include the state's 33 largest public school districts.

⁶ At the school level, sample sizes can be quite small. MA DOE reporting guidelines stipulate that no data can be presented for sub-groups of fewer than five students. In these instances, the data have been suppressed and appear as Not Reported (NR).

⁷ For example, among the 33 school districts classified as urban in this study, the proportion of students with special needs identified with a "specific learning disability" ranged from 29% in New Bedford to 71% in Taunton, compared to a mean for all urban districts of 51%. The proportion of students with special needs identified as "developmentally delayed/intellectually impaired" ranged from less than 1% in Taunton to 26% in Fitchburg, compared to a mean for all urban districts of 11%.

⁸ Criteria for classification as urban included minimum enrollment of 4,000 students and a community demography score that placed the district in the lower half of all Massachusetts communities.

As noted previously, substantial variations in the distribution of disability type at the district level suggest that these data are not entirely reliable; however, they remain highly useful for setting benchmarks at the aggregate level. When comparing the case study districts and schools to the overall profile of the 33 urban districts, the most notable discrepancies in sample composition are found in the Boston Public Schools. (Note: Boston was not a featured case study at the district level and the one featured school from that district, the Mary Lyon School, bears little resemblance to the overall district profile.)

Aside from differences in Boston's profile, the profiles of the four other districts in which case studies were conducted were generally consistent with the profile of the 33 urban districts, with three apparent exceptions. Those include an under representation of students in the developmental delay/intellectual impairment category and an over representation of students with specific learning disabilities and neurological disorders. Viewing these discrepancies, much of the difference in each is caused by the influence of Boston on the aggregate profile of 33 urban districts.

Further analyses performed by Dr. Robert Gaudet suggested that the profiles of the featured case study districts were "unremarkable." At the school level, profiles were more variable due to the existence of specialized programs within those schools that are targeted to specific sub-groups of students with special needs. However, the overall profile of students in those schools was again generally consistent with the profile of students with special needs across the 33 urban districts.

Disability Type	33 Urban Districts	4 Case Districts	Boston District	10 Case Schools
Autism	0.9%	1.0%	1.0%	0.5%
Developmental Delay/ Intellectual	10.5%	8.0%	12.2%	5.7%
Emotionally Disturbed	4.8%	5.1%	5.5%	5.7%
Neurological/ Head Injury	0.9%	3.1%	0.3%	3.0%
Blind/ Visual Impairment	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.2%
Deaf/ Hard of Hearing	0.5%	0.2%	0.6%	0.0%
Deaf - Blindness	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Physical	0.2%	0.3%	0.1%	0.0%
Specific Learning	50.6%	56.1%	43.5%	59.8%
Speech/ Language/ Communication	4.4%	4.8%	5.3%	5.7%
Health	1.4%	1.6%	0.3%	1.1%
Multiple Disabilities	2.7%	2.4%	2.8%	3.2%
Not Specified	23.0%	17.1%	28.1%	15.1%
<i>Count (N)</i>	<i>15,700</i>	<i>1,161</i>	<i>3,123</i>	<i>438</i>

Student placement data are reported through the MA DOE’s SIMS reporting structure and are generally considered very reliable. Overall, the case districts and school—excepting the Boston district level data—are very consistent with the placement profile of the 33 urban districts, with the exception that students placed in “general education modified” settings are under represented in the case districts and schools.

It should be noted that, despite the common perception of these data as very reliable, some unusual discrepancies do appear to exist between the proportions of students reported in the “general education modified” and “up to 25% separated” categories. These discrepancies may suggest inconsistencies in the criteria that districts apply during the student placement data coding process.

Placement Type	33 Urban Districts	4 Case Districts	Boston District	10 Case Schools
Gen Ed Modified	14.0%	8.4%	1.1%	8.8%
Up to 25% Separated	41.1%	50.5%	25.5%	49.0%
25 to 60% Separated	14.1%	13.1%	23.6%	11.2%
Substantially Separated	30.0%	27.5%	49.4%	30.6%
Not Specified	0.8%	0.5%	0.3%	0.4%
<i>Count (N)</i>	15,877	1,168	3,186	445