



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

Report of Field Research Findings

Case Studies and Cross-Case Analysis of Promising Practices in
Selected Urban Public School Districts in Massachusetts

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
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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

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.

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.

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

IV. District and School Case Studies

Promising Practices in the Chelsea Public School District

District Overview

Chelsea is located just past the Boston city line, bordering East Boston, and has a population of 28,710. It is served by the Chelsea Public School District, which had an enrollment of 5,777 students in school year 2002-2003. In 1996, Chelsea built an elementary education complex that contains four separate elementary schools. Students are assigned to one of these schools from a primary school that serves all Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten students in the district. In addition, Chelsea has one middle school that serves grades 6, 7, and 8, one school for grades 5 and 6, one alternative school for grades 5-12, and one high school.

This case study highlights the promising practices supporting MCAS achievement among students with special needs within two of the district's elementary schools (Hooks and Berkowitz) and the Williams Middle School. This district was selected for case study on the basis of the relative strength of the MCAS achievement of students with special needs at grade levels 4, 7, and 8.⁹ This relative strength is measured in comparison to a subset of the Commonwealth's most challenged communities, including Lawrence, Holyoke, Springfield, and New Bedford.

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for students in grades 4, 7, and 8 in the academic year 2002-2003. These data were provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education (MA DOE) in a combined file containing student level MCAS data and profile data captured through the department's Student Information Management System (SIMS). These data were merged and quality checked by the MA DOE prior to analysis.

In the academic year 2002-2003, the Chelsea Public Schools served 255 students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8. The proportion of students identified with special needs was slightly higher than the statewide average. Over 80% of these students received free or reduced lunch—a measure of family income—and were non-white, placing Chelsea among the most diverse and economically challenged districts in the state. The proportion of students with Limited English Proficiency was nearly four times the state average.

Profile Data

	Special Needs	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
District	18.8%	82.2%	83.9%	17.2%
Statewide	17.6%	29.4%	25.2%	4.4%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4, 7, and 8 students.

Among students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8, the district profile of disability types is similar, but not entirely consistent with statewide averages.¹⁰ Among the four most commonly reported disability types, the most substantial difference is the over representation of students with specific learning disabilities.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/ Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others
District	59.2%	6.1%	7.2%	7.2%	20.3%
Statewide	50.6%	5.8%	6.1%	6.6%	30.9%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4, 7, and 8 students.

⁹ A full explanation of the methodology used for site selection in this study is available in the companion report, *A Study of MCAS Achievement and Urban Special Education: Data Analysis and Site Selection Methodology*.

¹⁰ Only the four most common disability types statewide are included in this table. In total, there are twelve disability type categories.

Compared to state averages, the district profile is skewed toward substantially separate classroom placements. However, a comparison to the 28% substantially separate placement rate among the 33 urban districts considered in this study shows a less dramatic difference. The placement profile varies widely among elementary schools in this district, due to the use of some schools as hosts for district wide programs.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate	Outside Placement
District	15.0%	37.7%	4.8%	35.9%	6.6%
Statewide	14.2%	49.7%	11.9%	17.0%	5.6%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for Chelsea Public Schools' students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8, excluding those in outside placements.¹¹ This analysis includes the results of English language arts (ELA) and math examinations administered in 2002 and 2003, and shows actual scores, with comparisons to predicted scores. Predicted scores are statistically adjusted to account for community demographic factors, which have been shown to be key predictors of student performance on MCAS.

Overall, performance data indicate that Chelsea's grade 4 students have performed either at or above their statistically predicted performance; and display improved performance from 2002 to 2003. The picture with regard to student performance in grades 7 and 8 is mixed; and difficult to describe as positive. Although student pass rates and proficiency index scores improved between 2002 and 2003, they still leave tremendous room for improvement. However, when viewed in light of similarly challenged communities, these results are marginally—and in some cases substantially—better than those of peer districts.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)
Grade 4 ELA					
2002	52	50%	49%	44	39
2003	84	63%	66%	51	53
Grade 4 Math					
2002	53	49%	37%	44	35
2003	84	65%	53%	51	47
Grade 7 ELA					
2002	74	41%	54%	37	43
2003	76	62%	67%	45	51
Grade 8 Math					
2002	78	9%	12%	21	23
2003	69	14%	7%	24	23

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4, 7, and 8 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements.

¹¹ MCAS analyses developed through this study omitted students educated in outside (out of district) placements. This decision was consistent with the study objectives to assess the performance of students educated within the district through its schools; and to identify salient practices in place within those schools.

District-Level Findings

Overview of Promising Practices

Intensive interviews with district office and school building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that several district-level factors have contributed to the relative success of the Chelsea schools with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall, and among students with special needs in particular. The district-level practices most frequently identified as critical to this success include:

- **An emphasis on curriculum uniformity and alignment with district Curriculum Frameworks.** It is evident that the district has provided training and support to establish and maintain curriculum alignment at all levels. A comprehensive curriculum guide and Core Knowledge guide has been developed by the district office to assist schools in maintaining curriculum standards. Interviews indicated that MCAS-style questions and problems are frequently included in classroom instruction at all grade levels.
- **A strong commitment to early learning and an ongoing focus in literacy.** Stated as a district-wide learning objective, early literacy and ongoing attention to literacy is the foundation for all learning in Chelsea. Early identification of learning disabilities and early intervention are key elementary school tenets. This focus continues in the middle school as well, with a block of the daily schedule dedicated to literacy.
- **School system management that is well-planned and easily implemented.** In partnership with Boston University, most aspects of Chelsea's organization are carefully documented and staff assignments are aligned with educational priorities. The Special Education and Bilingual/ELL programs are clearly defined and have been strengthened over the past ten years. Building assistant principals serve as special education chairpersons to keep special education services at the forefront of building administration attention.
- **A professional development plan that is driven by data and multiple sources of information.** The deliberate and coordinated approach to district management is evident in the district's professional development plans and its efficient use of time for training and instruction. Professional development priorities are determined by the district and are identified primarily through analysis of MCAS and other assessment data. Needs assessment surveys of administrators and teachers also inform training plans.

District-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the district and school-building staff interview processes probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district. Following are summaries of district-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

In 1989, Boston University entered into a ten-year contract with the City of Chelsea to manage the Chelsea Public Schools. The city sought and received renewals of this contract, and this arrangement is still in place. The major beliefs that support the goals of this partnership are: teachers must be ready to teach, children must be ready to learn, and the curriculum must consist of material worthy of teaching.¹² Interviews with district and building leaders, as well as many teachers, revealed that the district leadership embraces these beliefs and provides leadership and support to schools to achieve the district goals.

Dr. Thomas Kingston has held the position as Superintendent for seven months, but has served Chelsea for the past 10 years as Assistant Superintendent. In that role he was responsible for professional development and, along with the former superintendent, initiated the Core Knowledge curriculum alignment initiative. Through an

¹² Chelsea Public Schools, Professional Development Plan 2000-2001.

administrative leadership intern program, Dr. Kingston and other district leaders select and mentor new leaders for the district.

The current Assistant Superintendent, Mary Bourque, is a native of Chelsea and has worked in the district for more than 20 years, most recently as the middle school principal before her assignment as assistant superintendent this year. As a former principal, she relates the importance of communication with building administrators and providing leadership and direction in maintaining strong curriculum alignment and professional development. Towards these goals, she describes a comprehensive data-driven approach to identify teaching and learning needs at all levels, with a district assessment specialist leading the assessment process and data analysis.

The district administrators who were interviewed stated a preference for an inclusion model in special education wherever possible. Special Education Director, Dr. Hazel Grenham, describes the district's approach with a student-centered statement, "Children are... supported across the span." Students with special needs are expected to meet the same standards as other students, although they may be in different settings and progress at different rates. This expectation is supported by the district belief that good special education teaching strategies are good teaching strategies for all students. In demonstration of this, regular education teachers are included in special education teacher training offerings.

Another district belief that was evident in our interviews is the value of art and music in the curriculum, especially for students with special needs. Dr. Kingston described Education Reform as an opportunity to expand resources and save art and music programs. Another strong advocate is Dr. Grenham who has a strong background in music and performing arts, and takes every opportunity to support their integration into the core curriculum

Curriculum and Instruction

In the wake of the Education Reform Act of 1993, Chelsea, with direction and support from the BU partnership, was among the first districts to embrace and align with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and to embrace MCAS as a tool to improve teaching and learning for all students. In their carefully planned organizational structure, Chelsea has established lead teacher positions for ELA and math in every school. These teachers are nominated by the building principals or district administrators, and provide curricular guidance and support to building teachers. These are leadership positions with merit pay stipends provided by funding from Title I.

As a result of input from lead teachers and analysis of student needs, the district is moving from a 1st through 5th grade elementary system to a system comprised of four 1st through 4th grade elementary schools and three 5th through 8th grade middle schools. The four elementary schools are housed in a single, state of the art, elementary complex where they share common space and resources for gym, lunch, music, and a large and very well equipped library. This joint facility allows principals and other staff to easily communicate and consult as needed.

In the past few years, Chelsea has moved to an inclusion model to ensure access to the general curriculum for students with special needs. While committed to this new direction, leaders acknowledged that it is a challenge. This challenge is compounded by the necessity to address the requirements of ELL students and determine whether they would benefit from special education services. Undaunted, administrators described creative methods to accomplish this, including participation in a Massachusetts Department of Education pilot program that partners districts with bilingual educators from Spain who have successfully implemented similar programs.

Personnel and Professional Development

Chelsea district leaders repeatedly emphasized the importance they place on hiring qualified staff. Equally important is monitoring the performance of new staff, ensuring that only capable teachers are retained. To this

end, principals and building administrators monitor lesson plans and conduct ongoing classroom observations. Teachers who are not performing to district standards are not retained to permanent status. Although qualified candidates are often difficult to find, and Chelsea salaries are not competitive with nearby communities, including Boston, the district appears to attract strong local candidates and some career-changing professionals, as evidenced by the many very thoughtful and motivated teachers engaged in the interview process.

At the district level, the Assistant Superintendent is responsible for implementing professional development, which is guided by district priorities and student assessment data analysis. To ensure that all aspects of instruction and curriculum are addressed, Dr. Grenham works with Title I leaders to monitor progress and provide direction to professional development at the district and school level. Input from teachers and building administrators is regularly solicited to supplement these data; however, the assistant superintendent makes the final determinations with regard to professional development offerings.

Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

District and building leaders indicate that MCAS data analysis is the main driver for informing curriculum and instruction, as well as determining professional development priorities within the district. With the creation of a special position to lead assessment and data analysis, it is evident that Chelsea is invested in understanding and responding to student performance data. With oversight at the district level, building principals are largely responsible for working with their staff to review the data and identify areas of need for each content area and grade level. Staff meetings and professional development time is dedicated to this purpose and teachers also collaborate informally to discuss strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum and lesson planning.

The Chelsea Public Schools, in partnership with Boston University, appear determined to have all Chelsea students meet state standards and to document evidence of their successful school system. Interviewees stated this goal frequently and have invested substantially in systems, as noted above, to pursue these objectives.

Hooks Elementary School

The Hooks School is one of four elementary schools in the Chelsea elementary school complex. It served 431 students in grades 1 through 5 at the close of academic year 2002-2003. Following is a description of the school and its student population, a review of its recent ELA and math MCAS results, and a discussion of the practices that building-level leaders, teachers, and support staff consider critical to the relative success experienced by its students with special needs.

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for students in grade 4 in the academic year 2002-2003. In that year, the Chelsea Public School District served 93 students with special needs in grade 4 and the Hooks Elementary School served 22 of those students.

The proportion of grade 4 students identified with special needs within the Hooks Elementary School was 22.7% - only modestly above the district average for this grade. The proportions of students who received free or reduced lunch and who were non-white was very high, but near district averages. The proportion of students as English language learners was very low by district standards.

	Special Needs	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
School	22.7%	86.6%	80.4%	4.1%
District	20.3%	86.5%	86.5%	24.5%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4 students.

The disability type and placement of students with special needs were examined and compared to district averages. As at many schools, the small grade level cohort size and the use of selected schools as sites for district wide programs targeted to specific student sub-groups resulted in distributions that did not closely match overall district profiles.

At Hooks Elementary School, the student population was skewed toward students with specific learning disabilities. With regard to student placement, the vast majority were educated primarily in a regular classroom setting, which makes the Hooks somewhat unique among the district's elementary schools. Some data were not reported in order to protect the confidentiality of sub-groups of fewer than five students.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/ Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others (includes NR)
School	72.7%	NR	NR	0%	27.3%
District	50.5%	18.3%	NR	12.9%	NR

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4 students with special needs. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes data not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate
School	33.3%	61.9%	NR	NR
District	8.6%	52.7%	8.6%	30.1%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4 students with special needs. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes data not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents ELA and math MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for the Hooks Elementary School's grade 4 students with special needs. Overall, data indicate that these students substantially exceeded their statistically predicted performance in 2002 and 2003, particularly with regard to math, and they demonstrated improvement in performance from 2002 to 2003 on both the ELA and math exams.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)
Grade 4 ELA					
2002	13	67%	51%	61	41
2003	21	71%	61%	62	51
Grade 4 Math					
2002	13	78%	38%	56	35
2003	22	90%	53%	67	46

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements, as their results are not reported at the individual school level.

Overview of Promising Practices

Intensive interviews with district office and school-building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that several school-level factors have contributed to the success of the Hooks Elementary School with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall and among students with special needs in particular. The school-level practices that appear to be most critical to this success include:

- **A respected leader with a strong background in literacy and long-term commitment to the Chelsea Public Schools.** The principal, Coralie Kelly, has worked in the Chelsea district for over 30 years and was a literacy lead teacher prior to becoming principal in 1996. Staff indicated that she is highly regarded and that she manages the school thoughtfully and efficiently.
- **Lead teachers for literacy and math at the building level who provide direct support to teachers.** Lead ELA and lead math teachers spend time co-teaching and provide support and resources for teachers. Teachers stated that they rely on these leaders to help them maintain strong curriculum alignment and to assist them in adapting curriculum to help students with special needs meet state standards
- **Curriculum alignment and access to the curriculum are valued and carefully monitored.** Teachers report that lesson plans are “coded” to the state standards using a curriculum guide provided by the district. The ELA and math lead teachers and the principal review lesson plans regularly to ensure that instruction to all students is in line with the curriculum and appropriate to grade levels. Teachers appear comfortable with and supportive of this practice.
- **Planned and efficient instructional time.** The school’s schedule, teacher assignments, literacy block, and supporting student activities are carefully planned to provide the most efficient teaching and learning environment possible. It was evident that the principal is particularly skillful in assessing needs and is aware of the best use of resources to meet those needs.

School-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the district and school-building staff interview processes probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district. Following are summaries of school-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

Interviews with the school leadership team indicated a strong collaborative approach to building management. Principal Kelly appears to know her teachers and students very well and models an open communication style. Teachers reported that they feel comfortable sharing ideas and asking for her help. Several interviewees stated that they feel supported and that the principal “is good at connecting us with other staff who know what we need to know.” In addition, the ELA and math lead teachers play an important role in helping the principal and assistant principal stay informed regarding instruction in the building.

Efficient use of resources and instructional time are priorities at Hooks. In one example, Principal Kelly successfully moved a strong teacher to the ELA lead position because she recognized that this teacher would be a greater asset to the school if he/she were providing leadership and assistance. With the addition of technology-assisted instruction, technology specialists were hired to assist students, allowing teachers to focus on valuable classroom instruction. Time for instruction in reading and writing is also maximized, as work related to these subjects is embedded throughout the curriculum. School leaders seem well-attuned to the needs of students and teachers, and they regularly assess teacher effectiveness and efficiency.

As is the practice throughout the Chelsea district, the assistant principal serves as the Special Education Chair for the building. In this role, she is well-connected to the special education population and the needs of the special

education students. With this connection, she also ensures that the building principal maintains a strong link to these needs.

Personnel

Chelsea has some difficulty in competing with the teacher salaries of surrounding communities and often is unable to confirm position openings and hires until summertime. Despite these obstacles, strong candidates emerge through careful review of applicants and diligent recruiting efforts. Once hired, teachers are held to high standards and those who do not meet expectations are not retained. In considering candidates, Principal Kelly emphasizes characteristics of teamwork and willingness to collaborate for improvement, in addition to teacher certification and high qualification requirements.

Most of the teachers who were interviewed have been at the Hooks school for 6 - 8 years, and several have been in the district longer. The supportive work environment and “challenging, but rewarding” teaching experience were noted by teachers as motivations for staying in the school. Teachers related a compelling sense of commitment to their students and pride in the success they have achieved in a challenging community setting.

Culture and Climate

Teachers frequently noted the strong culture of collaboration that exists within the Hooks school. They attribute this positive culture to the principal’s leadership and believe that it is critical to the school’s continuous improvement. School leaders, including ELA and math lead teachers, facilitate collaboration and help teachers to help each other. To further and maintain this culture of collaboration and service to all students, the school has a Climate Committee, which meets periodically to assess the needs of the school and plan for improvement.

Common planning time is provided for grade level teams, and special education and Title I staff attend as their schedules allow. Unfortunately, special education teachers often do not share the same schedule as regular classroom teachers and inclusion specialists, so they frequently can not participate in these scheduled common planning sessions. To compensate for this lack of common planning time, ELA and math lead teachers provide the needed curriculum connections for these special education teachers and include the substantially separate classes in their scheduled co-teaching sessions. In addition, regular classroom teachers with students who receive resource room services reported that they take the initiative to find other opportunities to meet with the special education and Title 1 teachers to discuss their students’ needs and progress.

It was apparent during interviews that Hooks Elementary School teachers embrace students with special needs as part of the school community. Students with IEPs are in homerooms and receive instruction in the regular classroom as much as possible. The inclusion model at Hooks School emphasizes access to the curriculum and high expectations for all students. Collaboration with special education teachers in adapting lesson plans and ensuring the use of appropriate accommodations was noted to be ongoing and essential to supporting student success. Staff acknowledged the wide range of needs within the student population, special education and otherwise, and emphasized that all teachers must know how to adjust to the requirements of all students.

Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

Principal Kelly and other school leaders use MCAS and other assessment data to assess performance by school and grade level. Teachers stated that they are comfortable interpreting MCAS results and use the analysis to identify opportunities to improve curriculum alignment and instructional strategies. Additional assessments, including DIBELS and multiple Writer’s Workshop components, are used to assess student progress and identify instructional needs at all grade levels. In keeping with the strong culture of collaboration, committees on literacy and numeracy examine data to assess school-wide instructional needs.

In reviewing MCAS results and other assessments, administrators and teachers stated that they also identify professional development needs, which are addressed through workshops, formal training, or collaboration with peers. Principal Kelly's attention to efficiency is sustained by evidence-based planning and decision-making with regard to professional development and other personnel deployment.

Curriculum and Instruction

Interviewees continually emphasized the great care taken to ensure that the curriculum is aligned with state standards. With assistance and support from lead teachers, lesson plans are "coded" or "mapped" to the Curriculum Frameworks and are regularly reviewed by building administrators. This coding process is supported by curriculum guides developed by the district.

Literacy is the primary focus in curriculum school-wide. The principal and ELA lead teacher have established a focus on the Writer's Workshop as a model for all teachers. This method emphasizes a structured approach to examining student work. Running records, Open Court phonemic awareness, and Project Read are other key tools to support the literacy curriculum. A literacy block in the schedule is stable and no pullout services interfere with this time, and the ELA lead teacher schedules co-teaching time on a rotating basis during this period. Other support for literacy in the building includes a student-mentor program linking fifth graders and second graders as reading buddies.

The math lead teacher is a strong presence in the building and ensures that attention to math instruction and curriculum in the classroom is sufficient. In addition to co-teaching, she teaches enrichment classes for regular and special education students, prepares computation packets that are included in homework assignments, and proactively searches for and disseminates needed materials and resources for teachers. Special education teachers stated appreciation for her assistance and also specifically mentioned the success of the MIMOSA math curriculum as a tool for instructing students with special needs.

MCAS success is a school-wide focus and MCAS practice test materials are imbedded in the curriculum. Teachers reported a number of MCAS test taking strategies, including instruction on MCAS terminology, open response questions, and building test-taking skills and confidence. In preparation for MCAS, teachers implement long composition practice at least once before the testing period, and previous MCAS math problems are sent home weekly for fourth grade students through the computation packets prepared by the math lead. Perhaps most importantly, teachers stated that, while they help students prepare for MCAS, the real focus of their work is the curriculum. The curriculum frameworks drive teaching and ensure that students receive the content needed to succeed on MCAS.

The inclusion model in place at Hooks provides students with special needs with targeted instruction in the regular classroom environment, with special education inclusion specialists and Title I teachers providing support. Substantially separate classrooms for those students whose IEPs stipulate this setting are currently provided in grades 2, 3, and 5. Special education teachers consult with grade level teachers and with ELA and math leads to ensure access to the general curriculum. Sub-separate classroom teachers review regular education teachers' lesson plans on a routine basis, which allows them to develop complementary lesson plans.

Interviews indicated a strong student-centered learning environment at the Hooks School. Teachers consistently emphasized their belief in flexible grouping of students and noted that the needs of all students are diverse. They also noted that special education and Title I teachers are vital resources who help them to identify best practices for instruction of students with special needs and other students who are struggling to mastery of the curriculum. Accordingly, lesson plans are shared regularly with these teachers to solicit their comments and recommendations for modifications and accommodations for students.

Professional Development

As mentioned previously, professional development is primarily driven by MCAS and other student assessment data, but is also supported by periodic needs assessments conducted by school leaders. Building leaders related the need for as much training time as possible and noted that teachers had agreed to devote one of their two monthly staff meetings, which are generally devoted to less critical building updates, to professional development. Common planning time with lead teachers is also utilized as an ongoing training opportunity, as is co-teaching time. Areas of focus in professional development include literacy and math instruction, as well as school climate and teamwork training.

Professional development at the Hooks school is customized to individual needs, but also reflects an emphasis on consistency. In one example, a literacy related program called Writer's Workshop has been a major focus in recent years and all teachers have participated in this training program. To make efficient use of resources, six of those teachers are involved in an intensive three-year training program and serve as trainers for other building staff. The focused approach to professional development extends to both regular and special education staff, who participate in the same trainings and contribute equally to the identification of training needs and priorities.

Parent Involvement

The Hooks Elementary School serves many students from economically disadvantaged families, some of whom face barriers to attending school meetings and participating actively in their children's education. For this reason, the school has tried to take a proactive approach to parent outreach, although these efforts have met with mixed results.

One of the ways in which the school reaches out to parents is through events such as an annual Literacy Festival, as well as arts and music performances. These performances are of particular note, as the school has been able to devote substantial resources to arts and music through a gift of the Annenberg Foundation. The school has also made a visible commitment to draw parents into the school and provide them with educational resources. A well-equipped Parents' Resource Room that contains children's reading material and other educational resources that parents can take home is one example; however, school leaders stated that although they actively promote the use of this room, it appeared underutilized.

Notably, academic intervention and special education services provide an imperative that more frequently draws parents' attention to the school. The parents of students who are academically at-risk are contacted whenever a student is referred to the Instructional Support Team (IST), which can be convened at the discretion of a teacher who notices that a student is struggling academically. The IST brings a variety of school staff together to brainstorm interventions to assist the struggling student, and parents are notified and invited to attend. In some cases, the IST process leads to a referral for a formal evaluation for special education services. Under these circumstances, parental participation is mandatory as an Individual Education Plan (IEP) is developed. Parental participation in this process is high and the process can serve to bring the parents into closer contact with the school.

Opportunities for Improvement

At the conclusion of the interview process, leaders and staff were asked to relate any concerns that they might have and note any ways in which the achievement of students with special needs might be improved. Following are the most salient concerns and opportunities expressed during interviews at the Hooks Elementary School:

- Staff value small class size and low student/teacher ratios. They noted that additional resources to reduce class sizes would help them to better address the needs of struggling students in both regular and special needs classrooms.
- As strong collaborators, staff expressed a need for more time in the schedule to plan together, discuss student needs, and visit each other's classrooms.
- While staff related the efficiency of the school day, they would nonetheless welcome additional time for instruction each day, if accompanied with a commensurate increase in compensation.
- A structured program that addresses the development of social skills among students would benefit the school. With a strong academic focus, some staff felt that this is an area that needs greater attention.

Berkowitz Elementary School

The Berkowitz School is one of four elementary schools in the Chelsea elementary school complex. It served 430 students in grades K through 5 at the close of academic year 2002-2003. Following is a description of the school and its student population, a review of its recent ELA and math MCAS results, and a discussion of the practices that building-level leaders, teachers, and support staff consider critical to the relative success experienced by its students with special needs.

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for students in grade 4 in the academic year 2002-2003. In that year, the Chelsea Public School District served 93 students with special needs in grade 4 and the Berkowitz Elementary School served 19 of those students.

The proportion of grade 4 students identified with special needs within the Berkowitz Elementary School was 15.3%—below the district average for this grade level. The proportions of students who received free or reduced lunch and who were non-white were very high, and above district averages. Over a third of students had Limited English Proficiency.

	Special Needs	Free/Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
School	15.3%	90.2%	90.2%	37.2%
District	20.3%	86.5%	86.5%	24.5%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4 students.

The disability type and placement of students with special needs were examined and compared to district averages. As at many schools, the small grade level cohort size and the use of selected schools as sites for district wide programs targeted to specific student sub-groups resulted in distributions that did not closely match overall district profiles.

At Berkowitz Elementary School, the student population was skewed toward students with speech and language disabilities and there was no other category for which a cohort of greater than three students existed. With regard to the placement of students, 50% were placed in substantially separate classrooms. This is an apparent result of the district's need to consolidate these classrooms across elementary schools in order to create cost efficiencies.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others (includes NR)
School	NR	47.4%	0%	NR	52.6%
District	50.5%	18.3%	NR	12.9%	NR

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4 students with special needs. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes data not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate
School	0%	50%	0%	50%
District	8.6%	52.7%	8.6%	30.1%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4 students with special needs. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. Placement data were not available for one student.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents ELA and math MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for Berkowitz Elementary School's grade 4 students with special needs. Overall, data indicate that these students substantially exceeded their statistically predicted performance in 2002 and 2003, particularly with regard to math, and they demonstrated improvement in pass rates from 2002 to 2003 on the math exam.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)
Grade 4 ELA					
2002	15	69%	54%	48	43
2003	15	67%	57%	53	48
Grade 4 Math					
2002	17	57%	44%	50	39
2003	15	67%	49%	52	43

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafle. Includes grade 4 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements, as their results are not reported at the individual school level.

Overview of Promising Practices

Intensive interviews with district office and school-building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that several school-level factors have contributed to the success of the Berkowitz School with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall, and among students with special needs in particular. The school-level practices that appear to be most critical to this success include:

- **A respected leader with high expectations for staff and students, and a long-term commitment to the Chelsea Public Schools.** Paula Finklestein has worked for the Chelsea Public Schools for over 30 years, with much of that time spent as an elementary school principal. She has been principal of Berkowitz Elementary School since it opened in 1996 and is also the lead elementary school principal for the district. Interviews suggest that she is well-respected by staff and her management style is strict, fair, and efficient.
- **A pervasive emphasis in curriculum alignment and access to the curriculum.** Teachers report that lesson plans are aligned to the state standards using a very specific and user-friendly district curriculum guide. Building leaders review lesson plans regularly to ensure that instruction is in line with curriculum and appropriate for grade levels. Teachers express support for this practice.
- **A focus on the integration of special education students into the broader school community.** All students participate in school activities and events. Numerous staff noted that special education students often shine in the arts and music programs. These programs are very well resourced due to significant funding provided by the Annenberg Foundation. All students receive substantial support and attention throughout the school day, normalizing the supportive services received by students with special needs and minimizing the perception of difference within the school community.
- **School-wide efforts to remove fear of MCAS and build confidence.** In addition to substantial instructional supports and academic preparations for MCAS, school-wide activities to increase comfort with the test, including a rally at which students conquer the “MCAS Monster”, create a positive “can-do” attitude throughout the school.

School-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the district and school-building staff interview processes probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district. Following are summaries of school-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

Interviews with the leadership team indicated a high-expectations approach to leadership in the building. Principal Finklestein appears to know the teachers and students well, and expressed pride in her success in maintaining a high standard of teaching. Adherence to the alignment with the State Curriculum Frameworks is the foundation for teaching at Berkowitz. With alignment as a foundation for success, attention to students’ individual needs and to creating universal access to the curriculum follow as essential elements of student success. As a Chelsea native with over 30 years of experience in the district, Principal Finklestein relates an unmistakable commitment to and pride in the success of her students.

As is the practice in Chelsea, the school’s assistant principal serves as its Special Education Chair. In this role, she is well-connected to the special education population and the needs of the special education students. With this connection, she also ensures that the building principal maintains a strong link to these needs. Interviews suggest that the leadership team places great emphasis on early identification of each student’s individual learning needs and provides customized instruction through the use of flexible grouping and other classroom supports.

Finally, staff indicated that the school's leaders stress the efficient use of resources, including instructional time. Several teachers noted the school's focus on ensuring that every moment is well-spent and directed toward student success in meeting curriculum standards.

Personnel

It was noted that Chelsea has some difficulty in competing with the teacher salaries of surrounding communities and often is unable to confirm position openings and hires until summertime. Despite this competitive disadvantage, they feel that strong candidates emerge through the careful review of applicants and diligent recruiting efforts. Once hired, teachers are held to high standards and those who do not meet expectations are not retained. In considering candidates, Principal Finklestein emphasizes the need for certified and highly qualified candidates. She does not hesitate to state that she is very selective regarding which teachers will be retained with full professional status.

Culture and Climate

Staff, including special education teachers, frequently noted the strong culture of collaboration that exists within their school, and believes that this environment enhances their ability to meet the diverse needs of the student population. However, a major barrier to collaboration between regular classroom and special education teachers was noted. Because special education teachers do not share the same schedule as regular classroom teachers and inclusion specialists, they frequently cannot participate in scheduled common planning sessions. To compensate for this, the math lead teacher, who supports the math curriculum within the building, bridges the gap between regular and special education teachers. This facilitates the alignment of curriculum and lesson planning within the building. The literacy lead teacher plays a similar role. Informal meetings between regular and special education teachers, sometimes on their own time, also support direct dialogue about shared student's progress toward mastery of the curriculum

Commonly observed comments suggest that the school's staff embraces students with special needs as "their kids." Although data indicate nearly half of fourth grade students were in substantially separate placements in 2003-4, staff emphasized a commitment to provide all students with access to the general curriculum and a belief in high expectations for all students. To ensure that high expectations can be achieved, special and regular education teachers work together, as noted above, to implement accommodations and coordinate lesson plans.

Berkowitz Elementary School operates with the premise that students want and need structure, and will behave and perform better within a well-disciplined environment. Accordingly, the high academic standard set by leaders and staff extends to matters of student behavior. In this environment, good behavior is expected, rather than rewarded. A school-wide understanding and acceptance of these standards was evident in our conversations with teachers and, in limited observations, students in the hallways and classrooms were notably well-behaved.

Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

Building administrators—including the principal, vice principal and math and literacy leads—perform school, grade, and classroom level analysis of MCAS data. All staff interviewed expressed comfort in their ability to examine MCAS results, and most indicated that the data help staff to identify opportunities for improvement of the curriculum and classroom teaching. Administrators review MCAS results at school-wide professional development meetings, but also meet with teachers individually to determine whether lesson plans require modification. Finally, MCAS and other assessments are used to target needed professional development programs.

Additional student assessments—including DIBELS (literacy), MIMOSA (math) and a locally developed math assessment—are used to assess student progress and identify instructional needs. Informal tools, such as teacher

observations and running records, complement formal assessment data. These formal and informal tools provide staff with a well rounded view of student performance and a basis for student-responsive instruction.

Professional Development

According to interviews, district and school level professional development priorities are determined, in a large part, through MCAS and assessment data analysis. In addition, each teacher creates a personal professional development plan that must be aligned with the school-wide plan and approved by the principal. Recent priorities noted by staff include: literacy initiatives such as Writer's Workshop; math instruction training, provided by the math lead teacher; and social development training, which is viewed as essential to maintaining a positive learning environment.

The approach to professional development emphasizes diffusion of knowledge. To the extent that analysis shows some teachers to be exceptional in their ability to foster high student achievement, those teachers are required to share and discuss teaching strategies with their peers. Similarly, teachers who receive specialized training must also have a plan for knowledge sharing. Recently, Chelsea elementary school leaders and staff agreed that there was not enough time in the school day to support information sharing. For this reason, they agreed to focus one of their two monthly staff meetings on training and information sharing. Even with this emphasis and time devoted to the practice, teachers stated a continuing reliance on informal communication to share knowledge.

Curriculum and Instruction

The district curriculum is carefully aligned with state standards, a practice that is reinforced at the school level. Lesson plans are developed with strict attention to the Curriculum Frameworks and the support of the district curriculum guide, and plans are regularly reviewed by building administrators. Both literacy and math are emphasized within the curriculum and are supported by lead teachers who serve as instructional leaders and supports, as well as by Title I literacy staff.

Literacy is the most emphasized aspect of the curriculum and literacy instruction is protected from distractions, such as student pullouts for non-literacy related services. Several staff noted that, while literacy instruction is supported by substantial Title I resources, math instruction is heavily dependent upon the lead math teacher, who teaches enrichment classes for regular and special education students, prepares computation packets for regular homework assignments, and continually provides materials and resources for teachers. Special education teachers stated a particular appreciation for her assistance and support, and specifically noted the success of the MIMOSA math curriculum with special education students.

MCAS success is also a school-wide focus, with MCAS practice test material embedded within the curriculum. Teachers mentioned continual attention to MCAS terminology, open response questions, and building test-taking skills and confidence in their classes. In preparation for MCAS, teachers implement full MCAS practice tests at least once before the testing period, and previous MCAS math problems are sent home weekly for fourth grade students. Teachers stated that, although they help students prepare for MCAS through exposure to key terms, practice questions, and anxiety reducing events, the focus of their work remains on teaching in alignment with the State Curriculum Frameworks. These frameworks drive instruction.

School staff emphasized the importance of recognizing and supporting the learning needs of all students, regardless of special needs status. In the regular classroom, instruction is supported by inclusion specialists and by Title 1 teachers, who provide support during the literacy block. Students with or without special needs may be grouped together, as indicated by their academic strength or weakness in a given subject. Some staff noted that the school has worked for years to meet the needs of students who are English Language Learners, and suggested that this experience has made staff adept at using scaffolding strategies that support student success. Students

who require pull-out services are supported by a single resource room teacher, who serves students of all grade levels.

A significant proportion of Berkowitz's special needs students receive instruction in substantially separate classrooms (combined grades 1-2 and 3-4). Teachers from these classrooms noted that they regularly review regular education lesson plans to ensure that instruction remains in pace and well coordinated. Teachers also emphasized their desire to bring these students into the regular classroom if they demonstrate academic strength in any area, and noted that they most frequently show strength in math. The school also runs a Student Support Program that provides instruction typical of a regular classroom, but with additional support to facilitate the success of students with behavioral issues and those who cannot perform well in a large classroom setting. These students do not necessarily have special needs and are considered very capable of doing grade level work. Specially trained social workers and instructional aides support teachers in this classroom.

Parent Involvement

The Berkowitz Elementary School serves many students from economically disadvantaged families, some of whom face obstacles to attending school meetings and participating actively in their children's education. For this reason, the school has tried to take a proactive approach to parent outreach, although these efforts have met with mixed results.

As at the Hooks Elementary School, Berkowitz reaches out to parents through annual events such as a Friendship Day, a Literacy Day, and special guest speaker presentations. They also involve all students in arts and music performances—supported in part through a gift from the Annenberg Foundation. The school maintains a Parents' Resource Room that contains children's reading material and other educational resources and, through its social workers, offers parent workshops and conducts home visits to help connect parents to their children's learning environment.

Again, it was noted that for some parents it is the early intervention and IEP processes that create the imperative to engage more closely with the school. Parental participation in this process is high and the process can serve to bring the parents into closer ongoing contact with the school.

Opportunities for Improvement

At the conclusion of the interview process, leaders and staff were asked to relate any concerns that they might have and note any ways in which the achievement of students with special needs might be improved. Following are the most salient concerns and opportunities expressed during interviews at the Berkowitz Elementary School:

- Several staff noted that there are insufficient resources devoted to supporting math instruction and that the math lead needs more staff support. The same concern was expressed regarding resource room staffing, and it was suggested that hiring a second resource room teacher would enhance the ability of resource room staff to plan and collaborate with other staff.
- Several staff expressed concern about the loss or reduction of before and after-school instructional programming, as well as the summer school program.
- Early identification of student needs is a continuing concern, particularly among students who are English Language Learners. This is also a problem among students whose families move frequently in and out of school systems.
- Some staff noted that the Student Support Program model is beneficial to students who may have difficulty functioning in less supported environments. These staff urged replication of the model at the middle school level.

Williams Middle School

The Williams Middle School is the only 6th - 8th grade middle school in the Chelsea Public School District¹³. It served 1,025 students at the close of academic year 2002-2003. Following is a description of the school and its student population, a review of its recent grade 7 and 8 ELA and math MCAS results, and a discussion of the practices that building-level leaders, teachers, and support staff consider critical to the relative success experienced by its students with special needs.

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for students in grade 7 and 8 in the academic year 2002-2003. In that year, the Chelsea Public School District served 162 students with special needs in grades 7 and 8, and the Williams Middle School served 150 of those students.

The proportion of grade 7 and 8 students identified with special needs within the Williams Middle School was 15.6%—below the district average for this grade level. The proportions of students who received free or reduced lunch, were non-white, and were reported to have Limited English Proficiency were high in comparison to state averages, but consistent with the overall profile of the district.

Profile Data

	Special Needs	Free/Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
School	15.6%	80.6%	82.9%	14.3%
District	18.2%	80.2%	82.8%	13.7%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 7 and 8 students.

The disability type and placement of students with special needs were examined and compared to district averages. Given that the schools serves over 90% of the districts 7th and 8th grade students with special needs, the school profiles track closely with the overall district numbers. The most notable features within these tables are the very high proportion of students identified with specific learning disabilities and the high proportion of students educated in substantially separate classrooms.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others (includes NR)
School	78.0%	0%	NR	5.3%	NR
District	72.2%	0%	3.1%	4.9%	19.8%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grades 7 and 8. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5 for at least one of these categories.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate
School	16.7%	35.3%	3.3%	44.7%
District	20.4%	33.3%	3.1%	43.2%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grades 7 and 8. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level.

¹³ The school will expand to include students in grade 5 from throughout the district beginning in academic year 2004-2005.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents ELA and math MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for Williams Middle School's grade 7 and 8 students with special needs. Overall student pass rates and proficiency index scores track closely with predicted performance, which correlates closely with community factors such as the rate of student poverty, which is very high within the district. Although student performance improved substantially from 2002 to 2003, these data are positive only in comparison to peer districts. School leaders acknowledged the need for continued progress in preparing students for these examinations.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)
Grade 7 ELA					
2002	68	40%	53%	38	43
2003	72	61%	60%	56	52
Grade 8 Math					
2002	68	8%	16%	20	24
2003	62	14%	13%	27	25

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Data includes grade 7 and 8 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements, as their results are not reported at the individual school level.

Overview of Promising Practices

Intensive interviews with district office and school-building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that several school-level factors have contributed to the relative success of the Williams Middle School with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall, and among students with special needs in particular. The school-level practices most frequently identified as critical to this success include:

- **A middle school leadership team that works together to increase teaching and learning standards throughout the school.** The principal and assistant principals manage the building and each focuses on specific areas of responsibility—curriculum, operations, special education, and discipline. Over the past three years, they have engaged in a determined effort to monitor and improve curriculum and instructional standards, and to increase teacher accountability.
- **ELA and math leads provide building-level leadership regarding curriculum standards and professional development.** New building level lead teachers provide support, resources, and training opportunities for teachers in the core curriculum areas of ELA and math. Interviews with these lead teachers indicated a concerted effort to increase curriculum access and target assistance to struggling learners.
- **Grade-level inclusion specialists who have common planning time with grade teams.** An inclusion specialist is assigned to each grade, which allows them to participate in grade level meetings and stay abreast of regular classroom lesson plans and curriculum instruction. This collaboration also provides regular education teachers with access to special education strategies and input, enhancing their ability to develop effective lesson plans.
- **An experienced special education administrator who serves as assistant principal for special education.** Donna Covino is a former Chelsea district-wide special education coordinator who now provides leadership in this area for the middle school. Upon her arrival, she immediately focused on improving the quality of the special education staff and extending high expectations to the special education student population.

School-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the district and school-building staff interview processes probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district. Following are summaries of school-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

Principal Carol Murphy, who came to the school three years ago, was unable to participate in a personal interview; however, other members of the school's leadership team were available. Among them are four assistant principals, each with responsibility for managing a specific school function, including curriculum, operations, special education, and discipline. These leaders characterized Principal Murphy as a strong leader with a clear direction for the building, which initially included an emphasis on getting the middle school “into order” on many levels. As explained by the leadership team, this was necessary because, prior to the current administration, the school was plagued by a lack of accountability and weak teaching standards, as well as an inconsistent curriculum and instructional practices.

In response, the new principal implemented evaluation and accountability standards for teachers. All teachers were provided with opportunities and support to improve their practices, and those who were not able to adapt to meet higher standards were not retained. This resulted in some turnover of staff, particularly within special education. With only her best staff retained, the assistant principal for special education, Donna Covino,

instituted what she described as a methodical recruitment strategy that focused on the hiring of certified and highly qualified special education teachers.

As the school worked to improve staff accountability and quality, leaders also sought to make themselves highly accessible to staff and to provide them with the resources to support effective instruction. Leaders consider the improvement of teaching and accountability in the school to have improved substantially over the past three years. Interviews suggest that staff are open to and accepting of monitoring and accountability practices, such as regular classroom observations and review of lesson plans. Leaders and staff are also reported to be collaborating more than they had in the past, and teachers now provide regular input regarding professional development related to curriculum and instruction. Perhaps most significantly, leaders and staff both reported that the school's curriculum is now in alignment with district and state standards.

Personnel

Remembering the situation that confronted the school three years ago, building leaders have paid considerable attention to the hiring process. In reviewing candidates, they consider each candidate's certifications, middle school experience, and overall qualifications. They also hold new teachers to high standards and retain only those teachers they consider to be effective. As was emphasized throughout the district, the Williams Middle School administration is very selective regarding which teachers will be retained and granted full professional status. According to the school's leadership team, this represents a change from past practices at the school.

Culture and Climate

A culture of collaboration and acceptance of all students was evident in our interviews with teachers. Collaboration among grade level teachers and their assigned inclusion specialists is evident, and is supported by regular, scheduled common planning time. Unfortunately, collaboration between regular classroom teachers and other special education teaching staff is not as well supported, as it relies on informal meeting opportunities. Informal meeting time is found during lunch hour, elective classes, and other "in-between" times. Despite this issue, special education teachers expressed comfort concerning the level of communication within the building and noted that they receive appropriate communication and support from instructional leaders, including the leadership team and the lead teachers for ELA and math, when they need it.

The mantra of high expectations was a common theme throughout the interview process and applied both to staff and to all students. Staff seem to embrace teacher accountability measures installed by leadership, including analysis of student assessment data, ongoing curriculum monitoring, and classroom observations. They also consistently expressed the belief that high expectations should be held for all students, including those with special needs. Challenges in meeting those expectations were expressed, but teachers related their determination.

Use of Data to Inform Instruction and Professional Development

Building administrators—particularly the assistant principal for curriculum, and the ELA and math leads—analyze and review MCAS results at the building and grade level. Grade level results are reviewed and discussed with teachers, who indicated that they are comfortable examining MCAS results and eagerly use performance data to identify opportunities for improvement of curriculum alignment and instructional strategies.

Another use of MCAS and other assessment results is the identification of professional development needs. Several teachers identified trainings related to the math and science curriculum in response to needs identified through data analysis. Interviews with the ELA and math leads also provided examples of specific college-sponsored coursework, training programs, and instructional coaching targeted through data analysis. Notably, informal communication remains a key means of sharing knowledge within the building.

Curriculum and Instruction

The Curriculum is aligned with state standards district-wide and Williams Middle School leaders and staff emphasized the continuous attention paid to assessing and maintaining curriculum alignment at the school level. Both the assistant principals and the ELA and math leads play a critical role in this process. Lesson plans are developed with strict attention to the Curriculum Frameworks and are regularly reviewed by building administrators who also “drop-in” on classrooms to observe instructional practices.

Literacy is the primary focus in the school’s curriculum and the school has installed a student centered approach that seeks to meet the individual learning needs of each student. This approach relies upon flexible grouping of students within the regular classroom and uses targeted supports to support mastery of the curriculum. A literacy block within the school’s daily schedule is given priority over other subjects and is protected from distractions such as pullout services, except in those instances where a student’s IEP specifically requires that literacy be addressed outside the regular classroom environment. Special education teachers in the school’s substantially separate classrooms receive additional support in literacy instruction from the ELA lead and a literacy specialist with a background in accelerating the reading skills of struggling readers and ELL students.

According to staff, the math lead is a strong presence in the building who plays an important role supporting curriculum and instruction. Although new to Chelsea in academic year 2003-2004, he has previous experience as a district math curriculum director and was described an excellent resource for teachers. Because of his particular expertise working with students who are struggling to mastery, he teaches a math class to help students, whether in regular or special education, to meet math standards.

MCAS success is clearly a school-wide focus, with MCAS practice test material embedded in the curriculum. Teachers noted that continual attention to MCAS in their classes, where they review essential terminology, sample open-ended test questions, and attempt to build test-taking skills and student confidence. All students, including those with special needs, are exposed to MCAS test content and question formats on a regular basis. Several teachers mentioned that students who are struggling with ELA or math content are provided with “double-sessions” of instruction in those key subjects. Students with special needs are provided with appropriate classroom and test accommodations, as identified through the IEP process. These accommodations are supported and monitored by grade level inclusion specialists.

Over the past three years, the Williams Middle School has instituted a philosophy emphasizing the inclusion of students with special needs in the regular classroom environment. This model of instruction is supported by an inclusion specialist devoted to each grade level who supports instruction. This arrangement supports specialist’s full participation in grade level meetings, which allows for excellent communication and time for discussion of student needs and progress, as well as instructional planning and scheduling.

Not all students are integrated into the regular classroom environment. Substantially separate classrooms are provided for the significant portion of students whose IEPs require this setting. In the absence of coordinated planning time with grade level teachers, the school ensures access to the general curriculum through the ELA and math lead teachers, who assist the special education teachers who work with these classes to develop lesson plans that are aligned with the content provided to regular education students. Curriculum alignment is also supported through informal planning meetings held between regular and special education staff.

Parent Involvement

School guidance counselors and social workers are a key point of contact between the school and the community. During interviews, these staff noted that they work well together and coordinate their efforts to reach out to students and their families. Counselors and social workers regularly contact parents to discuss concerns related to student performance and/or to schedule meetings to address those concerns, and believe they have a solid rapport

with families. These staff conduct home visits and attempt to address any factors in the home environment that may be adversely affecting student performance.

Three parents of special needs students were also interviewed, each of whom appeared highly involved in their child's education. They reported frequent communication with teachers and a comfort level working with the district and the IEP process, although not all had a full awareness of the accommodations identified in their child's IEP. These parents, however, may be somewhat atypical, as leaders and staff described parental involvement as a persistent challenge at the middle school level. Unlike the Chelsea elementary schools, performing arts were not identified as a means to parental engagement, and one parent noted that additional extracurricular and athletic programming would be of benefit to students.

Opportunities for Improvement

At the conclusion of the interview process, leaders and staff were asked to relate any concerns that they might have and note any ways in which the achievement of students with special needs might be improved. Following are the most salient concerns and opportunities expressed during interviews at the Williams Middle School:

- Although leaders and staff described recent improvements at the middle school as considerable, they also expressed the need for continued improvement. They indicated that leadership is not yet stable, as the ELA and math leads have only been in place for a year, and that there is the possibility that the principal may depart. Teachers felt that continued monitoring and tracking of curriculum and instruction needs to be maintained to see marked improvement in MCAS scores.
- Concern for the cohesiveness of the curriculum spanning across grades K-12, and attention to student needs as they transition to middle school were also expressed. Some staff indicated that identifying struggling students and their areas of need is increasingly difficult, and attributed this difficulty to both the annual influx of students transitioning from elementary school and to what they perceive as a high rate of student mobility.
- Class size at the middle school is large, with approximately 25 students in regular classrooms and 12-15+ students in special education classrooms. Meeting the needs of diverse learners, and dealing with an adolescent population with their accompanying behavioral issues, is challenging, and staff feel that current class sizes are too large and detract from effective instruction.
- The middle school does not offer much in the way of extracurricular activities and/or sports. Parents stated that this is an area that requires improvement. They believe that it will help motivate students to attend school and to achieve at higher levels in order to earn opportunities to participate in sports or other activities. It may also improve parental engagement.
- Substantially separate classroom teachers reported some difficulty in providing small enough groups for MCAS testing due to the student/staff ratios.

Promising Practices in the Everett Public School District

District Overview

Everett is located approximately 5 miles north of Boston in the greater Boston metro area, and has a population of 35,701. It is served by the Everett Public School District, which, in academic year 2002-2003, had an enrollment of 5,371 students. Everett has recently transitioned to an elementary and middle school configuration in which five buildings serve students in grades Pre-K through 8. The district has one high school. This case study highlights promising practices supporting MCAS achievement among students with special needs within two of the district's Pre-K to 8 schools: the Lafayette and Whittier elementary schools. The Everett district and these schools were selected for case study on the basis of the relative strength of the MCAS achievement of their students with special needs at grade levels 4, 7, and 8.¹⁴

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for students in grades 4, 7, and 8 in the academic year 2002-2003. These data were provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education (MA DOE) in a combined file containing student level MCAS data and profile data captured through the department's Student Information Management System (SIMS). These data were merged and quality checked by the MA DOE prior to analysis.

In the academic year 2002-2003, the Everett Public Schools served 187 students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8. The proportion of students identified as special needs was slightly lower than the statewide average for these grades. Over 50% of students in these grades received free or reduced lunch—a measure of family income—which is substantially above the state average. The proportion of students who are English language learners (ELL) is double the statewide average.

Profile Data

	Special Needs	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
District	16.8%	52.9%	27.1%	8.8%
Statewide	17.6%	29.4%	25.2%	4.4%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4, 7, and 8 students.

Among students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8, the district profile of disability types is similar, but not entirely consistent with statewide averages.¹⁵ Among the four most commonly reported disability types, the most substantial difference is the over representation of students with specific learning disabilities and developmental delays, although these discrepancies are relatively modest by comparison to some urban districts.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others (includes NR)
District	59.6%	3.8%	7.2%	10.1%	19.3%
Statewide	50.6%	5.8%	6.1%	6.6%	30.9%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8.

¹⁴ A full explanation of the methodology used for site selection in this study is available in the companion report, *A Study of MCAS Achievement and Urban Special Education: Data Analysis and Site Selection Methodology*.

¹⁵ Only the four most common disability types statewide are included in this table. In total, there are twelve disability type categories.

With regard to placement, the profile is similar to the statewide distribution, with some notable exceptions. First, few students were reported in a “General Education Modified” setting. Given the district’s strong inclusion model, it is likely that these students are recorded in the “Up to 25%” category. The “25% to 60%” category was also associated with very few student records. The proportion of students in substantially separate classrooms is close to the statewide average, but well below the average of 28% for the 33 urban districts included in this study.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate	Outside Placement
District	NR	64.9%	NR	20.7%	8.7%
Statewide	14.2%	49.7%	11.9%	17.0%	5.6%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8.

NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5 for at least one of these two groups.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for Everett Public Schools’ students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8, excluding those in outside placements.¹⁶ This analysis includes the results of English language arts and math examinations administered in 2002 and 2003, and shows actual scores, with comparisons to predicted scores. Predicted scores are statistically adjusted to account for community demographic factors, which have been shown to be key predictors of student performance on MCAS.

Overall, these data indicate that Everett’s students consistently perform at or near their statistically predicted performance, and that they showed substantial improvement in performance from 2002 to 2003 at grade 4 and mixed progress at grades 7 and 8. The overall trends of relatively high student achievement in grade 4 and notably low performance on the grade 8 math exam mirror broader trends for all students statewide.

Overall, Everett’s students with special needs showed better than average performance when compared to districts with similar community demography, which was the basis for selection of this district for case study. These performance data comparisons are presented and discussed in the companion to this report, *A Study of MCAS Achievement and Urban Special Education: Data Analysis and Site Selection Methodology*.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)
Grade 4 ELA					
2002	75	68%	65%	53	51
2003	61	80%	72%	65	58
Grade 4 Math					
2002	75	56%	52%	47	45
2003	62	65%	60%	56	51
Grade 7 ELA					
2002	72	71%	69%	58	56
2003	43	75%	79%	58	63
Grade 8 Math					
2002	53	28%	26%	34	31
2003	53	21%	21%	28	30

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4, 7, and 8 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements.

¹⁶ MCAS analyses developed through this study omitted students educated in outside (out of district) placements. This decision was consistent with the study objectives to assess the performance of students educated within the district through its schools, and to identify salient practices in place within those schools.

District-Level Findings

Overview of Promising Practices

Intensive interviews with district office and school building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that several district-level factors have contributed to the success of the Everett schools with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall, and among students with special needs in particular. The district-level practices most frequently identified as critical to this success include:

- **A rigorous attention to alignment of curriculum with the state frameworks.** District leaders embraced education reform early as an opportunity to improve instruction and begin the process of curriculum alignment throughout the school district. The long term commitment of the curriculum director to provide clear communication and guidance to building leaders and staff concerning the need for curriculum control and consistency at the building and classroom levels, lead to the establishment of curriculum alignment as a unified district mission.
- **A district-wide focus on literacy.** With a belief that a strong literacy foundation leads to improvement of student performance across the curriculum, Everett focused on literacy as an ongoing priority throughout the district. Title I, literacy grant funding, and a commitment to providing the requisite teacher and student supports to pursue this objective were cited by leaders as key elements of the district's success.
- **A determined move toward inclusion.** The Special Education Director keeps abreast of current research in best practices for special education and collaborates with other urban districts. With the expressed support and teamwork of the superintendent and curriculum director, he has guided the district in a move toward inclusion and access to the general curriculum for all students.
- **Leadership that is committed to effective professional development and efficient delivery of services.** District professional development needs are assessed using data analysis of MCAS results and other assessments. Each year, a professional development theme is selected in accordance with district's strategic priorities. Serving English Language Learners (ELL) was the theme for this past year, and specialized training will continue in the coming year. Inclusion was identified several years ago as an area of need and training continues at present. Staff assignments are reviewed annually to ensure appropriate and efficient delivery of services and staffing of programs.
- **A district that is willing to make structural changes to impact school culture and improvement.** Since 1998, Everett has been moving to a Pre-K to 8 system with unified leadership and shared resources in order to maximize community connections, reduce the need for student transitions, and promote stronger relationships among students and teachers.

District-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the district and school-building staff interview processes probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district. Following are summaries of district-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

Frederick Foresteire has been an educator in the Everett Public Schools for over 30 years and superintendent for the past 15 years. Interviews suggest that Superintendent Foresteire is an active leader who effectively communicates his vision for the district and remains in close contact with building leaders and staff. He insists on high standards for all teachers and consistency in teaching and learning. Principals and staff report that he visits schools regularly and knows staff and students well.

Staff interviews revealed a high level of respect for and confidence in district leaders. In their comments, staff frequently indicated that the Superintendent and District Curriculum Director are key factors in improvements in the district. The entire district leadership team is highly qualified and experienced, and expresses a deep commitment to the City of Everett. Many building leaders and staff also reflected on their commitment to the community and expressed pride and determination in their mission to help all students succeed academically.

Curriculum and Instruction

In the wake of the Education Reform Act of 1993, Everett was among the first districts to embrace and align with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and to consider MCAS a useful tool to improve teaching and learning for all students. The Curriculum Director, who has been in the position for over 10 years, led the curriculum alignment process and has managed the ongoing review and refinement of the district curriculum, ensuring that all staff are addressing the state standards. The Curriculum Director and building principals are jointly responsible for the monitoring of curriculum alignment through established practices, such as periodic review of lesson plans, open-ended response questions and sample rubrics. Additionally, the district actively utilizes assessment data results to inform curriculum and instruction and to identify professional development needs.

In the past few years, Everett has moved to an inclusion model for instruction, providing full inclusion for those special education students who will benefit from increased access to the regular classroom environment. District leaders expressed a preference for this model because it offers the most robust access to the general curriculum for students with special needs. This effort is supported by district-wide professional development and ongoing linkage with the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative.

Personnel and Professional Development

Although they reported that it can be difficult to find suitable candidates, district leaders repeatedly emphasized the importance they place on hiring certified and highly qualified staff. They also noted that it is equally important to monitor the performance of new staff and ensure that only capable teachers are retained. To this end, principals and building administrators monitor lesson plans and conduct both formal and informal classroom observations. Teachers who are not performing to district standards are not retained to permanent status. In some instances, permanent teachers who exhibit performance problems or limitations in their ability to work in a specific environment are reassigned within the district, with the intention of finding a position in which that teacher can be more successful.

Professional development is guided by district priorities and student assessment data analysis. District leaders regularly solicit input from building leaders and staff to supplement these data; however, district administrators make final determinations regarding professional development offerings. The stated priority for this year has been to learn to work more effectively with students who are English Language Learners (ELL), an appropriate focus in light of concerns expressed during the interview process. Continuing ELL training is planned, as well as a continuation and expansion of training related to implementing inclusion in the classroom, which has been ongoing for several years.

Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

District and building leaders indicate that MCAS data analysis is the main driver for informing curriculum and instruction, as well as for determining professional development priorities within the district. It is clear that Everett is invested in understanding and responding to student performance. Building principals are largely responsible for working with their staff to review MCAS and other assessment data to identify areas of need for each content area and grade level. Staff meetings and professional development time are dedicated to considering assessment findings, and teachers collaborate informally to discuss apparent strengths and weaknesses.

The Whittier School

The Whittier School is one of five Pre-K through 8 schools in the Everett Public School District. It served 478 students at the close of academic year 2002-2003. Following is a description of the school and its student population, a review of its recent grade 4, 7, and 8 ELA and math MCAS results, and a discussion of the practices that building-level leaders, teachers, and support staff consider critical to the relative success experienced by its students with special needs.

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for Whittier School students in the 2002-2003 academic year. In that year, the Everett Public Schools served 187 students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8, and the Whittier School served 15 of those students. Notably, none of those students were in grade 8.

The proportion of grade 4, 7, and 8 students identified with special needs within the Whittier School was 11.5%—below the district average. Over three-fourths of these students received free or reduced lunch and nearly one-half were non-white, proportions that substantially exceed district averages. The school's ELL population was consistent with the district mean.

Profile Data

	Special Needs	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
School	11.5%	76.9%	46.2%	10.0%
District	15.7%	53.3%	28.5%	9.7%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4, 7, and 8 students.

The disability type and placement of Whittier School students with special needs were examined and compared to district averages. The cohort size for students with special needs was quite small, as is sometimes the case when viewing these data at the school level. The profile of students by disability type did not closely match the district profiles, but is also rather unclear, as the proportion of students in selected categories cannot be reported (to protect cohorts of fewer than five students).

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/ Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others (includes NR)
School	53.3%	NR	NR	NR	46.7%
District	65.8%	4.3%	4.8%	11.2%	13.9%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

With regard to student placement, the Whittier School utilizes a full inclusion model, in which students with special needs spend the vast majority of their time in the regular classroom setting. Placement data reflect this educational strategy.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate
School	0%	100%	0%	0%
District	NR	72.6%	3.8%	23.1%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents ELA and math MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for the Whittier School's grade 4, and 7 students with special needs.¹⁷ Overall, data indicate that these students substantially exceeded their statistically predicted performance in 2003, which was a turnaround from the previous year. They also demonstrated substantial improvement in performance from 2002 to 2003 on both the ELA and math exams. Some data could not be reported due to a cohort size of fewer than 5 students.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)	
Grade 4 ELA						
	2002	21	43%	58%	36	47
	2003	9	89%	60%	83	50
Grade 4 Math						
	2002	21	29%	46%	31	41
	2003	9	89%	52%	81	45
Grade 7 ELA						
	2002	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR
	2003	6	100%	83%	75	67

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4 and 7 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements, as their results are not reported at the individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

¹⁷ The source data indicated no grade 8 students with special needs attended this school in 2002 or 2003.

Overview of Promising Practices

Intensive interviews with district office and school-building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that several school-level factors have contributed to the success of the Whittier School with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall, and among students with special needs in particular. The school-level practices that appear to be most critical to this success include:

- **Leadership with experience and a commitment to serving students with special needs.** The principal has a strong special education background and has promoted a philosophy of flexible instruction that is responsive to the needs of all students. A variety of instructional strategies and supports are in place to assist all students, including a rapidly increasing ELL population.
- **A full inclusion model, initiated four years ago, is now in place at the school.** The school has implemented an inclusion model to serve students with special needs. In this model, each grade level has a dedicated inclusion class in which regular education teachers work collaboratively with special education and Title I teachers. These additional instructional staff co-teach in the classroom on a rotating basis and serve as a resource for the regular teachers.
- **A focus on maximizing instructional time and resources, as well as time reserved for MCAS preparation.** Whittier uses a creative scheduling approach to maximize instructional time and provide an adequate opportunity for teachers to prepare students for MCAS testing. This includes assigning special education and Title I teachers on a rotating basis to staff learning centers within classrooms. Commitment to MCAS preparation is evident as time is set aside for special instructional programming, such as a writing workshop for students, which is taught by the school principal.
- **A collaborative staff that is making the extra effort.** Whittier's staff is a highly collaborative group that is deeply invested in the success of their students. Staff have invested their own personal time in the success of their students through initiatives such as a volunteer after-school program that provides academic support and extra-curricular activities to students, and seeks to increase parental involvement.

Detail of School-Level Practices

The standard protocol employed in the district and school-building staff interview processes probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district. Following are summaries of school-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

Dr. William Jones has been a principal in Everett for nine years, including four years as principal of the Whittier School. Possessing strong special education qualifications, Principal Jones stated that his primary goal when he began his tenure at Whittier was to transform the traditional special education pullout program to an effective inclusion model. He believes that reassignment of several staff members and careful hiring of special education staff over the past four years have contributed to considerable and positive changes in teaching strategies.

Interviews with teaching staff indicate confidence in the school's leadership team. Teachers noted that the principal's knowledge and experience in serving special education students provides guidance for them. They also reported that his openness to staff suggestions to improve student success is beneficial. Principal Jones teaches a writing workshop for students, and comments during staff interviews made it apparent that this boosts his credibility as an instructional leader within the building.

Personnel

The principal and other building administrators emphasized the importance of hiring qualified staff and described their process for discerning qualified candidates. In addition to appropriate experience and qualifications, Jones indicated that flexibility and patience are important characteristics that he looks for in teacher applicants. Once

hired, the school immediately creates a support system for new teachers. Mentor teachers are provided for new hires and an evaluation process ensures that only qualified teachers that meet school and district standards are retained to permanent status.

With funds limited, staff collaboration and sharing of resources is essential. Although they would welcome additional staff and materials, the teachers offered no complaints regarding resources and access to teaching materials. Principal Jones expressed a critical need for both materials and staff resources for the rapidly increasing ELL population, which demands very specific expertise that can be difficult to find.

Culture and Climate

During interviews, Whittier's teachers frequently mentioned the strong culture of collaboration that exists within their school and credited this environment for their self-described continuous improvement as a school. They noted that common planning time is provided for grade level teams, and special education and Title I staff attend as their schedules allow. Because special education and Title I teachers are assigned to more than one grade level, it is often not possible for them to participate in these scheduled sessions. As a result, formal common planning time between special education and regular education staff is limited, and teachers rely on informal connections to discuss curriculum and instruction relative to the needs of special education students. These connections are frequently made during lunch and at times when students are at art, music, or other special classes. Principal Jones expressed his intention to refine the schedule and increase time for planned collaboration in the future.

During interviews, Whittier School teachers consistently used language that suggests they embrace and accept students with special needs, just as they do all other students. Students with IEPs are placed in regular homerooms and receive instruction in the regular classroom as much as possible. Classroom teachers repeatedly stated that they welcome these students and indicated that they have expanded their teaching strategies as a result of working with classes that include diverse learners. Regular education, special education, and Title I teachers all describe a learning environment in which they work together effectively to assist students in the classroom.

Staff indicated that the inclusion model implemented within the Whittier School provides equal access to the general curriculum and that staff set high expectations for all students. Collaboration among special education teachers in adapting lesson plans and ensuring use of appropriate accommodations is essential to achieving this goal. Inclusion specialists work with grade level teachers to increase their knowledge and understanding regarding best practices for special needs students and support their effective use of appropriate accommodations. One example of this collaboration is the Teachers Assisting Teachers model, which brings teachers and staff together each week to discuss student performance and strategies for improvement.

Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

The Everett Public Schools demonstrate a strong commitment to use data to inform decision-making. District and building leaders perform MCAS data analysis to identify performance trends at the school and grade level. These data are then used to inform practices within the system.

It appears that teaching staff are comfortable using data analysis to better the system, as they noted that MCAS data have been helpful in improving curriculum alignment and instructional strategies. As evidence, teachers cited examples of curriculum components and lesson plans that were modified in response to MCAS results. They also noted that a variety of student assessment tools are used to create a baseline and monitor student performance during the school year. In 7th and 8th grade, teachers use assessment data to inform Individual Student Success Plans (ISSP), which articulate what supports each student may require as they pursue specific achievement goals.

Administrators and teachers also stated that MCAS results help to identify professional development needs, which may subsequently be addressed through workshops, formal training, or collaboration with peers. Teachers appeared comfortable with the practice of actively working to identify strengths and weaknesses in their

instructional practices and lesson plans, and to welcome opportunities to participate in training to address identified weaknesses.

Curriculum and Instruction

The curriculum is aligned with state standards district-wide, and comments from Whittier School staff indicate that a great deal of attention is paid to assessing and maintaining alignment. Administrators review lesson plans as a routine practice and teachers expressed comfort with this activity. Literacy is the primary focus in curriculum school-wide and the instructional schedule includes a literacy block that is protected from discretionary pullout services that might otherwise distract from instruction. During the literacy block, Title I and/or special education teachers are in classrooms assisting students in need of specialized instruction or additional support in English language arts (ELA).

MCAS success is also a school-wide focus and MCAS practice test materials are embedded into the curriculum. As part of this effort, MCAS curriculum resources, such as Study Island software (purchased through PTO fundraising), are also available to assist teachers in the development of lesson plans. Creative scheduling is also used to support MCAS achievement. For example, in January, 7th and 8th grade class periods are reduced by a few minutes to allow time for specific ELA and math MCAS preparation courses. Additionally, assistance for struggling 8th grade math students is provided through double math classes.

Teachers also described the MCAS writing workshops conducted by Principal Jones as a key element of MCAS preparation. These workshops are provided to all students who demonstrate a need for extra help in order to improve their scores on the ELA MCAS, including those students with special needs. These workshops have become an annual tradition where he provides tips for writing that are designed to help students develop skills and understand the rubrics used to score the MCAS writing prompts. Teachers report that students enjoy this engaging workshop and Principal Jones incorporates fun acronyms and interesting topics into the program.

Inclusion and Student-centered Learning

The Whittier School's inclusion model places special education students in regular classrooms with the integration of special education and Title I teachers in the classroom several times per week. In addition to supporting individual students on IEPs, this staffing plan enables the use of differentiated instruction and learning centers within the regular classroom to address the diverse learning needs of all students. In accordance with student IEPs, some pullout services are provided on an as-needed basis. In these cases, special education teachers consult with grade level teachers to ensure full access to the general curriculum.

Finally, interviews suggest a strong, student-centered learning environment exists at the Whittier School. Teachers emphasized that flexibility and collaboration among staff are essential to identifying the best strategies to address student learning needs. Teachers also stated that input from special education and Title I teachers is essential to identifying the best course for instruction of students with special needs, as well as other students who are struggling to mastery. Lesson plans are shared regularly with these specialists to solicit suggestions for modifications and accommodations for students.

The inclusion model in Everett is designed to transfer knowledge and teaching strategies from special education teachers to regular classroom teachers, enabling regular classroom teachers to better serve students with special needs, while maintaining instructional efficiency. Common planning time for grade level teachers provides an opportunity to share knowledge and disseminate relevant information. Special education and Title I teachers attend meetings as schedules allow, and, with the help of Title I teachers and administrators, they find other times in the schedule to meet with classroom teachers. The district has also made a commitment to formal inclusion training, including an intensive 2-day training conducted at the beginning of the school year. Most special education teachers have participated in inclusion training, but leaders and staff acknowledged the need to expand this training to include more regular education teachers.

Parent Involvement

Whittier school is in a low-income neighborhood where many parents are working and have difficulty finding time to attend school meetings and participate in their children's education. Whittier also has a rapidly increasing immigrant population with limited English proficiency. In the face of these challenges, school administration and teachers describe extensive efforts to communicate with parents and to accommodate their schedules, which have resulted in over 95% parent participation in IEP team meetings.

Whittier's most innovative practice to improve the connections between families and the school is a strong after-school program with a variety of student activities and opportunities for parents to engage not only with their children, but with teachers and administration. This program, born of teacher creativity and collaboration, is a point of pride for the school's staff who support the program as volunteers. Through programs such as this one, the school is accessible to families from 7:30am – 4pm, rather than for the scheduled school day of 8:15 – 2pm.

Opportunities for Improvement

At the conclusion of the interview process, leaders and staff were asked to relate any concerns that they might have and note any ways in which the achievement of students with special needs might be improved. Following are the most salient concerns and opportunities expressed during interviews at the Whittier School:

- Staff feel that they need more scheduled common planning time to allow regular education and special education staff to work together on lesson plans and design instruction.
- Staff would like more regular education teachers to have the chance to participate in inclusion training, which they believe would improve implementation of the inclusion model and teacher collaboration.
- Leaders and staff are concerned that the school lacks the staff and other resources required to serve its growing ELL population, which grew from 35% in 2000 to 67% in 2004. This includes specialists to assist in early intervention and assessment.
- Staff feel that students would benefit from smaller class sizes and/or additional staff resources in the classroom, which would improve effective teacher/student ratios. This could take the form of additional literacy and math specialists, special education staff, or teaching aides or paraprofessionals.

The Lafayette School

The Lafayette School is one of five Pre-K through 8 schools in the Everett School District. It served 1,042 students at the close of academic year 2002-2003. Following is a description of the school and its student population, a review of its recent grade 4, 7, and 8 ELA and math MCAS results, and a discussion of the practices that building-level leaders, teachers, and support staff consider critical to the relative success experienced by its students with special needs.

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for Whittier School students in the 2002-2003 academic year. In that year, the Everett Public Schools served 187 students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8, and the Whittier School served 64 of those students.

The proportion of grade 4, 7, and 8 students identified with special needs within the Lafayette School was 18.2%—slightly above the district average. The proportions of these students that received free or reduced lunch and were non-white closely match district averages. The school's ELL population was relatively low within this district.

Profile Data

	Special Needs	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
School	18.2%	50.3%	24.7%	4.8%
District	16.8%	52.9%	27.1%	8.8%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4, 7, and 8 students.

The disability type and placement of Lafayette School students with special needs were examined and compared to district averages. With regard to disability type, the proportion of students identified with specific learning disabilities was similar to the district average. However, at Lafayette, the proportion of students with developmental disabilities was nearly twice the district average. With regard to placement, the school and district profiles were generally consistent.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/ Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others (includes NR)
School	59.4%	0%	NR	20.3%	20.3%
District	65.8%	4.3%	4.8%	11.2%	13.9%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate
School	NR	67.2%	9.4%	21.9%
District	NR	72.6%	3.8%	23.1%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents ELA and math MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for the Whittier School's grade 4, 7, and 8 students with special needs. Overall, the data demonstrate mixed results. Students exceeded their statistically predicted performance in 2002, but lost ground in 2003. They also demonstrated a decline in performance from 2002 to 2003 on both the ELA and math exams.

Despite these declines, the school's scores place it comfortably among its peers in similarly challenged communities, particularly with regard to grade 8 math, which is an area of tremendous weakness within many districts.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)
Grade 4 ELA					
2002	20	80%	67%	59	54
2003	29	72%	65%	53	54
Grade 4 Math					
2002	20	65%	55%	49	47
2003	30	43%	57%	42	48
Grade 7 ELA					
2002	18	89%	68%	63	57
2003	12	67%	74%	58	59
Grade 8 Math					
2002	18	44%	30%	46	34
2003	20	25%	26%	34	33

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4, 7 and 8 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements, as their results are not reported at the individual school level.

Overview of Promising Practices

Intensive interviews with district and school-building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that several school-level factors have contributed to the relative success of the Lafayette School with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall, and among students with special needs in particular. The school-level practices most frequently identified as critical to this success include:

- **An effective MCAS preparation program.** Among its programs to support student preparation for the MCAS, the Lafayette School has established an advisory program, through which staff are assigned to a small group of students. Advisors meet regularly with members of their student groups and are available for informal support throughout the day. The principal also participates in the advisory program, which she established.
- **A principal and faculty who support the inclusion model for serving students with special needs.** The school principal and building administrators have assigned several classrooms in each grade level as inclusion classes. Staff schedules are managed to provide time for specialists to collaborate with teachers on a regular basis. Special education teachers support classroom teachers to ensure that effective teaching practices and required accommodations are in place within the regular classroom.
- **A building structure and layout that is designed for efficient instruction and use of resources.** The new Pre-K to 8 building is organized in such a fashion as to group teaching teams together, encouraging informal meetings and collaboration throughout the school day. Additionally, shared resources such as the library, media room, and cafeteria, allow for flexible scheduling and large group activities across grades.
- **Leadership that is actively engaged in curriculum alignment.** The new building principal, with a strong student services background, monitors lesson plans, and open response writing prompts and samples, to assess curriculum alignment. This practice has been in place for all principals in the district for many years.

School-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the district and school-building staff interview processes probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district. Following are summaries of school-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

Mrs. Irene Jones has been an educator in Everett for over thirty years; 2003-2004 was her first year as principal of the Lafayette School. She has extensive experience in guidance and student services. In interviews, Principal Jones came across as attentive to student needs and related her belief in high standards for all students. With the school-wide attitude that “all students belong to everyone in the building”, Principal Jones instituted an advisory program whereby each staff person has a small group of students to assist for MCAS preparation and discussion. Staff meets with these students individually or in groups and are available to respond to student concerns as they arise. The stated goal of this program is to ensure that every student has an established connection with an adult in the building. It was noted in staff interviews that Principal Jones communicates openly and models a caring attitude for her staff.

In keeping with the district-wide practice, the principal closely monitors teaching and learning in the building. She reviews teachers’ lesson plans each week and regularly drops in to observe classroom instruction. MCAS results are analyzed through TestWiz and are disseminated to classroom teachers to facilitate discussion of apparent strengths and weaknesses. This discussion occurs in a number of settings, including: staff meetings, grade level preparation, and scheduled planning meetings. Individual Student Success Plans (ISSP) are developed for all students whose MCAS scores are in the warning range. These ISSPs are monitored and updated on a monthly basis, and progress is assessed at midterm and the end of the year.

Personnel

During interviews, Principal Jones emphasized the importance of hiring qualified staff and described a thorough process for identifying qualified candidates. In addition to appropriate experience and qualifications, she seeks candidates that are highly qualified, open to the school's inclusion model, and show that they are attentive to student needs. Once hired, the school creates a support system for new teachers. Mentor teachers are provided for new hires and an evaluation process ensures that only those teachers that prove to be effective are retained to permanent status.

Culture and Climate

Staff reported that the Lafayette School has a strong culture of collaboration in which teachers take time to discuss student needs and to share knowledge and resources. Unfortunately, although formal planning time is provided for grade level teachers, special education and Title I teachers are responsible for multiple grade levels and are frequently unavailable to participate in these meetings. To compensate, regular classroom and special education teachers rely on informal meeting opportunities to collaborate and share lesson plans. Staff cited the lunch period and times when students are at art, music, or other special classes as the best opportunities for informal planning and consultation.

The model of instruction in use at the Lafayette School requires that regular and special education staff share responsibility for the success of students with special needs, and staff comments reflect a sense of shared responsibility for student success. All students with IEPs are assigned to regular homerooms and they receive instruction in the regular classroom to the greatest extent possible. At certain times, a classroom will be served by a regular education, special education, and Title I teacher at the same time, and teachers expressed appreciation for these opportunities to work as a team and to customize instruction to small groups of students.

Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

The Everett Public Schools have a longstanding commitment to use data to inform decision-making. District and building leaders analyze MCAS data to identify performance trends at the school and grade level. These data are then used to inform practices throughout the system. Teachers stated that they are comfortable examining MCAS results and said that they use the analysis to identify opportunities to improve curriculum alignment and instructional strategies. Teachers provided specific examples of changes to curriculum components and lesson plans in response to analysis. MCAS results have also been used to guide the specific curriculum areas employed in the school's classroom learning centers.

Building administrators and teachers also noted that MCAS and other assessment data are used to identify professional development needs at the district level, which are addressed through workshop events, training programs, or peer mentoring. This practice appears well established in Everett and interviews at the Lafayette School suggest that there is strong support for this process.

Curriculum and Instruction

The curriculum is aligned with state standards district-wide and Lafayette School leaders and staff described ongoing attention to assessing and maintaining that alignment at the classroom level in both regular and special education classrooms. Classroom lesson plans are reviewed by building leaders on a routine basis, and are also shared among collaborating teachers at the grade level. Teachers appear to embrace curriculum alignment as an essential goal and to support these assessment and reconciliation practices.

Literacy is the primary focus of the school's curriculum and receives the greatest share of instructional resources. Staff described the curriculum as rich in literature and expressed a belief that this emphasis is central to MCAS success. As at the Whittier School, each day features a block of time devoted to English language arts instruction and this time is protected from pullout services, which can disrupt instructional continuity. Title I and special

education staff are brought into the classroom to assist instruction during this time. These additional staff resources enable differentiated instruction and support operation of classroom based “learning centers.”

Lafayette’s inclusion model is similar to that of the Whittier School. In this model, students with special needs are integrated into regular classrooms to the maximum extent feasible. Classrooms are supported by inclusion specialists, who are special education teachers. These specialists work with multiple grade levels and rotate from class to class, providing each with assistance in the core academic subjects of math and ELA. The specialists work with grade level teachers to increase their knowledge and understanding regarding best practices for special needs students. They also provide guidance with regard to the needed accommodations identified in each student’s individual education plan (IEP) and monitor and support implementation of these accommodations.

Following is an example of the role a very well qualified inclusion specialist plays in this system. The grade 7 and 8 inclusion specialist has been a special education teacher in the Everett school system for over thirty years and was described by her peers as an exceptional teacher who goes above and beyond regular duties to assist students. In her classroom role, she provides students with extra instruction in writing skills and math in preparation for MCAS testing. She also developed and maintains a homework website to assist students and parents in keeping up with assignments. This web site provides resources to aide in completion of homework assignments, further supporting student (and parent) success. Staff expressed tremendous respect for this teacher and a strong reliance on her skills and experience to help them meet the needs of students with special needs in their classrooms.

Although the school seeks to integrate students with special needs into the regular classroom as much as possible, the needs of its student population require substantially separate classrooms for some students. It is through these classrooms that many students with special needs receive instruction in math and ELA, in particular. Teachers in substantially separate classrooms reported that they carefully maintain access to the general curriculum. Their strategy for maintaining alignment includes frequent matching of lesson plans to the district curriculum frameworks and regular consultations with other classroom teachers. Teachers in these classrooms design lesson plans based on learning needs defined through the analysis of MCAS and other assessment data.

MCAS is also a school-wide focus and practice test materials are embedded in the curriculum. Students who are struggling to master MCAS content are provided with extra instructional time in those subjects. For example, double math classes are provided for struggling 8th grade students and writing and math workshops are added to students’ schedules on an as needed basis. Classroom teachers emphasized the need for focused instruction to assist students struggling in specific content and skill areas. To this end, teachers noted that they make use of Study Island software when developing lesson plans. This tool—purchased through PTO fundraising—provides curriculum resources aligned with the MCAS.

Professional Development

The inclusion model in Everett is in itself part of the school’s professional development strategy. Through this model, regular education teachers acquire new perspectives and teaching strategies from inclusion specialists and then adopt those strategies in the classroom to the benefit of all students. Everett has also made a district-wide commitment to formal inclusion training and last year conducted an intensive two day training program at the beginning of the school year. In the past, only Lafayette’s special education teachers have participated in this training, but leaders and staff acknowledged the need to expand this training to include regular education teachers in the coming year.

In addition to professional development tied directly to the inclusion model, training in literacy and math instruction, and other subjects is provided as needed. The overall district plan for professional development is developed with an awareness of student assessment results, as well as input from staff surveys.

Parent Involvement

The Lafayette School is in a family neighborhood setting, and school administration and teachers describe extensive efforts to communicate with parents and try to accommodate their schedules as much as possible. These efforts have resulted in over 95% parent participation in IEP team meetings. Lafayette staff believe this neighborhood setting, along with the building's Pre-K to 8 structure, encourages communication and allows the school to build lasting relationships with students' families.

Opportunities for Improvement

At the conclusion of the interview process, leaders and staff were asked to relate any concerns that they might have and note any ways in which the achievement of students with special needs might be improved. Following are the most salient concerns and opportunities expressed during interviews at the Lafayette School:

- Staff expressed great concern regarding the limited amount of scheduled common planning time available to regular and special education teachers. While informal meetings fulfill the immediate requirements, they do not always allow sufficient time to consult and work together on lesson plans.
- Staff feel that further professional development would improve the effectiveness of the school's inclusion model and also improve the effectiveness of collaboration among regular and special education teachers. Regular education teachers' participation in formal inclusion training would improve their skills and reduce the reliance on inclusion specialists for teaching strategies and accommodations in the classroom.
- Staff feel that students would benefit from smaller class sizes and/or additional staff resources in the classroom, which would improve effective teacher/student ratios. This could take the form of additional literacy and math specialists, special education staff, or teaching aides or paraprofessionals.
- Additional staff for literacy and math instruction, as well as additional special education staff, would allow for a smaller student caseload and teachers could spend more focused time in regular education classrooms.
- The addition of teaching aides or paraprofessionals would also help teachers to provide students with the classroom supports needed for greater academic achievement. Staff feel that students would benefit from smaller class sizes and/or additional staff resources in the classroom that would improve effective teacher/student ratios.
- As at the Whittier School, interviews with teachers at the Lafayette School conveyed pride in their students' success and it was evident that they would make good use of any additional resources to improve student performance.

Promising Practices in the Framingham Public School District

District Overview

Framingham is a town of approximately 65,000 located 20 miles west of Boston, Massachusetts. It is served by the Framingham Public School District, which, in academic year 2002-2003, had an enrollment of 8,364 students. The district consists of 13 schools, including 8 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, and one high school. This case study highlights some of the promising practices supporting MCAS achievement among students with special needs within three of the district's schools: Woodrow Wilson Elementary, Miriam F. McCarthy Elementary, and the Walsh Middle School. These specific schools were selected for case study on the basis of the relative strength of the MCAS achievement of their students with special needs at grade levels 4, 7 and 8.¹⁸

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for students in grades 4, 7, and 8 in the academic year 2002-2003. These data were provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education (MA DOE) in a combined file containing student level MCAS data and profile data captured through the department's Student Information Management System (SIMS). These data were merged and quality checked by the MA DOE prior to analysis.

In the academic year 2002-2003, the Framingham Public Schools served 439 students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8. The proportion of students identified as special needs was higher than the statewide average at these grade levels. Nearly one-third of students in these grades received free or reduced lunch, a measure of family income, and were non-white. Both of these figures exceed statewide averages.

Framingham serves a diverse student body and nearly 16% of its students have only Limited English Proficiency (LEP), more than triple the statewide average. These data vary among the case study schools, in part due to district-wide programs that have been established at selected schools to serve either students with special needs or English language learners. School level data are presented later in this case study.

Profile Data

	Special Needs	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
District	22.6%	33.2%	32.1%	15.7%
Statewide	17.6%	29.4%	25.2%	4.4%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4, 7, and 8 students.

As the following tables display, among students with special needs, the district profile of student disability types is generally consistent with statewide averages for grade 4, 7, and 8.¹⁹ With regard to student placement, the proportion of students with special needs who are educated in a substantially separate classroom environment is 26.9%. This is higher than the statewide average of 17%, but lower than the average for the 33 districts with urban characteristics examined through this study, which had a combined mean of 30%.

¹⁸ A full explanation of the methodology used for site selection in this study is available in the companion report, *A Study of MCAS Achievement and Urban Special Education: Data Analysis and Site Selection Methodology*.

¹⁹ Only the four most common disability types statewide are included in this table. In total there are twelve disability type categories.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/ Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others
District	44.4%	6.3%	7.6%	7.2%	34.5%
Statewide	50.6%	5.8%	6.1%	6.6%	30.9%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate	Outside Placement
District	7.3%	34.7%	21.7%	26.9%	7.7%
Statewide	14.2%	49.7%	11.9%	17.0%	5.6%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for Framingham Public Schools’ students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8, excluding those in outside placements.²⁰ This analysis includes the results of English language arts and math examinations administered in 2002 and 2003, and shows actual scores, with comparisons to predicted scores. Predicted scores are statistically adjusted to account for community demographic factors, which have been shown to be key predictors of student performance on MCAS.

Overall, these data indicate that Framingham’s students with special needs consistently exceeded their statistically predicted performance; and that they showed substantial improvement in performance from 2002 to 2003 at grade 4 and mixed progress at grades 7 and 8. The overall trends of relatively high student achievement in grade 4 and comparatively low performance on the grade 8 math exam mirror broader trends for all students statewide.

Overall, Framingham’s students with special needs showed better than average performance when compared to districts with similar community demography, which was the basis for selection of this district for case study. These performance data comparisons are presented and discussed in the companion to this report, *A Study of MCAS Achievement and Urban Special Education: Data Analysis and Site Selection Methodology*.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)
Grade 4 ELA					
2002	109	71%	71%	58	57
2003	113	85%	76%	70	61
Grade 4 Math					
2002	110	66%	59%	52	50
2003	113	77%	63%	62	53
Grade 7 ELA					
2002	126	90%	74%	70	60
2003	134	88%	79%	70	63
Grade 8 Math					
2002	102	41%	28%	38	33
2003	140	33%	26%	34	34

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4, 7, and 8 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements

²⁰ MCAS analyses developed through this study omitted students educated in outside (out of district) placements. This decision was consistent with the study objectives to assess the performance of students educated within the district through its schools, and to identify salient practices in place within those schools.

District-Level Findings

Overview of Promising Practices

Intensive interviews with district office and school-building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that several district-level factors have contributed to the success of the Framingham Public Schools with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall and among students with special needs in particular. The district-level practices most frequently identified as critical to this success include:

- **Substantial commitment to and support of curriculum alignment with the MA Frameworks.** District leaders report that Framingham made an early commitment to alignment with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. The district employs Curriculum Resource Specialists who work actively with elementary and middle school leaders and their staff to support and monitor curriculum alignment.
- **A pro-active hiring process and high retention standards ensure quality of staff.** Framingham begins its teacher recruitment several months in advance of expected vacancies. As a result, schools are able to hire during the spring for positions the following fall. The district works with Framingham State College, which provides student teachers who may continue as staff after completing college. The district retains its new teachers and grants professional status only to those who are proficient in their jobs.
- **A strong culture of inclusion and ownership of students with special needs.** The district has been working to create greater inclusion for several years and has taken a variety of steps to support it. It currently has five “inclusion schools” at the elementary level, which meet the needs of students district-wide who are best served in a full inclusion setting. The district has increased special education and social work support staff and developed district-wide programs to reduce out of district placement.
- **Professional development to reduce the barriers between regular and special education.** Over the past several years, the district has used professional development to reduce the barriers between regular and special education. It uses grant money to bring these staff together for training in specific programs and instructional techniques. District leaders feel that common training facilitates inclusion and effective teaching, particularly to students with special needs.

District-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the district and school-building staff interview processes probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district. Following are summaries of district-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

Key district leaders have a wealth of experience both as practitioners and policy specialists. Dr. Chris Martes became Superintendent of Schools in 2003, following several years as the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Superintendents’ Association. He has previously served as a superintendent, director of personnel, principal, and teacher in other Massachusetts school districts. Pamela Kaufmann has been Director of Special Education in Framingham since 1997. Before that, she served the Massachusetts Department of Education for twenty years, completing her tenure as State Director of Special Education. Building-level leaders and staff frequently noted elements of the district-wide strategy to support curriculum, inclusion, and hiring when discussing practices supportive of the MCAS achievement of students with special needs.

Curriculum and Instruction

Leaders report that Framingham was quick to embrace and align with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Notably, the district has staff with specific responsibility for supporting and maintaining curriculum alignment at the building and classroom level. These Curriculum Resource Specialists—one each for math, science, and English language arts/social studies—work with the district’s elementary and middle schools to support alignment. These specialists conduct regular visits to each school, during which they review school-level

programs for alignment with the Frameworks, answer staff questions, and make recommendations for professional development. When asked to comment on the level of control the district exerts on building-level instruction, one principal said, “we’re told what to teach, not how to teach it.” This principal reported that she was very comfortable with this arrangement and that it supported curriculum alignment at the classroom level.

According to leaders, the district has taken aggressive steps to provide special needs students with appropriate program resources and with full access to the general curriculum. One key program resource is the Wilson Reading program, which is used in all of the district’s elementary schools. This program is designed for instruction of students with special needs, and the program and related training are offered both to special education and regular classroom teachers. Another change that has guaranteed equal access to program resources and the general curriculum was made several years ago. Prior to Pamela Kaufmann’s tenure, curriculum specialists would not routinely purchase copies of regular education curriculum tools and materials for special education staff or invite them to related in-service trainings. Such materials and training are now routinely offered to all teaching staff.

Finally, the district has invested substantially in co-teaching resources to support its full inclusion model in five K-5 elementary schools, phasing the program in one grade level per year. Acknowledging that the co-teaching model is resource intensive and may not be appropriate for all students, the district—which offers school choice—plans to offer the full inclusion model in a limited number of buildings. However, partial inclusion takes place at all schools. This strategy will help the district to create economies of scale and to capitalize on the strengths of staff in each building. Counterbalancing the up-front costs of the co-teaching model, leaders report that the inclusion model prevents out of district student placements, resulting in cost savings.

Personnel and Professional Development

District leaders believe Framingham is at the leading edge with regard to the effective and timely recruitment of staff in urban or quasi-urban districts. The district’s Director of Human Resources and Director of Special Education begin the recruitment process several months in advance of expected vacancies. As a result, schools are able to hire during the spring for positions the following fall. For example, one school reported that it received 300 applications this spring for five teaching positions opening next fall. All candidates are pre-screened and rated by district staff, then forwarded for review and hiring by the schools. The district invests in mentoring its new teachers, and reported that its schools are encouraged to grant professional status only to those teachers who prove to be effective.

From the beginning of her tenure, the Director of Special Education pursued grant money to support professional development focused on improving the curriculum and instruction of students with special needs. Key training initiatives were related to literacy (Wilson Reading), behavioral issues and classroom management, co-teaching in an inclusion setting, and working with children with autism. Other initiatives pursued in the past three years include training in differentiated instruction, closing the achievement gap, and math instruction. These programs are made available to all teaching staff.

Professional development has also been used as a means to break down the silos of regular and special education. Specifically, teaching staff have been brought together for training in the specific programs and instructional techniques listed above. District leaders feel this common training has reinforced access to the general curriculum, facilitated inclusion, and supported effective instruction of students with special needs.

Use of Assessment Data and MCAS Testing Accommodations

Leaders indicated that student level assessment data play a key role in supporting classroom instruction and are critical to the early identification of students who may be at risk of falling behind academically. At the district level, basic analyses of MCAS data have been used to inform district strategy concerning the emphasis and resources placed on particular elements of the curriculum. Most recently, math has emerged as a district focus,

based on comparisons of student achievement on the ELA and math MCAS examinations that showed such a focus was warranted.

As was the case with all of the case study districts, accommodations are commonly used to support access to the general curriculum and MCAS achievement among students with special needs. The district provides direct support to its schools through Evaluation Team Coordinators, who serve multiple schools as chairs of Evaluation Team Meetings. According to one principal, they play a notable role in maintaining the integrity of the testing process by reviewing and assessing the appropriateness of each proposed accommodation.

Opportunities for Improvement

District leaders were asked how they might continue to improve the MCAS achievement of students with special needs. To that end, they noted:

- Although the district has made considerable progress, it is still working to fully unify the curriculum across all buildings.
- The state should continue and fully fund its Circuit Breaker program for special education cost reimbursements. This is critical to the overall fiscal health of the public education system.
- Budget constraints limit the ability of the district to pursue several key programs or initiatives. These include the ability to:
 - Perform comprehensive MCAS data analysis, as the district lacks a specialist on staff who can perform complex sub-population performance analyses.
 - Offer after school MCAS preparation/remediation courses, which are no longer funded.
 - Implement the inclusion model to the desired extent within the district.
- The district serves students with 60 different native languages. While it has hired or has access to more specialized staff than it once did, the district also recognizes the difficulty of properly identifying special needs within the ELL student population.

Woodrow Wilson Elementary School

The Woodrow Wilson Elementary School is a grade K through 5, Title I elementary school in the Framingham Public School District. It had an enrollment of 484 students at the close of the 2002-2003 academic year. Wilson is a community school that is located in one of the poorest and most ethnically diverse sections of town. It is a bilingual education school that offers sheltered English classrooms to English Language Learners (ELL).

The building also contains district-wide programs that serve students with special needs. These include a combined K-1 classroom for children with autism, as well as classrooms for students with substantial language delays. Students in these substantially separate classrooms receive language arts and math instruction in the regular classroom. Inclusion is supported by special education staff who co-teach with regular classroom teachers. The school is also beginning to implement the district's full inclusion model, beginning with a kindergarten class in 2003-2004.

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for students in grade 4 in the academic year 2002-2003. In that year, the Framingham Public Schools served 155 students with special needs in grade 4 and the Wilson Elementary School served 12 of those students.

The proportion of grade 4 students identified with special needs within the Wilson Elementary School was 16.2%—substantially lower than the district average for this grade level. Nearly 60% of these students received free or reduced lunch, well above the district average. The proportion of non-white students was consistent with district averages; however, over one-fourth of the Wilson Elementary School's grade 4 students were ELL. Portuguese is the most common native language among these students.

Profile Data

	Special Needs	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
School	16.2%	58.1%	31.1%	25.7%
District	23.5%	35.7%	33.7%	18.0%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4 students.

The disability type and placement of Wilson Elementary School students with special needs were examined and compared to district averages. As at many urban schools, the small grade level cohort size and the use of selected schools as sites for district wide programs targeted to specific student sub-groups resulted in distributions that did not closely match overall district profiles, particularly with regard to disability type. In some instances, data were not reported, to protect cohorts of fewer than five students. This was the case at Wilson Elementary School, where only a very limited presentation of disability type data is possible.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/ Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others (includes NR)
School	NR	NR	-	-	37.5%
District	52.7%	8.7%	5.3%	4.7%	28.6%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grade 4. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

With regard to student placement, data for the Wilson Elementary School data showed no grade 4 students in substantially separate classroom environments. While elements of these data were not reported, at least 83% of these students were educated outside the regular classroom for less than 25% of the school day, compared with approximately 52% of grade 4 students with special needs across the district.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate
School	NR	83.3%	NR	0%
District	10.3%	41.9%	17.4%	30.3%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grade 4. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents ELA and math MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for the Wilson Elementary School's grade 4 students with special needs. Overall, data indicate that these students substantially exceeded their statistically predicted performance in 2002 and 2003, and that they demonstrated substantial improvement in performance from 2002 to 2003 on both the ELA and math exams.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)	
Grade 4 ELA						
	2002	11	75%	64%	60	51
	2003	12	100%	71%	94	58
Grade 4 Math						
	2002	11	67%	52%	52	45
	2003	12	92%	61%	69	51

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements, as their results are not reported at the individual school level.

Overview of Promising Practices

Extensive interviews with district office and school-building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that, in addition to the previously discussed district practices, several school-level factors have contributed to the success of the Woodrow Wilson Elementary School with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall and among students with special needs in particular.

The school-level practices most frequently identified by leaders and staff as critical to the recent success of the school's students with special needs include the following:

- **A positive school climate that nurtures and believes in its children** Staff described a school where morale is high, people work as a team, and staff have high expectations for all children. Staff comments suggest they feel a particular commitment to their student population and believe they can make a positive impact on students' lives. The principal exudes warmth in his dealings with students and has established a safe, caring environment.
- **Professional development that has put staff “on the same page” in curriculum and instruction.** Staff consistently reported that they share common strategies, philosophy, and language concerning instruction. They attributed this cohesiveness to carefully targeted professional development with a school-wide focus. Staff noted that this focus extends to the curriculum as well, with literacy and math curricula that are vertically aligned and a common understanding among staff that MCAS achievement is everyone's responsibility.
- **A focus on and commitment to inclusion in English language arts and math.** Literacy and math instruction have priority status in the school, and a block scheduling structure assures students are not distracted from instruction in these subjects. In most cases, students with special needs receive literacy and math instruction in the regular classroom. In this inclusion model, regular and special education teachers function as co-teachers, working with flexible groups of students that are defined by instructional needs, rather than IEP status. Staff noted that additional time is made for independent reading in the early morning between breakfast and the start of the school day.
- **Use of data to drive instruction.** Staff reported the use of a variety of assessments to benchmark and monitor student literacy, and, to a lesser extent, math achievement. They noted that these tools have become more refined and effective in recent years. Assessment is viewed as critical to early identification of at-risk students as well as to teachers' ability to modify instruction at the individual and group levels. The school's Title I Literacy Coordinator was reported to play a key role in the assessment process, analyzing findings at the student, classroom, and building level.
- **Special resources that have supported staff development and common planning time.** In addition to being a Title I school, Wilson received special funding that allowed the principal to hire permanent substitutes to come in for a full day, twice a week. These resources allow grade level staff to participate in on-site professional development programs together and to conduct peer observations. They have also increased the common planning time available to staff. Staff widely identified this time as “invaluable” and critical to school-wide coordination and the sharing of best practices.

School-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the staff interview process probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district and school. Following are summaries of school-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

Principal Robin Welch came to the Woodrow Wilson Elementary School six years ago, shortly after the construction of a new school building. According to Welch, the old school's enrollment consisted primarily of minority and economically disadvantaged students. The old building's poor condition, longtime status as a low performing school, and student demography compelled the district to adopt intra-district choice. In this new, competitive environment, the challenge before the principal was clear; to build confidence within the community and among staff that McCarthy Elementary was not only a state of the art building, but an effective school where staff and students are expected to succeed.

Six years later, Principal Welch's vision for the school appears to be firmly embedded in his staff. Throughout the interview process, staff noted the underdog status of their school and their students, and expressed their willingness to go the extra mile to help students succeed. They also described an immense affection between students and staff, particularly the principal. Staff emphasized that Principal Welch's "no excuses" approach to education requires a commitment to high standards, but also invites an open exchange of ideas and permission to take risks on behalf of students. They also noted a strong culture of collaboration within the building and the camaraderie that comes with the principal's belief in school-wide accountability for performance.

Culture and Climate

"We don't lose teachers and that's part of our story." This teacher's comment was echoed many times during a day of on-site staff interviews. Staff explained that the culture and climate of Wilson Elementary School is a critical element of its MCAS success. Teachers, even one who entered the school reluctantly, were adamant that the Wilson School is where they belong and that they love working there. The contributing factors cited include the great camaraderie and collaboration among staff, as well as the belief that they could help students from the most economically challenged part of Framingham to succeed educationally.

This commitment, camaraderie, and belief in the ability of their students to succeed, seemed to fuel the school's response to the label "Under-performing" that was attached to it after disappointing MCAS ELA achievement scores in 2002. At that time, Principal Walsh said, "The rating doesn't reflect the reality of the situation. It doesn't represent where we are now. We had one bad year."²¹ To staff of the school, the label was taken as a challenge to do better. Accordingly, they worked to improve, with apparent success. Two years later, the school was invited to apply for status as a COMPASS School, awarded by the Massachusetts DOE to schools that demonstrate significant improvement in ELA and math MCAS performance.

Woodrow Wilson Elementary School now resides in a beautiful facility. Complementing this, interview findings suggest that staff love their work, are eager to collaborate, and have embraced high standards for all students. With a positive physical environment and staff culture in place, Principal Welch believes that students find a stability, predictability and warmth that support their success.

The other critical element in Principal Welch's plan to maintain a positive school culture was to install a clear and effective approach to student discipline. During interviews, he described his attempt to shift the emphasis from punishment to reward by replacing the Detention Room with a Reward Room, and granting grade and school-wide behavior awards each week. At the same time, he implemented a Responsible Decision Making (RDM) program that holds students accountable for their behavior. Through RDM he monitors rule infractions at the student level and, after the first offense, he discusses the decisions that led to the problem with the student. The student's family is also notified. Escalating consequences come with each subsequent infraction. The principal believes student discipline has improved as a result of these programs and proudly noted that students with special needs are less likely to present behavioral problems than are other students.

²¹ Metrowest Daily News. *Wilson School Fails MCAS Criteria*. November 26, 2002

Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

Wilson Elementary School staff expressed a strong commitment to the use of student assessment data and related that assessment results drive instruction within the building. A review of the building's School Improvement Plan (SIP) reflects an emphasis on both MCAS and other standardized student assessments as the basis for establishing and monitoring progress against system priorities. Staff frequently cited the SIP as a guiding document that keeps them focused on the school's strategic priorities.

Both regular classroom and special education staff touted early literacy assessment as critical to the identification of students who are at risk of falling behind academically and may have special needs. Student assessment begins at the start of kindergarten with an internally developed Title I Assessment, which is again administered in November. This and other assessments conducted during a student's career at Wilson Elementary School enable teachers to customize instruction to the needs of the individual student and to monitor the student's ongoing progress against goals.

Within the school, literacy assessment appears to be more formalized than assessment in other areas, including mathematics. Students at all grade levels, K through 5, participate in any of a number of literacy assessments, including standardized tools, such as the Gates McGinitie Reading Comprehension Test, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and Flynt Cooter, as well as locally designed tools. MCAS is the primary formal assessment tool used by the school for math assessment, but additional systems are under development since the hiring of a Math Specialist through Title I in 2003.

Curriculum and Instruction

According to school staff, the curriculum used at the Wilson Elementary School is fully aligned with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and is vertically aligned to ensure a coherent approach to instruction. This alignment is supported and monitored by school staff, including the principal and Title I Literacy and Math Specialists, as well as district-level Curriculum Resource Specialists in the areas of math, science, and English language arts/social studies. The school, like many others, has, for several years, placed a tremendous emphasis on developing literacy skills and has only more recently begun to increase the resources devoted to math instruction, as evidenced by the hiring of a Title I Math Specialist in 2003.

The school schedule is designed to reflect and support the focus of the curriculum on literacy and math, as well as to ensure that special needs pullouts and other intervention services do not interfere with access to those subjects in the regular classroom for all students. The schedule consists of four distinct blocks of time. Each day begins with an Intervention Block, during which a variety of support services are provided to students, whether in the regular classroom or another location. These support services are available to all students who require intensive support, including, but not limited to, students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs). This block effectively reduces the disruption caused by pullout services during the three subsequent blocks, which are devoted to specific subjects.

Of the three teaching blocks, those devoted to literacy and—to a lesser extent—mathematics, are given special status as “Sacred Blocks.” In theory, students receiving instruction during the Sacred Blocks are not diverted from the classroom. The exception to this rule is that a student's IEP may stipulate that the student receive instruction from a special education teacher in a different educational setting. The consensus among staff was that this block schedule works and contributes substantially to their ability to focus on literacy instruction, in particular.

In most cases, during the Sacred Blocks, special education teachers and their students come into regular classrooms, including English Language Learner (ELL) classrooms. In this inclusion setting, special education teachers co-teach or otherwise support the regular classroom teacher. Students receive instruction in mixed groups based on their personal learning needs. Students with special needs have their own desks in the classroom, adding to the feeling that they are part of the regular classroom environment.

Classroom teachers reported that the block scheduling used at Wilson provides an efficient and coherent instructional environment that is particularly beneficial to students with special needs. They also noted that average class sizes of 18 to 20 have benefited students, although it was reported that ELL class sizes are highly variable and sometimes grow larger than is acceptable under Framingham Public School class size guidelines over the course of the school year²². A number of staff also recognized the efforts of the school's Literacy Coordinator, whom they consider a driving force in supporting instruction, and the Math Coordinator, who is a more recent, but very welcome, resource.

Staff cited other factors as supportive of the coherent instructional environment at Wilson Elementary. They reported that both instructional and support staff were participating in on-site professional development that helped them to develop shared instruction philosophy, strategies, and language. They have also enjoyed additional grade-level planning time and the opportunity to conduct peer observations over the past two years. At the same time, common planning time remains, in some case, insufficient, particularly the time available for regular education or ELL Teachers to meet with resource room staff who frequently work with students in multiple grade levels.

Notably, much of the additional in-school time available for professional development, common planning, and peer observation is owed to a grant made available when the school was identified as "under-performing" two years ago. This money was used, in part, to fund permanent substitutes to come in for a full day, twice a week. These substitutes provide staff with the flexibility they need in order to participate in these activities. Staff widely identified this time as "invaluable", but expressed concern that these activities will be discontinued when the grant expires at the end of the current academic year. It was noted that this money should be set aside to support collaboration and skill building in all schools.

Finally, Principal Welch has emphasized a school wide approach to curriculum and instruction. Accordingly, staff of all grade levels related their responsibility for student learning, as measured by MCAS achievement. Staff noted that this does not mean very young children are receiving test preparation, but rather that the curriculum is vertically aligned to support mastery of the skills that are tested through the MCAS exam. Students in grades 3 and 4 are exposed to more specific preparation for the MCAS examinations, including practice questions, open-response scoring rubrics, test taking strategies, and targeted after school programming. Leading up to the test, practice becomes part of the daily routine.

Professional Development

As previously noted, staff report that professional development opportunities have helped them to develop shared instructional strategies, philosophy and language. Among the training referred to by teachers were several literacy related programs, including Wilson Reading, Rigby Literacy Strategies, and instruction in the Four Blocks provided by Gretchen Courtney. They also noted on-site programs to improve math instruction and Social Competency Training provided by Wellesley College, which some staff felt has helped them to address children's reactions to difference, reducing the stigma that may be attached to a student's unique personal attributes.

Parent Involvement

Several staff noted that it can be difficult to maintain ongoing parent involvement, but described parent participation in early intervention program meetings (performed by a School Evaluation Team or SET) and IEP Team meetings to be very good. Resource Room and ELL teachers gave much of the credit for this success to the school's psychologist/guidance counselor/social worker, who performs outreach to parents and provides a vital connection between the family and the school. One parent of a student with special needs noted that it was a special education teacher's assistance that expedited her child's formal evaluation for SPED services.

²² In these cases, classroom teachers usually receive additional support through the hiring of teaching assistants or aides.

Regular education teachers noted that the school has also tried to engage parents through homework assignments. For example, certain math assignments are accompanied by instructions for parents to help them work effectively on schoolwork with their children. This strategy is in response to the concern that parents' lack of exposure to the concepts found in homework creates a barrier to their participation in the student's school life. These efforts are also supported by Math Nights for parents who are interested in learning more about the math curriculum. The school also provides other Parent Enrichment Classes through its Parent Resource Center; however, these classes were not specifically identified or discussed during staff or parent interviews.

Concerns and Opportunities for Improvement

At the conclusion of the interview process, leaders and staff were asked to relate any concerns that they might have and note any ways in which the achievement of students with special needs might be improved. Following are the most salient concerns and opportunities expressed during interviews at the Wilson Elementary School:

- Two parents of students with special needs were interviewed and both related that parents lack awareness of the special education process, particularly before a formal evaluation is initiated. In a worst-case scenario this can form a barrier to access to services.
- Some staff are concerned that tight budgets and intra-district school choice may undermine the school's ability to maintain class sizes in the 18 to 20 student range. Class size was of particular concern to ELL teachers. They also want to protect building-level services that support inclusion.
- Some staff suggested that the state should mandate and fund full-time pre-school and kindergarten programs, which they feel would support better long-term student outcomes.
- Until the current year, the school had a bi-lingual special education teacher who could work effectively with ELL students. While other staff have worked hard to replace her, ELL teachers suggest that a bi-lingual special education teacher is critical to early identification and intervention with ELL students.
- While MCAS is good in terms of creating high standards and school accountability, it may not be a fair test based on deficits in experiential knowledge suffered by poor children. It is not that these students cannot learn and achieve, but that they may require extra resources to support experiential enrichment.
- Leadership noted that year-to-year comparisons used in No Child Left Behind's Annual Yearly Progress requirements ignore legitimate cohort issues that create performance variability. As a solution, it was suggested that the Department of Education test and report student scores as they move through the system –a value-added approach to assessing educational effectiveness.

McCarthy Elementary School

The Miriam F. McCarthy Elementary School is a grade K through 5, Title I school in the Framingham Public School District. It had an enrollment of 506 students at the close of the 2002-2003 academic year. Designated a School of Literary Arts, “the impetus behind much of its instruction is the belief that all students can become skilled, life-long readers and writers.”²³

McCarthy Elementary offers district-wide programs that serve students with special needs. These programs include self-contained classrooms for students in grades K-3 who have emotional or behavioral disabilities, and self-contained classrooms for students in grades 3-5 who are substantially language delayed. The school also offers sheltered English classrooms to English Language Learners (ELL) in grades K-1. The school also offers full inclusion classes in grade K-3 and will add grade 4 and 5 inclusion classes on a rolling basis over the next two years.

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for students in grade 4 in the academic year 2002-2003. In that year, the Framingham Public Schools served 155 students with special needs in grade 4 and the McCarthy Elementary School served 28 of those students.

The proportion of grade 4 students identified with special needs within the McCarthy Elementary School was 34.6%, which was substantially higher than the district average for this grade level. This high proportion is a result of the location of district wide programs for students with special needs within this school. The proportions of its students who received free or reduced lunch and who were non-white were consistent with district averages. The school did not have programs for English language learners at grade 4 at the time of this study.

Profile Data

	Special Needs	Free/Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
School	34.6%	33.3%	33.3%	0%
District	23.5%	35.7%	33.7%	18.0%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4 students.

The disability type and placement of McCarthy Elementary School students with special needs were examined and compared to district averages. As at many schools, the small grade level cohort size and the use of selected schools as sites for district-wide programs targeted to specific student sub-groups resulted in distributions that did not closely match overall district profiles, particularly with regard to disability type. At McCarthy Elementary School, the student population was skewed toward students with specific learning disabilities. With regard to the “All Others” category, data were not reported, due to a cohort size of fewer than five.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/ Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others (includes NR)
School	82.1%	NR	0%	0%	17.9%
District	52.7%	8.7%	5.3%	4.7%	28.6%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grade 4. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not released due to cohort size of < 5.

²³ McCarthy School Web Site Welcome. <http://www.Framingham.k12.ma.us/mccathy/principa.htm>

With regard to student placement, the McCarthy Elementary School profile shows 32% of grade 4 students with special needs in substantially separate classroom environments, which is consistent with district averages. Overall, 39% of students were educated outside the regular classroom for less than 25% of the school day, compared with approximately 42% of grade 4 students with special needs across the district. Data in the “General Education Modified” and “Up to 25% Separated” categories were not reported, to protect the confidentiality of a cohort of less than five in one of these categories.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate
School	NR	NR	28.6%	32.1%
District	10.3%	41.9%	17.4%	30.3%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grade 4. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents ELA and math MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for the McCarthy Elementary School’s grade 4 students with special needs. Overall, data indicate that these students substantially exceeded their statistically predicted performance in 2003, and that they demonstrated substantial improvement in performance from 2002 to 2003 on both the ELA and math exams.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)	
Grade 4 ELA						
	2002	22	54%	75%	44	59
	2003	28	96%	76%	79	62
Grade 4 Math						
	2002	22	46%	62%	42	52
	2003	28	86%	66%	73	54

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements, as their results are not reported at the individual school level.

Overview of Promising Practices

Extensive interviews with district office and school-building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that, in addition to the previously discussed district practices, several school-level factors have contributed to the success of the McCarthy Elementary School with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall and among students with special needs in particular.

The school-level practices most frequently identified by leaders and staff as critical to the success of the school's students with special needs include the following:

- **A school culture that is embracing of students with special needs.** Staff reported that the school climate embraces all students and their unique learning styles and needs. Teachers' comfort and ability to work effectively with diverse learners was supported by at least two factors: the arrival of district programs for students with special needs several years ago; and the hiring of the current principal three years ago. The building has made a substantial commitment to full inclusion programming.
- **A well-aligned and supported curriculum.** Both district and building-level practices contribute to curriculum alignment with the State Frameworks, and provide ongoing monitoring and support to ensure that alignment is maintained in the classroom. District curriculum resource specialists make periodic visits to the school to support alignment and instruction. At the same time, building-based Title I literacy and math specialists, and the principal, monitor and support implementation of the curriculum.
- **Use of assessment data to drive instruction.** Staff reported that differentiated instruction is supported by periodic assessment in literacy and math. They also noted the rigor with which the principal approaches MCAS analysis and how effectively it is shared and discussed with staff. MCAS results are actively utilized to identify weaknesses and improve instructional practices and curriculum alignment.
- **A school-wide focus on MCAS preparation and achievement.** Staff noted that a vertically aligned curriculum is the foundation for MCAS success, but also reported a wide range of specific strategies that are implemented to support MCAS achievement, beginning in grade 3. Special education students receive substantial MCAS preparation and were observed to "work very hard" to pass the exam.
- **Close attention to personnel quality and deployment.** Mid-winter recruiting by district staff provides an ample number of qualified teaching candidates for vacancies. College intern programs help to identify and pre-screen additional candidates. Building staff conduct interviews and make hiring decisions each spring. Only effective teachers receive professional status. The principal carefully assigns staff to full inclusion classes, considering individuals' skills, style, and attitudes. Full inclusion and self-contained classrooms are staffed at such a level as to provide tremendous support to students.

School-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the staff interview process probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district and school. Following are summaries of school-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

Principal Joan Vodoklys is a certified special education teacher who began her tenure as principal of the McCarthy Elementary School three years ago. During interviews, staff lauded both her style and substance, with some describing her as the key to the school's success. Staff noted that McCarthy's designation as a Literary Arts School has taken on new life under her leadership, and that the school has enhanced its focus on the literary arts, with students actively engaged not only in writing, but in sharing their work in public forums, such as an ongoing poetry reading series at an area coffee house.

During interviews and a school tour, the principal shared her belief in the ability of students with special needs to achieve and master curriculum content, and expressed her great enthusiasm for the full inclusion model implemented within the school. At present, full inclusion classes are offered in grades K through 3, with plans to expand these classes to students in grades 4 and 5 over the course of the next two years. These inclusion classes and the two district-wide self-contained programs boast favorable staff to student ratios, which staff consider critical to program success.

In addition to directing substantial resources to the instruction of students with special needs, staff reported that Principal Vodoklys supports student success by maintaining a school-wide focus on achievement. She demonstrates substantial instructional leadership, analyzing student assessment data and observing classrooms on a regular basis to identify effective practices, which she then shares at school-wide staff meetings. In these meetings, she emphasizes the responsibility of every member of staff for the success of every student. Staff consistently reported that the principal has established an environment where teamwork can and does flourish, to the benefit of students.

Personnel

Like other schools in the district, McCarthy Elementary benefits from the district's pro-active approach to staff recruitment. The principal noted that she received approximately 300 applications this spring for five teaching vacancies next fall (all due to retirement). The school also hires student interns from Framingham State College, some of whom are offered positions after completing their training. Among the hiring criteria considered by the principal and her staff are a candidate's familiarity with MCAS, the State Curriculum Frameworks, and the curriculum tools in use at the school. This underscores the school's commitment to hiring staff who are prepared from "day one" to support student achievement.

Staff noted that leadership and a strong team environment support their success. New staff receive mentoring from building or, in the case of the literacy and math specialists, district staff. If a teacher is struggling, the principal develops an improvement plan with the teacher, and if a teacher proves to be ineffective, even after intervention and support, that teacher will not be granted professional status. Staff deployment is also aimed to encourage teacher and student success, as the teachers assigned to full inclusion classes are selected based on their affinity and effectiveness working in a team teaching environment with students with special needs.

Culture and Climate

McCarthy Elementary School is a state-of-the-art building—renovated within the past several years—that offers a bright and airy atmosphere. According to interviewees, the staff is imbued with a culture of teamwork and a belief that all students should feel equally valued and given every opportunity to succeed.

Staff reported that the school climate embraces all students and their unique learning styles and needs. Teachers expressed comfort in their ability to provide instruction to students with special needs, but some noted that this was not the case several years ago. For these staff, confidence and ability increased with the advent of district-wide programs that created greater opportunities to work with this student population. The hiring of the current principal three years ago, with her background in special education, was said to further the school-wide comfort and expertise in working with students with special needs.

Student discipline was not identified as a problem by staff, who, nonetheless, reported a proactive approach to behavior management. Within the school, Principal Vodoklys responds to and handles all disciplinary issues, and contacts the student's parent or guardian, as appropriate. She also meets with the school's guidance counselor and social worker once per week to review all of the discipline issues that occurred, and together they determine the responsible course of action for each issue.

Students who experience social/ emotional problems, such as getting along with others, making friends, or home issues, are referred to the guidance counselor who runs student groups that develop skills in the areas of

communication and media tion. The guidance counselor also assists the self-contained classrooms for students with emotional or behavioral disabilities, working with students when they exhibit signs of stress. The school social worker responds to the needs of students in the learning and language delay classrooms, and runs groups on social skills, anger management, and the transition to middle school. One SPED parent noted that the school uses a social awareness curriculum called Open Circle, which has helped her child to develop a better and more respectful attitude.

Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

Staff reported that periodic assessment in literacy and math assist in the identification of students' individual learning needs. Both formal and informal assessments were reported to play a role in identifying students who may be at risk of falling behind academically. With regard to formal assessments, staff most frequently referred to pre/post literacy assessments using the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) and pre/post math assessments utilizing an internally developed tool. Other non-specific references were made to grade-level national standard tests used to assess student learning.

Staff also emphasized the role that informal assessments play in assessing student performance. This was particularly true among staff of the learning and language-delayed classrooms, who noted that favorable class sizes made informal and highly personalized assessment possible. In this environment, they reported, teachers can present information to students, gauge response, and tailor instruction accordingly.

Staff consistently identified the principal as the school-level driver of MCAS analysis and strategy. MCAS data are used to reveal weaknesses in the curriculum and lesson planning. These data are then discussed at school-wide professional development days, where staff work together to identify the root causes of common mistakes and to identify more effective instructional approaches. Through these strategy sessions, the principal's vision of MCAS as a school-wide responsibility is brought to life and reinforced as an element of building culture.

Curriculum and Instruction

According to school staff, the curriculum used at the McCarthy Elementary School is fully aligned with the State Curriculum Frameworks and is vertically aligned to ensure a coherent approach to instruction. This alignment is supported and monitored by school staff, including the principal and Title I Literacy and Math Specialists, as well as district-level Curriculum Resource Specialists in the areas of math, science, and English language arts/social studies. Reflecting on the role of the district in curriculum development, the principal noted, "We are told what to teach, not how to teach it." True to its identity as a School of Literary Arts, McCarthy Elementary has placed a tremendous emphasis on developing student literacy for several years. More recently, it has increased the resources devoted to math instruction, as evidenced by the hiring of a Title I Math Specialist in September 2003.

Within the school, instruction is provided to students with special needs through full inclusion classes, as well as through self-contained classrooms and resource rooms, each of which offers inclusion for subjects other than literacy and math. While class sizes in the language-delayed classrooms were reported to be as low as 12, class sizes were more commonly noted to be 18 to 20. One combined grade-level resource room was reported to serve 30 students. According to staff, Title I support and aides mitigate class sizes and support small group instruction.

In general, special education teachers follow their students into the regular classrooms during inclusion time, which consists of the science, social studies, arts, and gym periods. Staff variously described their roles in these classrooms as ranging from co-teaching to serving as an aide to the regular classroom teacher, depending on the program and individual teaching styles. Staff emphasized that special education teachers worked with all students during inclusion time and that students with special needs are grouped with other students in accordance with their needs. According to staff of the learning and language-delayed classrooms, time in the regular classroom often requires highly differentiated instruction. Several staff noted that some teachers are more adept than others in providing differentiated instruction, and some urged that additional training be offered in this area.

McCarthy Elementary offers full inclusion classrooms to students grades K-3 and will add classrooms for students in grades 4 and 5 over the next two years. A regular classroom teacher, who is supported by an inclusion specialist and a classroom aide, leads these classes. These classrooms were observed to offer a student to staff ratio of approximately 5 to 1, and to utilize a flexible grouping strategy. The principal noted that she matches some of her best and most flexible teachers to these classrooms to ensure their success.

McCarthy Elementary School devotes substantial attention to MCAS preparation and staff noted a range of strategies to support achievement, beginning in grade 3. Above all, staff said that students—particularly those with special needs—should encounter no surprises when they take the MCAS. Accordingly, in addition to an aligned curriculum, students are exposed to practice tests, scoring rubrics, detailed reviews of past questions and answers, standard testing language, and targeted vocabulary and computation activities. The principal and curriculum specialists play an active role in developing and supporting the integration of these preparation activities into the classroom. Several staff noted that after school MCAS programs were discontinued in the past year due to the elimination of program funding.

When asked about the MCAS success of her students with special needs, one teacher emphasized that they take the test seriously and work very hard to pass. Special education staff also noted the importance of MCAS preparation and noted that they have a number of daily practices and supportive programs, such as Soaring Scores, that support student achievement. They related the critical role of accommodations in supporting student success and noted that students have benefited from clearer guidance that has allowed the school to use accommodations more effectively in recent years.

Professional Development

Staff noted a number of training opportunities at the district-level. These included new teacher mentoring programs, Wilson Reading training for special education teachers, crisis intervention training for guidance counselors and social workers, and a recent emphasis on professional development to enhance math instruction. The principal also confirmed the important role played by district curriculum resource specialists, who bring relevant professional development opportunities to the attention of staff on an ongoing basis, and also provide direct training related to elements of the district curriculum.

Staff also commented on professional development and knowledge diffusion that take place within the building. These programs generally relate very directly to the priorities established by building leadership. Among the workshops run by the principal this year, was one that demonstrated techniques for familiarizing students with MCAS vocabulary and another focused on implementing inclusion. It was also widely noted that she routinely conducts classroom observations, disseminates best practices that she observes, and actively coaches teachers who may require assistance.

In addition to the principal, other building staff play a role in professional development and knowledge diffusion. For example, the literacy coordinator provides workshops on how to conduct DRA assessments, and special education teachers are responsible for diffusing knowledge of Wilson Reading principles to their counterparts in the regular classroom.

Parent Involvement

Staff comments reflected a mixed feeling about the current level of parent involvement, particularly concerning the parents of students with special needs. The school reaches out to parents through special events, such as Reading Nights, monthly classroom newsletters, and other events and written communications. It also notifies and actively recruits parental participation in its early intervention and IEP Team meetings, with what was characterized as 90%-95% success. The school also employs a social worker whose job includes parent outreach, conducting home visits, and working to secure required signatures for students' IEPs. This member of staff spends at least one day per week in the community, connecting with parents.

Staff of one self-contained classroom noted that the school improvement council is very active, but that none of her students' parents are involved on it. This reflected a trend in staff comments, which related some disappointment that parents of students with special needs are not engaged enough.

Opportunities for Improvement

At the conclusion of the interview process, leaders and staff were asked to relate any concerns that they might have and note any ways in which the achievement of students with special needs might be improved. Following are the most salient concerns and opportunities expressed during interviews at the McCarthy Elementary School:

- Some staff noted that there is not enough scheduled time for special education staff to plan with other teachers, which may, in some instances, undermine the ability to co-teach effectively.
- Some staff reflected that while MCAS is a useful assessment tool, there is so much about a child that it does not measure.
- Some staff noted that the timing of MCAS sometimes creates problems. In one case, the concern was that the full curriculum must be covered before the test is administered, which can result in a loss of focus and direction during the weeks following the test. In another example, staff lamented that by the time results are available, the child is on to another class or another building, creating a barrier to problem remediation.
- One instructional leader expressed concern that the curriculum is overwhelming and does not afford teachers the opportunity to cover subjects in-depth, as would be preferred.
- Staff emphasized the benefits of MCAS preparation and accommodations, but were concerned that the school's after school MCAS program was no longer available to students due to a lack of state funding.
- Staff noted at least two specific professional development requirements that may have implications for working with students with special needs. These include the necessity for additional training in both differentiated instruction and conflict de-escalation for at least some staff.
- Special education staff related an interest in bringing SPED staff from across the district together to share resources and practices.

Walsh Middle School

The Walsh Middle School serves students in grades 6 through 8 and is one of three middle/junior high schools in the Framingham Public School District. It had an enrollment of 639 students at the close of the 2002-2003 academic year. The building receives students from the Barbieri, Dunning, and Hemenway elementary schools. Like other Framingham middle schools, it houses a district-wide program for students with special needs. In the case of Walsh, this program serves students with significant learning disabilities in a substantially separate classroom environment. These students were identified as generally two to three years below grade level in their academic functioning.

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for students in grade 7 and 8 in the academic year 2002-2003. In that year, the Framingham Public Schools served 284 students with special needs in grades 7 and 8, and the Walsh Middle School served 98 of those students. The proportion of grade 7 and 8 students with special needs within the school was 22.6%, which is close to the district average for those grades. The proportion of its students who received free or reduced lunch and who are ELL were well below district averages, while the percentage of students who were non-white was near average.

Profile Data

	Special Needs	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
School	22.6%	20.5%	28.8%	6.9%
District	22.1%	31.9%	31.3%	14.6%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all students in grades 7 and 8.

The disability type and placement of Walsh Middle School students with special needs were examined and compared to district averages. With regard to disability type, the overall profile of students was similar to that of the district, with a notable over representation of students with specific learning disabilities. With regard to the “Emotional Disturbed” and “All Others” categories, data were not reported, to protect the confidentiality of a cohort of fewer than five students in one of those categories.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/ Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Neurological/ Head Injury	All Others (includes NR)
School	54.6%	8.2%	NR	8.2%	NR
District	44.5%	6.0%	5.3%	9.2%	35.0%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grades 7 and 8. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

With regard to placement, the overall profile was very similar to that of the broader district in grades 7 and 8. Students in the “General Education Modified” and “Up to 25% Separated” categories were not reported, to protect the confidentiality of a cohort of fewer than five students in one of those categories.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate
School	NR	NR	24.0%	29.2%
District	6.8%	36.2%	27.6%	29.4%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grades 7 and 8. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for the Walsh Middle School's students with special needs on the grade 7 ELA and grade 8 math exams. These data indicate that its students with special needs substantially exceeded their statistically predicted performance on both exams in 2002 and 2003, and that they demonstrated consistently high performance on the 2002 and 2003 grade 7 ELA exams, while they experienced a decline in scores on the 2002 to 2003 grade 8 math exams.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)
Grade 7 ELA					
2002	23	93%	75%	74	63
2003	55	95%	78%	70	64
Grade 8 Math					
2002	23	57%	29%	43	33
2003	62	49%	33%	46	38

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafire. Includes grade 7 and 8 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements, as their results are not reported at the individual school level. Cohort size changes due to realignment of district wide programs for students with special needs.

Overview of Promising Practices

Extensive interviews with school-building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that several factors have contributed to the success of the Walsh Middle School with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall and among students with special needs, in particular.

The school-level practices most frequently identified by leaders and staff as critical to the recent success of the school's students with special needs include the following:

- **Assertive leadership with high expectations.** In his first year on the job, the principal, who has a background in special education, has re-organized aspects of the school, including class schedule and student discipline, in order to provide a more effective and efficient teaching and learning environment. Staff credited building leadership for setting high expectations for themselves and their students.
- **District and school-based structures support and monitor curriculum alignment.** Both district and building level practices contribute to curriculum alignment with the State Frameworks and provide ongoing monitoring and support to ensure that alignment is maintained in the classroom. District K to 8 curriculum resource specialists make periodic visits to the school to support alignment and instruction and assess vertical integration with the elementary schools. At the same time, building based department heads drive the curriculum, and support and manage instruction, including special education.
- **Use of data to improve curriculum and instruction.** District curriculum resource specialists and building-level department heads conduct analyses of MCAS and other assessment data to inform instruction and improve education strategies. These data are also used to guide professional development priorities at the school.
- **Positive school climate.** Elimination of disruptive behavior is a priority at the Walsh Middle School. A variety of strategies are used to accomplish this goal, including the provision of intensive behavior management services to the students that stand out as exceptionally disruptive.

School-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the staff interview process probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district and school. Following are summaries of school-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

Jay Cummings assumed the position of Walsh Middle School principal at the start of the 2003-2004 academic year, after serving as vice-principal of the school for the two previous years. He has substantial past experience as a special education teacher and program director. During interviews, he related a keen understanding of the role of school leadership and a willingness to innovate to improve his school. In his first year, he re-organized core elements of the school's operation, including its approaches to class schedules and student discipline, in order to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of the educational environment. In interviews, staff noted that the school does not have significant behavior problems and noted that this plays a role in student achievement.

Principal Cummings considers the mastery of standards based curriculum by all students to be the central goal of the school. As such, support of instruction is a key consideration within the building. The principal is supported in this task by department heads that have limited teaching schedules and play a vital role as instructional leaders and resources within the building. Principal Cummings believes the department heads, who provide oversight and support to both regular and special education teachers, reinforce equal access to the general curriculum. In his first year as principal, he has also made changes to provide students with special needs with greater access to curriculum resources, such as access to the buildings science labs, which was limited in past years. Finally, he discussed at length his personal commitment to inclusion, which is currently implemented in science and social studies classes.

When asked what has made his building successful in its work with students with special needs over the past few years, Principal Cummings was quick to note that he typically has up to 100 students with significant learning disabilities and that a key to success is control over the climate in the school. Accordingly, the building has employed a structure that separates students by grade level and integrates all students within each grade level—including those in substantially separate classrooms—in grade level activities to reduce the sense of difference. Even with this structural support in place, Cummings noted that he has been actively working to reduce the negative affects of language (i.e., the “SPED homeroom”) that suggests difference within the building.

Personnel

For the past few years, the Walsh Middle School has utilized department heads who, along with district level curriculum resource specialists, drive and support curriculum and instruction. Department heads have limited teaching responsibilities, which allows them to mentor teachers, monitor curriculum alignment, assist in teacher evaluations, conduct student assessments, and analyze data, including MCAS. The department head system was credited with improving and driving instruction, and allowing the principal greater flexibility to address other priorities.

Walsh Middle School also has a special education department head who functions in a capacity similar to the district Team Evaluation Coordinators who serve as coordinators for special education in the district’s elementary schools. The responsibilities of this department head are unique within the building and include chairing all Individual Education Plan (IEP) Team Meetings, notifying parents of special education meetings and activities, assisting in the identification of appropriate testing and classroom accommodations, and drafting or revising student IEPs, as appropriate.

One other special consideration was noted with regard to school personnel. Given the increasing population of students who are English Language Learners (ELL), the school has hired a vice principal who speaks both Spanish and Portuguese, and has several staff, including school social workers, who are bilingual.

Culture and Climate

Principal Cummings noted that during his tenure in Framingham, district administration has always communicated clear expectations of high student achievement, but allowed building leaders to run their schools in a decentralized manner to encourage multiple paths to meeting educational objectives. Walsh Middle School leaders emulate this approach, communicating expectations of high achievement to both regular and special education teachers, but also affording them some latitude in developing their own approaches to meeting educational goals. This did not go unnoticed by staff, who frequently credited building and district leadership for setting high standards for student achievement.

In interviews, teachers described a school with a positive and professional school culture, and mentioned a “great open spirit” among staff. In fact, the structure of the school is designed to reinforce opportunities for collaboration. Each grade level is organized into two teams, each including a teacher of math, science, English language arts, social studies, and a special education teacher. The addition of the special education staff to the grade level teams facilitates effective inclusion and access to the general curriculum for students with special needs. Teams may also draw upon the resources of school social workers, guidance counselors, or other staff. Teams meet often, usually daily, to discuss academic issues.

Principal Cummings places great emphasis on the school climate and staff described a middle school where discipline issues are well managed. They also noted that students with special needs are no more likely than other students to exhibit disruptive behavior. A key element of the school’s behavior management strategy is a Resiliency Program that offers intensive services to the students who most frequently cause disruptions. This program brings students together with guidance, social work, and other support staff for weekly meetings to discuss issues that affect student behavior. Through these meetings, behavioral contracts and other interventions are developed.

The principal believes that dealing proactively with the most disruptive students helps to keep them in school and staff agreed that the intervention improves the overall climate in the building. At the same time, staff acknowledged that building level support services play an important role in maintaining the school culture. Guidance counselors, the school psychologist, and social workers are involved in day-to-day academic life. They work with all students, teachers, and parents as needed to solve problems and guidance counselors meet regularly with teams of teachers and work on student issues.

Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

Data analysis is conducted at both the district and school level. District staff conducts an initial analysis of MCAS data, and then meet with on-site with staff from each school for a half-day discussion of the data. From there, school department heads and the K-8 curriculum resource specialists conduct more detailed analysis at the building level. MCAS data are considered in light of the State Curriculum Frameworks and each of the five strands is carefully studied to determine whether weak links exist in curriculum at the building level. In some cases they have found that curriculum content is adequate, but that course sequencing covers critical material too late in the school year for it to support MCAS achievement.

The principal describes the data analysis as a two step process, the initial analysis and follow up process and planning time. Previous MCAS tests are used to inform instruction and shape teaching. For example, open response questions have been targeted as an area that needs more work at the school. Data analysis is also used, at least in part, to identify areas for professional development. For example, the math department was asked to plan professional development around the findings of data analysis.

The Walsh School uses other assessment data in addition to MCAS. For example, the math department uses internally developed pre- and post-tests to assess student skills and progress during the school year. With regard to literacy assessment, a nationally recognized assessment tool, Gates-McGinnity, is used to identify reading proficiency.

Curriculum and Instruction

District curriculum resource specialists and building department heads drive instruction at the building level, supporting curriculum alignment. In this way, accountability for curriculum alignment is defined and monitored. Curriculum and instruction are further supported at the grade level by a daily fifty-minute common planning time that is built into the schedule of most teachers, including special education staff. The purpose of this common planning time is to coordinate and refine instruction, and problem solve, as needed.

The vast majority of the students with special needs who attend the Walsh Middle School are in a district wide program that serves approximately 100 students with significant learning disabilities. These students are generally two to three years below grade level in English language arts (ELA) and math, and receive the majority of their instruction in substantially separate classrooms. Instruction in social studies and science classes is provided in an inclusion setting, with the assistance of teachers' aides. Notably, the school does not currently offer English or math to students with special needs in an inclusion setting.

As a former special education teacher, the principal related a desire to move to inclusion in ELA and math; however, he believes his staff will require additional training in differentiated instruction before they can adequately support the needs of these learners in these subjects, where foundation skills are critical to grade-level success. In contrast, he noted that social studies and science are generally less dependent on foundation skills; therefore his staff can effectively support inclusion of students with special needs in these subjects.

Staff reported that substantial effort is made to support student success on MCAS. For students with special needs and their teachers, this means that they are expected to "work to the absolute top of their ability." This statement reflects the principal's belief that all students should be pushed to master the curriculum, although

acknowledged that some are years behind grade level and will struggle to pass. The school creates an improvement plan for all students, whether special needs or not, who score in the warning category.

Teachers prepare students for the content and format they will encounter on the ELA and math MCAS exams by administering past versions of the tests, a practice that staff feel makes students more comfortable with the exams. Students identified as behind grade level receive more intensive MCAS preparation through ELA and math pullout classes and other remedial programs. Notably, after years of instructional emphasis on literacy, the district and school substantially increased emphasis on math instruction during the 2002-2003 school year.

According to staff interviews, special education students receive appropriate MCAS accommodations, in accordance with their IEPs. During the IEP process, the necessity of each proposed accommodation is discussed and those that are clearly indicated are formalized in the IEP. Standard accommodations are routinely used in the classroom and on MCAS tests. Alternate assessments are not used at Walsh Middle School.

Finally, staff noted that the school makes use of special resources to enrich students' lives through after school programs. These resources include Citizens School program, as well as programming offered by the local YMCA and Mass 20/20.

Professional Development

The school wide priorities for professional development are developed primarily by building leaders and are driven by instructional needs, identified in part through analysis of past MCAS results, as well as other student level assessments. District and building leaders noted that recent years have brought progress in special education teachers' access to the professional development and materials provided to regular education teachers. This is a key element of the plan to further reduce the institutional barriers that still exist within the district and at the Walsh Middle School. Principal Cummings is also offering additional workshops to improve teacher readiness to provide differentiated literacy and math instruction, which facilitate a greater degree of inclusion in those subjects.

Parent Involvement

Staff noted that it is sometimes difficult to obtain parent participation in IEP meetings. However, they also reported that the school is proactive with regard to parent outreach and that it does whatever it can to support parent participation in IEP meetings. This support sometimes takes the form of providing taxi service or sending guidance or social work staff to pick up parents who lack transportation. The school has also recruited a bilingual vice principal, as well as teachers and social workers, to facilitate and encourage communication with family members who are not native English speakers.

Although these are positive indications, the principal also said that the school is working to rebuild or strengthen its parent relationships. As part of this effort he has initiated a "coffee with the principal" program, through which he can begin to build these relationships and identify opportunities for greater parent engagement.

Concerns and Opportunities for Improvement

At the conclusion of the interview process, staff were asked to relate any concerns that they might have and note ways in which the achievement of students with special needs might be improved. Following are the most frequently expressed concerns and opportunities at Walsh Middle School.

- Staff expressed a need for more differentiated instruction, greater inclusion of students with special needs in the general classroom, and more training to support these initiatives.
- Staff expressed concern that budget constraints will result in changes to the department head structure, which would undermine the ability of those positions to effectively lead and support instruction.

- Staff noted that resources, such as Title I staff, in place at feeder elementary schools were not available to the middle school. These resources would allow greater flexibility in the school day and free teachers to work more with students who are struggling to master the curriculum.
- Staff identified the transition from elementary school to middle school, and from middle school to high school, as areas of concern. According to reports, students enjoy substantial academic and social support in elementary school, which sometimes masks special needs. For some students, these needs become apparent as they enter the less resourced middle school environment, complicating an already stressful transition. While a concern for all students, this was identified as an even larger issue for ELL students.
- Some staff raised concerns about the fiscal impact that the Framingham Community Charter School is having on the district in a time of tight budgets.

Promising Practices At the Mary Lyon School in Boston

School and District Overview

The Mary Lyon School is located in the Brighton section of Boston, Massachusetts—a city of approximately 575,000. It is served by the Boston Public School District, which served 61,522 students in 136 schools, including nine with K through 8 configurations, at the close of the 2002-2003 school year. This case study highlights some of the promising practices supporting MCAS achievement among students with special needs at the Mary Lyon School.

The Mary Lyon School offers a unique educational setting to students in grades pre-K to 8, with a unique focus on serving students with special needs in a full inclusion model. The school is unusually small in relation to other schools in the district, serving only 122 students in the 2002-2003 school year. Despite the school's unique design, which may limit its replicability, it was selected for case study on the basis of the high MCAS achievement of its students on individual education plans at grade levels 4, 7 and 8.²⁴

Following is a description of the school's student population, a review of its publishable ELA and math MCAS results, and a discussion of the practices that building-level leaders, teachers, and support staff consider critical to the success experienced by its students with special needs.

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for students in grades 4, 7, and 8 in the academic year 2002-2003. These data were provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education (MA DOE) in a combined file containing student level MCAS data and profile data captured through the department's Student Information Management System (SIMS). These data were merged and quality checked by the MA DOE prior to analysis.

In the academic year 2002-2003, the Boston Public Schools served 3,186 students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8. The Mary Lyon School served 17 of these students. Overall, the proportion of students with identified special needs within the Mary Lyon School is substantially higher than both the district and statewide averages for these grade levels. This is a function of the school's unique design, as described in this case study. Overall, the proportions of enrolled students who were non-white and who receive free or reduced lunch—a measure of family income—were substantially below district averages, but over twice the statewide averages. The number of students with Limited English Proficiency is not reported to due the small size of this cohort.

Profile Data

	Special Needs	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
School	43.6%	61.5%	64.1%	NR
District	22.8%	79.4%	85.0%	16.5%
Statewide	17.6%	29.4%	25.2%	4.4%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4, 7 and 8 students.

²⁴ A full explanation of the methodology used for site selection in this study is available in the companion report, *A Study of MCAS Achievement and Urban Special Education: Data Analysis and Site Selection Methodology*.

The disability type and placement of Mary Lyon School students with special needs were examined and compared to district averages (see tables, below). Due to the small grade level cohort size within the school, much of the specific data are not reported (NR). However, it is clear that the school serves a higher proportion of students identified as emotionally disturbed than is typical within the district. It is also apparent that the school provides services to students with special needs in an included environment, in contrast to the broader district.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/ Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others
School	NR	NR	41.2%	NR	58.8%
District	40.2%	5.0%	7.3%	11.4%	36.1%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

District OOD = 6.7%

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate
School	NR	76.5%	NR	0%
District	1.1%	25.6%	23.7%	49.6%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes students with special needs in grades 4, 7, and 8. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not released due to cohort size of < 5.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for the Mary Lyon School’s students with special needs on the grade 7 ELA and grade 8 math exams.²⁵ Despite impressive results for 4th grade students, cohort sizes of fewer than five students required that these results be suppressed. This analysis includes the results of English language arts (ELA) and math examinations administered in 2002 and 2003, and shows actual scores, with comparisons to predicted scores. Predicted scores are statistically adjusted to account for community demographic factors, which have been shown to be key predictors of student performance on MCAS.

These data indicate that the Mary Lyon School’s 7th and 8th grade students with special needs substantially exceeded their statistically predicted performance on both exams in 2003. Additional data not reported in this table also indicate exemplary performance on the MCAS.

Exam	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)
Grade 7 ELA				
2002	NR	NR	NR	NR
2003	100%	67%	91	53
Grade 8 Math				
2002	NR	NR	NR	NR
2003	100%	16%	75	27

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 7 and 8 students with special needs. All grade 4 data are suppressed due to cohort size of < 5. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

²⁵ MCAS analyses developed through this study omitted students educated in outside (out of district) placements. This decision was consistent with the study objectives to assess the performance of students educated within the district through its schools; and to identify salient practices in place within those schools.

School-Level Findings

Overview of Promising Practices

Intensive interviews with school-building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that several school-level factors have contributed to the relative success of the Mary Lyon School with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall and among students with special needs in particular.

The Mary Lyon School is a unique K-8 school facility located in the Brighton section of the City of Boston. Its student population is limited in comparison to most schools in the district, serving approximately 120 students through a single classroom for each grade level. It serves as a school for students with emotional, behavioral and neurological disorders (EB/DB). In addition to its district budget appropriation, the school receives substantial funding through the Annenberg Foundation and has previously enjoyed remarkable support from a parent who donated \$1.5 million towards renovation of the school building.

The school-level practices most frequently identified by staff as critical to the schools success in supporting the MCAS achievement of its students with special needs include:

- **Strong Leadership** – The principal of the school designed and implemented the current school model to educate children with substantial ED/BD in a total inclusion environment approximately ten years ago. Key elements of this model include: a strong preschool and after school program; hiring highly qualified staff with certification in both regular and special education; small class size; and frequent interaction with parents.
- **Positive School Climate** – The full inclusion model at Mary Lyon contributes to an atmosphere of acceptance of diverse learning styles and behaviors. Problem solving among teachers is ongoing and collaborative, including discussions across grades. Staff described a school that is flexible in its approach. A focus on MCAS permeates the building.
- **Strong Emphasis on Personnel and Hiring** – Teachers at the Mary Lyon School hold dual certification in regular and special education. The principal recruits high quality teachers, many from the in-house after school program.
- **Efficient Use of Resources** – Savings resulting from implementing a full inclusion model and employing teachers with dual certification has allowed Mary Lyon classrooms to be limited to 15 students per class. In addition, masters degree candidates serve as teaching assistants. The principal negotiated a change in the contract to allow these graduate student interns to be hired as instructional assistant trainees.
- **Strong, Aligned Curriculum and Instruction/ Strong Use of Data to Inform Education Decision Making** – Curriculum has been aligned to the state frameworks for several years and is constantly monitored for realignment. MCAS and other data are continually analyzed to identify gaps in curriculum or instruction. There are two assessment/content specialists in the building, but all teachers interviewed expressed comfort doing data analysis.
- **Staff Ownership of All Students/Complete Inclusion Model** – The total inclusion model at Mary Lyon, coupled with dual certification of classroom teachers, creates a seamless education structure.
- **Strong Parent/School Interaction** – There are multiple opportunities for interaction with parents. The principal meets with each family individually and all students have individual communication plans. Progress reports for all students are sent to parents every two weeks.

School-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the district and school-building staff interview processes probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district. Following are summaries of school-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

The Mary Lyon School, as it is presently organized and operated, was designed by the current principal, Mary Nash, approximately ten years ago. The principal did considerable research into the development of a total inclusion model for a school that would serve students whose emotional and behavioral needs would typically require outside placement. The principal designed the education program and was given two years to produce results. In designing the school, the principal added special programming, such as before and after school programs; to help convince the parents of regular education students to enroll their children in a school that was to serve a substantial number emotionally disturbed students. During interviews, building staff described the principal as an expert in behavior management.

Since program inception, the principal has hired only the most highly qualified, dual-certified staff. The granting of professional teacher status is done with great care. In addition to her internal staffing standards, she has taken the initiative to contract with outside experts as needed. For example, the Walker School currently runs Mary Lyon's after school program.

The principal has also reorganized the school day to provide teachers with substantial daily common planning and problem solving time, which she considers critical to the functioning of the school. To create the necessary meeting time, the principal had to negotiate with members of the Boston Teacher's Union to allow for practices not covered by the union contract.

Personnel

The recruitment, hiring, and retention of highly qualified staff is a major focus of the school's administration. In order to implement a total inclusion program, the principal hires teachers who hold a dual certification in regular education and special education. Because of this dual certification, there is no need for the school to maintain special education classrooms. Resulting savings allow for a class size of fifteen students throughout the school, each of which is staffed by two or three adults, including a teacher, an assistant teacher and a paraprofessional.

Many teachers are developed and recruited in-house from among the assistant teachers and paraprofessionals who are on staff. About half of all new teachers are recruited from the after school program. The principal hires the strongest master's degree candidates from colleges as full-time assistants and works out their academic schedules with the colleges so that students are able to graduate. Student teachers are placed in the lower grades so that they learn the fundamentals of early literacy instruction. Teachers are given the opportunity for flextime which allows them to run the before and after school programs. A performance evaluation tool is used to determine the effectiveness of paraprofessionals.

The principal worked with members of the Boston Teacher's Union to negotiate an agreement where teachers come to school a half hour early for grade level meetings. In return, teachers receive an additional planning and development block and a longer lunch hour.

Culture and Climate

The entire school is focused on the implementation of a full inclusion model for special education students, including those with significant emotional and behavioral issues. The school climate is accepting, and is described by the principal as especially good for children with atypical disabilities such as Tourette's or Asperger's Syndrome. Learning takes place in the regular classroom setting, including interventions for disruptive behavior.

Staff portrayed the school as a real community of learners and teachers. In interviews, teachers described a school where they work together seamlessly to help each other boost skills and develop approaches to help students learn. Their school culture includes the belief that if you can identify how to teach challenged special education students, then you have identified how to teach *all* students. Flexibility is a foundation of the school's teaching and learning culture. Teachers tell of constantly assessing and determining what a child needs to thrive. The school has a formal structure that allows teachers to discuss their mistakes, and problem solving is ongoing and collaborative. School staff described close communication with parents and view them as partners in their children's education.

High Standards and MCAS Preparation

The school is also very MCAS-focused, maintaining close alignment to the curriculum frameworks and continuously using MCAS test data to improve teaching and learning. Staff have high expectations for all students and do not hesitate to say that all of their students can pass the MCAS exams. Non-standard accommodations for MCAS are not written into IEPs because the school believes that students must learn to succeed under real world conditions.

The school takes several steps to maximize MCAS achievement. The principal meets with each parent and discusses MCAS, and, as part of the discussion, the parent is encouraged to be confident that her child will be successful on the exam. The school places a major emphasis on teaching students how to take the test, and uses a Super Bowl metaphor to encourage students to train so that they will have "a good day" when the test is administered. Following the February school vacation, the school increases its focus on MCAS preparation, including visual wall art reinforcing key themes and stressing the importance of the MCAS exam. Staff also work with students to increase their coping skills and to reduce test anxiety.

Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

The use of data to inform decision-making permeates the Mary Lyon School culture. Analysis of periodic student assessment data is used to inform curriculum and instruction, and MCAS data are analyzed to identify gaps in the curriculum.

Staff described a major emphasis on using test items missed one year to inform instruction the next year. Teachers asked their students to tell them what they didn't understand on exams that they have taken. Teaching modules are then built around any identified gaps or problem areas. For example, the inclusion of genres into the English language arts (ELA) curriculum was instituted following data analysis. Two assessment captains, who also serve as content captains, take the lead in test results analysis, but all teachers interviewed seemed to be comfortable analyzing data on their own as well. Test analysis is not limited to a review of MCAS data, but also includes NAEP and school-designed assessments. The findings of data analysis are translated into modifications in classroom instruction. Identified problem areas may become "problems of the week" and the focus of staff development; areas of weakness are identified for next year's teachers who are responsible for remediating areas of weakness for each student.

Curriculum and Instruction

Curriculum alignment with the state frameworks occurred very early at the Mary Lyon School, as the principal and teachers were concerned that the curriculum for the Boston Public Schools did not adequately cover all aspects of the state curriculum frameworks. Curriculum access is supported by the schools' commitment to total inclusion, which ensures that special education students have access to the regular education curriculum. Because classroom teachers are certified in both special and regular education, there is a seamless blending of curriculum and teaching strategies. Special education students are expected to meet the same standards as regular education students.

In the spirit of the school as a learning community, several teachers asked to switch grade assignments in order to better understand the full range of school curriculum. In addition, teachers and administrators have traveled to other districts and to other states to observe good curricula in action. The school uses a wide range of instructional strategies and materials including the Wisnia-Kapp Reading Program, Semple Math, the Story Grammar Marker, Lindamood Bell Visualization Program and the Myers Johnson Program.

The school takes a student-centered approach to instruction. Teachers report that they are constantly assessing and determining what a child needs in order to thrive. Common planning time, both formal and informal, keeps teachers on the same page in terms of approach to individual student learning and allows them to share ideas to improve individual students' learning. Planning time occurs before, during, and after school. Daily team meetings focus on individual students and all people who work with the student must attend these meetings, including the paraprofessionals and assistant teachers. Sometimes parents are involved in these meetings.

The elementary school schedules a two-hour literacy block, and one and a half hours for math and science. The middle school has a two-hour block for math and science, and a two hour block for humanities.

Professional Development

Professional development is a key element of the Mary Lyon School culture. On average, teachers take 100 hours of professional development per year; compared to the 30 hours included in the Boston Teachers' Union contract. Several specific professional development activities are worth noting. Consistent with the school's population and mission, all teachers receive 12 hours of instruction on how to deal with students who present severe behavior problems. In the learning community spirit, individual teachers become content captains, who are charged and are charged with researching and sharing the latest thinking in content instruction. These captains pass learning on at regular bi-weekly curriculum committee meetings.

Parent Involvement

Staff at the Mary Lyon School described actively reaching out to parents. The principal meets personally with each family, and teachers develop a communication plan for every student based on meeting the language and availability needs of individual parents. The office maintains a living diary of students' progress. Teachers routinely call parents and many parents receive daily logbooks detailing their child's academic and social progress, with reports sent home every two weeks. The school holds MCAS information meetings where parents are shown rubrics and test questions.

Opportunities for Improvement

Staff expressed very few concerns with regard to the educational environment at the Mary Lyon School, noting their satisfaction with the educational model and the resources available to implement that model. The only consistent concern presented by staff was a frustration that they have not yet been able to effectively share the model and their experience working with it, particularly within their own district.

Promising Practices at the Morningside Community School in Pittsfield

School and District Overview

Pittsfield is a city of 48,622 located in rural Berkshire County, the westernmost county in Massachusetts. The city is served by the Pittsfield Public School District, which had an enrollment of 6,718 students in academic year 2002-2003. The Morningside Community School is one of eight elementary schools in the district. It is notable as one of two community schools and one of three Title I schools in the city. Morningside is the district's only Reading First School and previously participated in the Bay State Readers program. The school was selected for case study on the basis of its special education students' MCAS achievement on the grade 4 ELA and math MCAS examinations in 2002 and 2003.²⁶

Following is a description of the school's student population, a review of its ELA and math MCAS results, and a discussion of the practices that district and building-level leaders, teachers, and support staff consider critical to the success experienced by its students with special needs.

Demographic Profile

The following tables feature profile data for students in grade 4 only in the academic year 2002-2003. These data were provided by the Massachusetts Department of Education (MA DOE) in a combined file containing student level MCAS data and profile data captured through the department's Student Information Management System (SIMS). These data were merged and quality checked by the MA DOE prior to analysis.

In the academic year 2002-2003, the Pittsfield Public Schools served 82 4th grade students with special needs. The Morningside Community School served 22 of these students. Overall, the proportion of students with special needs within the school is higher than both the district and statewide averages for these grade levels. This is due to the presence of a district-wide program for students who have been identified as behaviorally disturbed.

Overall, the proportions of enrolled students who were non-white and who received free or reduced lunch—a measure of family income—were substantially above district averages, but mixed in comparison to statewide averages. The number of students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) is not reported to due the small size of this cohort within the school. The proportion of LEP students in the district has been increasing in recent years.

	Special Needs	Free or Reduced Lunch	Non-White	Limited English Prof.
School	24.7%	71.9%	24.7%	NR
District	16.1%	41.0%	14.3%	2.0%
Statewide	17.6%	29.4%	25.2%	4.4%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes all grade 4 students.

With regard to the disability type and placement of students with special needs (see tables, below), 41% were identified with emotional disturbances, all of whom participate in a substantially separate classroom. Notably, the remaining students had a reported disability type of "not specified," which is included under "All Others." With regard to placement, the school's profile is fairly representative of the district overall, with approximately half of all students in the "Up to 25% Separated" category and most others in substantially separate classrooms.

²⁶ A full explanation of the methodology used for site selection in this study is available in the companion report, *A Study of MCAS Achievement and Urban Special Education: Data Analysis and Site Selection Methodology*.

Disability Type

	Specific Learning	Speech/ Language	Emotionally Disturbed	Developmental Delay	All Others
School	0%	0%	40.9%	0%	59.1%
District	43.9%	0%	11.0%	6.1%	39.0%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes only grade 4 students with special needs. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level.

Placement

	Gen Ed Modified	Up to 25% Separated	25 to 60% Separated	Substantially Separate
School	NR	50.0%	NR	40.9%
District	NR	54.9%	NR	35.4%

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4 students with special needs. Students in Out of District placements omitted, as data are not available at individual school level. NR denotes not reported due to cohort size of < 5.

MCAS Achievement of Students with Special Needs

The following table presents ELA and math MCAS pass rates and proficiency index scores for the Morningside Community School’s grade 4 students with special needs.²⁷ This analysis includes the results of English language arts (ELA) and math examinations administered in 2002 and 2003, and shows actual scores, with comparisons to predicted scores. Predicted scores are statistically adjusted to account for community demographic factors, which have been shown to be key predictors of student performance on MCAS.

Morningside’s grade 4 students substantially exceeded their statistically predicted performance in 2002 and 2003. They also demonstrated substantial improvement in performance from 2002 to 2003 on both the ELA and math exams.

Exam	Student Count	Pass Rate (actual)	Pass Rate (predicted)	Prof. Index (actual)	Prof. Index (predicted)
Grade 4 ELA					
2002	13	92%	73%	56	58
2003	22	100%	66%	91	54
Grade 4 Math					
2002	14	79%	59%	59	50
2003	22	100%	57%	82	48

Source: MA DOE 2003 MCAS/SIMS data megafile. Includes grade 4 students with special needs, but excludes students in Out of District placements, as their results are not reported at the individual school level.

²⁷ MCAS analyses developed through this study omitted students educated in outside (out of district) placements. This decision was consistent with the study objectives to assess the performance of students educated within the district through its schools, and to identify salient practices in place within those schools.

Summary of Findings

Extensive interviews with district and school-building staff, including leadership, teachers, and a variety of support staff, suggest that several district and school-level factors have contributed to the success of the Morningside Elementary School with regard to the MCAS achievement of students overall and among students with special needs in particular.

District-Level Practices

Following are district-level practices identified through the interview process:

- **A consistent focus on early literacy.** As early as 1999, district leadership in Pittsfield reviewed MCAS data and determined that, due to both evident need and the reality of limited resources, the district would focus on literacy as a first priority. Three years ago, as an outgrowth of this strategy, the district committed to Reading Across the Curriculum and to training every teacher in the CRISS reading strategies. The district made a strategic decision to focus this training on elementary school teachers first. Since that time, seventy to ninety teachers have participated in CRISS training each year.
- **Early commitment to the use of assessment data to inform instruction of students with special needs.** Through the initiative of a clinical psychologist working for the district, Pittsfield began using curriculum probes and DIBELS reading strategies four to five years ago, placing it ahead of the curve with regard to the use of these assessment tools. The program was first implemented with special education students and later expanded to include all students. The district uses DIBELS to identify students who need direct instruction or other interventions. This initiative is focused at the elementary school level.
- **Inclusion oriented programs to support students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.** Pittsfield has concentrated students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (ED/BD) into two elementary schools and elected to recruit well-qualified staff from established private programs as classroom teachers. Students attend the Crosby School in the early elementary grades and then transfer to the Morningside Community School for grades 3, 4, and 5. Notably, the district lacked a parallel program at the middle school level until one was established last year.
- **Pursuit of grants that reflect schools' strategic priorities.** Each year, administrators develop a Consolidated Grant Package that reflects the strategic priorities of the district's individual school improvement plans. District and school administrators participate in a two-week retreat to develop the package. According to district staff, this process has been used successfully to develop resources to support strategic priorities—most recently, to secure funding for a Math Coordinator and ELL Specialist, emerging areas of concern within the district.

School-Level Practices

District leaders and the staff of the Morningside Community School identified several school-level practices as critical to the success of the school. These include:

- **Leadership conveyed and supported a love of reading.** Six years ago, a new principal took control of Morningside and immediately focused on developing strong English/language arts programming, as well as a love of reading. Through his leadership, the school secured Bay State Readers and Reading First resources. In the wake of his retirement last year, the new principal has sought to build upon, rather than disrupt, this focus of literacy.

- **Leaders and staff committed to a better school climate.** Staff related a compelling story of the transformation of Morningside from a school that was “out of control” to a very civil environment where students and teachers alike display a respectful attitude for one another. They noted that this change in climate was critical to improving the learning of all students, particularly those with ED/BD. At the heart of this transformation was The Golden Rule, implemented six years ago and still in use today. The work of special education teachers highly trained to work with ED/BD students was among the keys to the success of this initiative.
- **A strong inclusion model and commitment to all students.** Morningside works to increase the inclusion of students with special needs throughout the year. Regular classroom teachers expressed confidence in working with students with ED/BD and welcome them into their classrooms. The school takes a broad view of inclusion. Not only do special education students receive services in the regular classroom, but regular education students also join EB/DB students in their classroom for instruction. This reduces the sense of difference among students and creates a type of “two way inclusion.”
- **Highly Trained and Committed Special Education Staff.** In interviews, staff consistently indicated that the improvement in school climate was greatly aided by the efforts of highly trained special education staff working in the ED/BD program. These teachers work continually with regular education teachers to model best practices and share conflict resolution strategies for working with ED/BD students. These staff are also considered highly effective in their ability to teach students who struggle to mastery.

School-Level Practices by Subject

The standard protocol employed in the staff interview process probed a variety of topics related to the support and delivery of educational services within the district and school. Following are summaries of school-level practices identified as supportive of MCAS achievement, presented by topic area.

Leadership

In on-site interviews, staff indicated that the school once had a reputation for being out of control and student behavior interfered with the ability of students to learn. They also repeatedly cited a radical, positive change in the climate and culture at the school approximately 6 years ago, and attributed it to the arrival of a new building principal, Ed DiNicola. DiNicola retired at the end of the 2002-2003 school year, but his successor, John Peron, has continued the practices that led to the positive change in climate and culture at Morningside.

Permeating the culture at Morningside is the Golden Rule, which was introduced by DiNicola. The importance of the Golden Rule to school culture was identified by staff in every interview that conducted at the school. The rule—“Don’t do or say anything to anyone that you wouldn’t want said or done to you”—is simple and applies to staff as well as students. All staff are involved in processing breakdowns in the Golden Rule in a supportive environment. Staff report that supportive principals have been a key to turning the school around. DiNicola and Peron have treated staff as professionals and given them latitude to do what needs to be done to improve the school.

At the same time that Principal DiNicola focused on school climate, he also emphasized a love of reading and strove to make it a part of the school climate. Both district and building staff noted that he always carried a book with him and actively discussed reading with students. He made literacy a strategic focus at Morningside and pushed to get teachers to bring all of their students to the highest level of reading. He also successfully pursued grant money to support his emphasis on literacy.

Personnel

Students with substantial emotional or behavioral disabilities from across the district are clustered at the Morningside School in grades 3, 4, and 5. Understanding the need for specific expertise to work effectively with this student population, the district recruited teachers for this program who had previously worked at a 766 approved private residential school that works with this student population. In addition, one of Morningside's regular education teachers has a residential background and serves as the restraint trainer for the district. Other teachers in the building recognize the expertise of these special education staff and refer to them as extremely supportive and enabling of inclusion. The ED/BD classroom teachers seem to have had a positive effect on both student and teacher behavior and attitudes. They have also had great success using direct instructional techniques to teach math to students with special needs, as well as other academically challenged students.

Morningside School uses its staff in an efficient and creative manner. The two ED/BD teachers work closely with regular classroom teachers and can provide instruction for any student who is having learning difficulties. The flexible approach to instruction allows students with special needs and some regular education students to move back and forth between classrooms throughout the school day, in accordance with their specific needs. The general student body sees the ED/BD teachers as regular education teachers and their rooms are not labeled as "SPED" classes. In this way, the lines between special education and regular education become blurred, differences are less emphasized, and inclusion is facilitated.

Culture and Climate

Staff are convinced that the school climate and culture are important factors in improving student achievement. Staff described the school as open, child centered, and less stressful than other elementary schools in the district. Teachers reported that they feel respected and empowered to make decisions, and paraprofessionals also related that they feel respected and are treated with the same consideration as teachers.

In addition to the culture created by the Golden Rule, Morningside has a strong culture of professional collaboration and cooperation. Special education teachers transfer knowledge to the regular education teachers and regular education teachers view the special education teachers as vital resource. Regular classroom teachers related how special education staff have helped them to successfully include ED/BD students into their classrooms. This collaboration also extends to the resource room and the speech and language specialists in the building, who are also highly respected.

This culture of collaboration has enabled the Morningside School to implement the unique inclusion model noted above, in which students move back and forth between the regular classroom and the substantially separate ED/BD class. It is supportive of the full integration of both special education teachers and students into the normal activities and classrooms of the building. This, they feel, reduces the stigma that is sometimes attached to special education and reinforces a sense of joint responsibility for all students among staff.

Finally, several staff emphasized that the Morningside Community School offers a sense of community, as its name implies. Staff emphasized that they really know their students, many of whom eat two of their three meals a day at the school and reportedly receive all or most of their medical care from the school nurse. The school adjustment counselor and other staff work to ensure that parents attend IEP meetings and are involved in the assessment of whether their children should be mainstreamed for part or all of the school day.

Use of Data to Inform Decision-Making

In general, staff of the Morningside Community School embrace the use of data to inform instruction and share classroom level data with the district curriculum coordinator. Literacy and math assessments are routinely administered and the resulting data are used to create flexible groupings for math and guided reading. Both the school and the district pride themselves on being early adopters of the use of data to inform instruction. DIBELS,

a requirement of Reading First, has been used at Morningside for several years. This year, selected Morningside staff are participating in a pilot project that uses Palm Pilots for instant analysis of DIBELS assessment data.

In addition to DIBELS, the school uses MCAS data, classroom observations and Developmental Reading Assessments (DRA) to assess student mastery in ELA. MCAS data are generally used to assess macro-level issues of curriculum alignment, strengths and weaknesses, whereas other pre-post student assessments are used to inform individual student instruction and support differentiated instruction. Notably, at least some teachers reported that they rely less on standardized tools than on informal assessments to guide ongoing instructional strategies.

Grade-level teaching strategies are also informed by data and rely upon an inquiry model that consists of several steps: identification of challenge area; brain storming solutions, development of action plan, implementation of plan; and a measurement and reassessment of the strategy. Last year, grade level staff met and considered the challenge areas described by student assessment data, applied this inquiry model, and then developed an action plan for improvement. Across grades, staff agreed that writing programs should become a major focus for the school.

Curriculum and Instruction

According to district and school staff, the curriculum used at the Morningside School is wholly aligned with the state frameworks. Common planning time is reportedly essential to monitoring and maintaining this alignment. To support the curriculum, the district employs a math specialist who visits schools to model classes for teachers. Also, as a former Bay State Readers and current Reading First School, Morningside has an on-site Literacy Coordinator, which is unique within the district.

Teachers strive to include special education students in the regular classroom as much as possible, which results in increased access to the general education curriculum. By the 5th grade, many ED/BD students spend almost the entire day in the regular classroom with the special education teacher providing support in the regular education class. As students transition to a more inclusive setting, they are carefully matched with the regular education teacher who is judged by special education staff to be best suited to work with that student.

While special education students transition in and out of the regular education classrooms, it is not unusual for regular education students of low achievement to transition in and out of the special education classrooms, especially for direct math instruction—a strength of the special education teachers. This reinforces access to the general education curriculum. One reason for the success in inclusion and curriculum access is the confidence that regular education teachers have in their ability to work with ED/BD students. This confidence was frequently attributed to the support provided by special education staff to regular classroom teachers. It is a confidence built over time.

With regard to curricular priorities, Morningside has for several years embraced reading as a priority. Through grants written by its former principal, the school has participated in the Bay State Readers program and is now a Reading First School. The resource room teachers do Reading First instruction for regular education students in their classrooms. Paraprofessionals from the resource rooms assist in the implementation of modifications to the literacy curriculum. Also, as noted above, the school has recently increased its focus on writing skills. As part of this effort, they now use the Four-Square model to help students organize their writing and the use of graphic organizers has become standard practice.

To meet the varied learning needs of all students, the school employs a mix of instructional methods and has trained its staff in differentiated instruction. Some staff have instructional specialties; most notably the ED/BD classroom teachers, who are experts in direct instruction, using Reasoning and Writing, a scripted curriculum.

These special educators have trained their paraprofessionals to provide direct instruction as well. The speech therapist, in contrast, runs a language-based program for the students with whom she works.

To prepare students for MCAS, teachers have expanded their curriculum to cover testing strategies. Staff also do their best to alleviate student anxiety over MCAS and leaders talk about “un anxious expectations”, which is intended to convey a commitment to high expectations, but low pressure. Individual education plans frequently incorporate common testing accommodations, including test taking in a small group environment, frequent breaks, and the use of scribes. Staff view accommodations as effective education supports and recommend their use wherever it is considered educationally appropriate.

Professional Development

District and school priorities, both informed by data analysis, have led to an emphasis on ELA focused professional development for the last several years. Leaders indicate that most elementary teachers have now had the CRISS reading strategies training, and up to 90% of Morningside teachers attended a two-week intensive Bay State Readers Training program. Recognizing its past emphasis on literacy, the district is now turning its attention to math instruction, while the school is also emphasizing data analysis skills.

All special education teachers in the district have been trained in the use of DIBELS assessments and received other specialized training from the district. Special education staff are responsible for diffusing this specialized training within their buildings. While no formal process for dissemination was described, staff comments suggest that informal sharing at Morningside has been highly productive.

Parent Involvement

The parents of two children with special needs were interviewed and they reported that there is excellent dialogue between parents and teachers. They noted that school leaders have reached out and invited them to participate in the School Improvement Council, but they declined to participate due to work schedule conflicts. They described the early childhood programs run by the school as “terrific” and said that those programs make families feel at home in the school. They went out of their way to note that the school is a safe and caring environment and that their children have not had to deal with bullying. These parents were comfortable with and impressed by the IEP process, but also noted its complexity.

While these parents were overwhelmingly positive in their review of school practices, staff indicated that creating substantial parent involvement is sometimes challenging. The building’s School Adjustment Counselor serves as liaison between home and school, and works to develop and maintain relationships with the families of students with special needs. He noted that the school informs parents when their children participate in the pre-referral process and works hard to get parents to attend IEP meetings, including annual re-evaluations. Regular education teachers noted that the special education staff have strong relationships with many of their students’ parents and that this is helpful to them as they work to mainstream students with special needs.

Concerns and Opportunities for Improvement

At the conclusion of the interview process, leaders and staff were asked to relate any concerns that they might have and note any ways in which the achievement of students with special needs might be improved. Following are the most salient concerns and opportunities expressed during these interviews:

Among the concerns expressed by Morningside's staff were:

- Some staff would like more staff hired for instruction and testing, and believe that improving the teacher/student ratio would improve achievement.
- Some special education staff noted that students with behavioral or emotional issues have difficulty transitioning to the middle school environment, which lacks the same supports present at the elementary school level.
- Building leaders would like to create more vertical consistency in curriculum and teaching materials. In particular, leaders would like to focus on a single math curriculum.
- Some staff noted that paraprofessionals and Title I assistant teachers are not on teacher contracts and therefore cannot be compensated for participation in some relevant professional development sessions.

Among the concerns expressed by district leaders were:

- A concern that district funding is heavily reliant of the fiscal condition of the city. If a city's finances are strained, this is reflected in budget allocations.
- A concern that the practice of funding education on a one-year cycle does not provide districts with the stability they need to properly launch and support program initiatives. Whether the budget increases or decreases is not the point—greater year-to-year predictability is what is needed.
- The state must make certain that it does not waiver in its financial commitment to funding its educational initiatives. Too many mandates are un-funded.
- DOE no longer has the same presence in western Massachusetts that it provided when it used a regional office configuration and this is missed.
- Leaders affirmed the district's commitment to high standards, but a concern was raised that getting 100% of students to Advanced or Proficient status is probably not feasible. The fear is that districts' failure to meet this benchmark might lead the state to water down the standards, which these leaders opposed.