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GAINING TRACTION

Urban educators' perspectives on the critical factors influencing student achievement in high and low performing urban public schools

A project of the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability and the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Cooperating Districts and Schools

Following are the districts and a subset of the schools that cooperated with this study. The identities of a number of schools are not revealed to maintain requested confidentiality.

Boston:	Rogers Middle School, Snowden International School, Brighton High, TechBoston Academy, Boston Community Leadership Academy (three undisclosed)
Brockton:	Edgar B. Davis Community School (one undisclosed)
Fall River:	John Westall Elementary (one undisclosed)
Holyoke:	Lt. Clayre Sullivan Elementary (one undisclosed)
Lawrence:	Edward F. Parthum School (one undisclosed)
Lowell:	Two undisclosed
Lynn:	Tracy Elementary (one undisclosed)
New Bedford:	Sgt. William H. Carney Academy (one undisclosed)
Springfield:	Rebecca Johnson Elementary, Frank Freedman Elementary (two undisclosed)
Worcester:	May Street Elementary, North High School (two undisclosed)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gaining Traction: Urban Educators' Perspectives on the Critical Factors Influencing Student Achievement

After more than a decade of education reform in Massachusetts, the problem of low student achievement persists in a troubling proportion of the Commonwealth's urban schools. The question facing educators and policymakers today is what to do next in the effort to resolve this crisis in urban education.

With this question in mind, the Massachusetts Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA), with support from the Massachusetts State Legislature, commissioned this study of the factors influencing student achievement in urban public schools. Conducted by the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute, the study went directly to urban educators to seek their insights into the policies, practices and programs that are making a positive impact on student achievement, as well as the factors that continue to hinder success. Achievement was defined in terms of school performance on selected English language arts (ELA) and mathematics Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) examinations over a four-year period.

A case study research method was used to engage more than 600 educators in 30 schools spanning 10 of the Commonwealth's urban school districts. A pair of similar schools was selected from each of these districts, with multiple pairs selected from the largest cities. These "paired" schools displayed either substantially different ELA and math MCAS results or contrasting trends in recent results, with relative performance assessed against district averages. They served similar grades and students, and were in most cases similar in size and staffing. This approach provided insight into how practices and focus varied in otherwise similar schools with differing levels of achievement. In the context of this study, these schools are referred to as "higher" and "lower" performing, as all comparisons are relative.

The study process made clear the tremendous investment that urban educators have in improving educational opportunities for their students, as well as their willingness to engage in constructive dialogue about their schools' strengths and weaknesses. The findings that follow are based on their subjective reports of the district and school-level factors that support or inhibit student achievement in their schools, as well as a review of available documentation. These findings may or may not capture all of the practices of note across the study schools, but feature those that educators deemed most critical to student success. Following are key conclusions and recommendations resulting from this study. They are presented in greater detail in the Conclusions and Recommendations section of this report (see page 30).

Higher performing schools built a solid foundation for student achievement through a balanced emphasis on leadership and staffing, school culture, and curriculum and instruction.

Conclusions

Some urban schools are in fact "gaining traction" on the road to improved student achievement. Interviews suggest that the higher performing schools engaged through this study differ in important ways from similar, but lower performing, schools. Following are the practices and behaviors that typified the higher performing urban schools and generally distinguished them from their lower performing counterparts.

Higher performing schools …

- Built a solid foundation for student achievement through a balanced emphasis on leadership and staffing, school culture, and curriculum and instruction.
- Leaders actively pursued new strategies and resources they believed would improve their schools, and communicated these strategies clearly and supported their implementation.
- Leaders used all available discretion to hire staff who were well-qualified and highly motivated. They placed staff in roles where they would make the greatest impact on student success.
- Displayed positive *staff* cultures that were typified by collegiality, a sense of efficacy, a unified vision and shared accountability for school improvement.
- Displayed positive *student* cultures that were safe and nurturing, but also challenging, supportive and goal- and accountability-focused.
- Focused intensely on ELA and math and constantly fine-tuned curriculum and instruction to ensure alignment with state standards and to maximize instructional efficiency.
- Focused on intervention and remediation of students' academic deficits. Often through after-school, weekend and summer school programming.
- Used assessment data to guide instructional planning and delivery, and benefited from principals and coaches who could translate assessment results into instructional action.
- Focused on implementation at the school and classroom level. Monitoring for fidelity of implementation was important, but staff culture was also critical.

Recommendations

Following are recommendations that come directly from educators, as well as the researchers' synthesis of the implications of study findings for practice and policy. It is hoped that they will contribute to the ongoing dialogue regarding how to improve urban schools.

What Schools and Districts Can Do

- Make school culture a priority and a central tenet of urban school improvement
- Invest in leaders and enhance building-level leadership capacity
- Give leaders more authority to shape their staff through selective hiring
- Maintain schools' flexibility to customize instruction in response to student needs
- Improve instructional and overall school flexibility through enhanced support staffing
- Continue to invest in thoughtfully conceived professional development
- Increase the time available for instruction through efficiency and by expanding the time school is open and providing instruction
- Create more opportunities and implement effective models for school-wide planning
- Increase attention and resources targeted to remediation at all levels
- Provide full-day kindergarten and expand pre-school availability for at-risk students
- Manage change carefully so it does not adversely effect school performance

What State Policymakers Can Do

- Employ better tools and more nuanced analyses when assessing school effectiveness
- Provide substantive and well-conceived technical assistance to under-performing schools and districts
- Increase funding and administrative capacity to support knowledge-sharing and dissemination
- Improve capacity to serve students who are English language learners
- Develop adequate and predictable funding streams to support the recommendations of this research
- Recognize that a more robust intervention may be required to fully meet the goals of education reform and bring all urban students to MCAS proficiency

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All photography by Mark Morelli

Third grade students from the Edgar B. Davis Community School in Brockton work with partners on *Math Investigations'* "Array Game" for the purpose of determining multiplication facts and products.

INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts' urban centers are remarkable places, home to many of the state's most significant economic and cultural resources. At the same time, they are home to large populations of economically disadvantaged citizens, including thousands of new immigrants each year. For myriad reasons, urban public schools have come to serve a disproportionate share of these citizens, whose lives often lack a meaningful connection to these cities' vast opportunities. Data show that while educational attainment might facilitate this connection, it continues to elude many urban students. More than a decade into education reform, student achievement in our state's urban centers remains obstinately low, limiting the opportunities of another generation of inner-city youth.

Troubled by this reality, the Massachusetts Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA), with support from the Massachusetts State Legislature, commissioned the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute to conduct extensive research in 30 schools in 10 urban public school districts. Its purpose was to illuminate the factors that have enabled some urban schools to achieve uncommon success, as well as the factors that hinder further progress. For the purposes of this research, success was measured by student achievement on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) examinations.

DISTRICT	# OF SCHOOLS
Boston	8
Brockton	2
Fall River	2
Holyoke	2
Lawrence	2
Lowell	2
Lynn	2
New Bedford	2
Springfield	4
Worcester	4
Total (10 Districts)	30

This study utilized a paired case study research method to engage educators. Two similar schools were selected from each of these districts, with multiple pairs selected from the largest cities. The "paired" schools served comparable student populations, but displayed either substantially different English language arts (ELA) and mathematics MCAS results or contrasting trends on recent test scores, with relative performance assessed against district averages. Paired schools served similar grade levels and student populations. In most cases, they were also similar in size and staffing. This provided insight into how practices differed within otherwise similar schools that displayed different levels of achievement.[1]

As many educators noted, with so much direction having come from outside, the time seems right to hear voices from within.

This report identifies the factors — policies, practices and programs — that were consistently identified as central to improving student achievement in these urban schools, making note of the differences observed between relatively high performing schools and their lower achieving counterparts. These findings were derived from interviews with over 600 district and school-level educators. The vast majority of these educators welcomed the opportunity to share their perspectives on the factors driving achievement in urban schools and appreciated the study's focus on identifying endogenous solutions to problems in inner-city schools. As many educators noted, with so much advice having come from outside, the time seems right to hear voices from within.

School Selection

Relatively high and lower performing schools were selected on the basis of their reading, ELA and math MCAS performance from 2002 through 2005.[2] Student demography, embedded programs and other characteristics were considered in school selection, with the intention of accounting for demographic and resource-based factors that might influence achievement. The selected schools in all cases served the same grade levels, but in some instances the need for the most substantial marginal

1) A note on the paired case approach: The selection of two similar schools with differing levels of achievement offers an opportunity to study the factors that support and hinder student achievement within similar contexts. School-specific factors that influence success are documented in a compendium of promising practices through extended case studies of the higher performing schools. The compendium is available at www.donahue.umassp.edu.

2) A subset of six schools in Boston, Holyoke and Lynn were selected and studied after 2006 MCAS results were released. In these instances, 2006 data were also considered.

difference in performance overrode the preference for maintaining correspondence of other characteristics. Schools with special entry requirements, such as Boston's exam schools, and schools with very unusual program characteristics, were not considered for study due to concerns regarding their exclusivity or replicability.

School selection was made in close consultation with district leaders, who offered knowledge and perspectives not evident within the demographic and achievement data. This enabled the researchers to identify rival explanations for schools' performance, such as hard-to-detect student sub-groups or changes in student assignment plans that effectively re-populated a school. It also resulted in the identification of schools in which changes in leadership, staffing or programs were so substantial as to make them inappropriate sites for the purposes of this research.

Through the selection process it became apparent that some urban schools are in fact gaining traction, maintaining MCAS achievement that is higher than district averages or recovering from previously very low performance to meet or exceed those averages. At the same time, it is notable that within some districts even the best case study candidates displayed what would widely be considered very low overall performance, with only marginally higher MCAS achievement than their in-district peers. These districts also happened to be among the Commonwealth's most profoundly disadvantaged communities, displaying high poverty, low levels of parent educational attainment, and a high proportion of households in which English is a second language. From a research standpoint, this is unsurprising, as the correlation between these socio-economic factors and student achievement is widely documented.

District and School Interviews

The researchers interviewed more than 600 educators, including district leaders, school principals and assistant principals, instructional specialists, teachers and student support staff. These educators included staff from 14 elementary schools, four K to 8 schools, four middle schools and eight high schools. Interviews were conducted in small groups (typically 4 to 6 people) during site visits to each school, with interview sessions typically lasting 55 minutes. There were instances where some schools could not meet all of these requirements. Case studies were developed featuring practices within the higher performing schools, while anonymity was maintained for the lower performing schools. Multiple pairs were selected in Boston, Worcester and Springfield, the state's largest school districts.

A semi-structured protocol was used to guide the interview process. It directed educators to identify the district- and school-level policies, practices and programs that they felt enhanced student achievement in their school, as well as those that inhibited it. This approach allowed educators to define the critical leverage points to student success. This was important because the researchers did not want to presuppose that responses would conform to an "obvious" set of themes and use those assumptions as the basis for inquiry. Instead, factors commonly discussed in effective schools literature were used as prompts or probes throughout the interview process.

Using this Report

The findings that follow are based on educators' reports of the factors that supported or inhibited student achievement within their schools. Findings are discussed in specific terms, with excerpts from case studies appearing as side bars to illustrate those findings.

The nuances of the interview protocol shaped the phrasing of study findings in this report. In some instances, themes emphasized in one school were not widely addressed in another, despite probing by the interviewers. In other cases, practices were clearly described and were the same or different across the two cohorts (higher and lower performers). Accordingly, findings sometimes highlight clear differences in practices and at other times reflect differences of emphasis or omission, as noted in the text.

Study findings are presented through several sections, as follow:

- The Urban Challenge in Massachusetts
- A Foundation for Urban Success
- Leadership and Staffing
- School Culture
- Curriculum and Instruction
- Additional Factors that Influence School Performance
- Conclusions and Recommendations

THE URBAN CHALLENGE IN MASSACHUSETTS

A Demographic Snapshot

This study engaged public school districts in 10 cities, representing 21% of all Massachusetts school children. These post-industrial cities have much in common — high rates of poverty, English as a second language, unemployment and other factors commonly linked through research to low educational achievement. Moreover, 2005 American Community Survey data show that residents of these cities have generally become poorer since the 2000 U.S. Census, with an increased incidence of households in which English is not the primary language. This suggests that the challenges endemic to these urban centers are unlikely to diminish in the near term and may be increasing.

These school districts and the cities they serve are nonetheless far from homogeneous. Each displays a particular history, population and character, as well as unique resources, assets and liabilities. The inset table below provides some insight into the varying demographics within these cities. In terms of differences, the following are notable:

- Poverty is a persistent problem in all the study districts. As measured by the proportion of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, poverty rates range from moderate in Fall River and Worcester (61% and 63%) to severe in Lawrence and Holyoke (83% and 77%).
- Holyoke and Lawrence serve the highest proportions of students whose first language is not English (83% and 51%), in contrast to New Bedford and Springfield (21% and 22%). However, the diversity of languages spoken in Springfield was reported to exceed that of Holyoke.
- The cities of Lawrence and Springfield (26% and 24%) have the highest rates of single-parent families, with Boston and Worcester (both 16%) having the lowest.
- Lawrence (10%), Fall River and New Bedford (11% each) have the lowest rates of households with college graduates, with Boston (36%) and Worcester (23%) having the highest.

Urban Student Achievement

Educational attainment can help to disrupt cycles of intergenerational poverty and improve life outcomes for urban students. Unfortunately, MCAS achievement data reveal little consistent progress in urban districts, particularly at the elementary and middle school levels. Grade 10 MCAS scores have increased modestly over the past four years, but most urban public schools continue to fall short of the benchmarks established for student achievement. In terms of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) status, all of the study districts are currently identified as in need of corrective action for aggregate or sub-group student performance. Sixty-eight percent of the schools in the study districts did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by NCLB in 2006. (MA DOE)

This result is understandably disappointing to policy makers and advocates who hoped that substantial systemic reforms, coupled with increased state funding, would improve educational achievement statewide. This study is intended to leverage the knowledge and practices that have elevated achievement in some urban schools, so they can be replicated and supported through future policy and program initiatives.

	LOW INCOME*	1ST LANGUAGE NOT ENGLISH*	SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES**	COLLEGE GRADS**
Boston	73%	39%	16%	36%
Brockton	68%	28%	20%	14%
Fall River	61%	29%	17%	11%
Holyoke	77%	51%	22%	17%
Lawrence	83%	83%	26%	10%
Lowell	68%	49%	17%	18%
Lynn	75%	48%	18%	16%
New Bedford	67%	21%	19%	11%
Springfield	78%	22%	24%	15%
Worcester	63%	38%	16%	23%
State	29%	15%	8%	39%

* District student enrollment data 2006-7. State figure includes all MA districts. Source: MA DOE

** City-level data. State figure excludes the 10 study districts. Source: 2000 US Census

The Persisting Link between Demography and Achievement

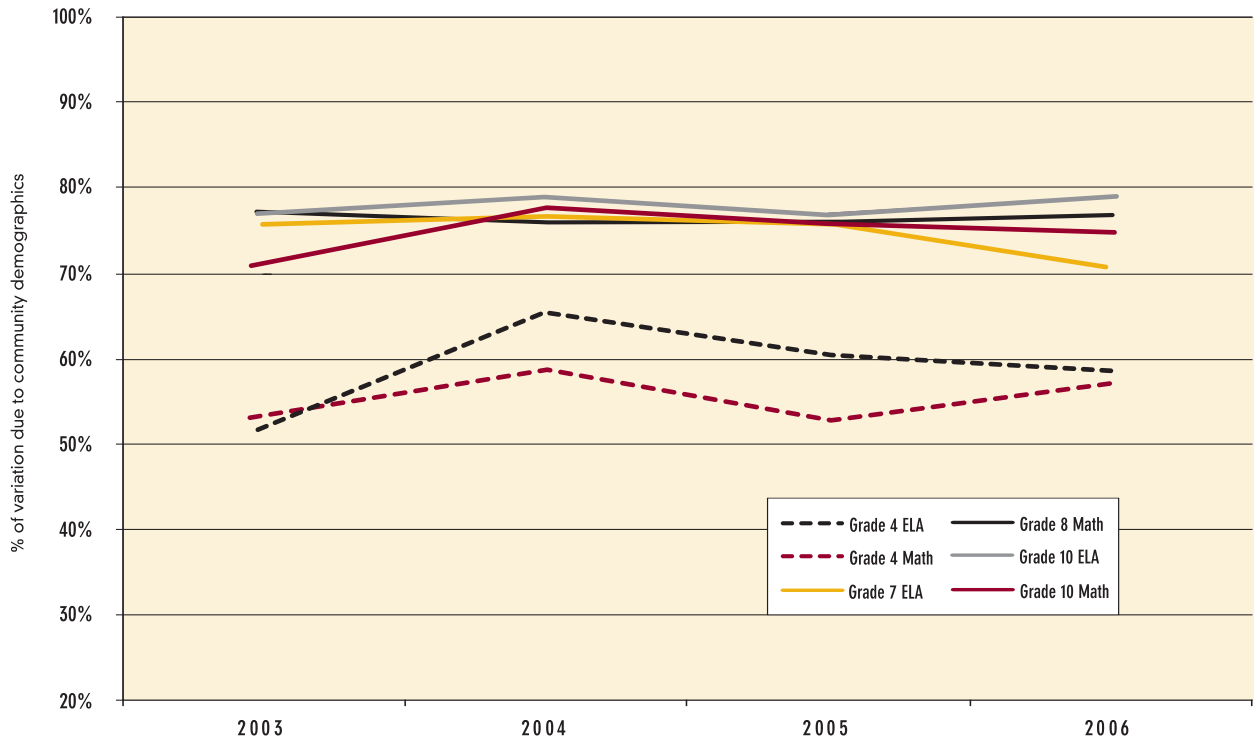
Before proceeding to findings, it is important to understand that past research has shown that the demographic characteristics of a community and its students have a powerful effect on student MCAS achievement.[3] Historically, demographic factors have explained much of the variation in test scores from community to community. That is, districts with residents who are well-educated and have high incomes usually have had schools with high test scores. More demographically challenged areas, including the state's core cities, have had lower scores.

Between 2003 and 2006, the influence of demography on MCAS achievement generally remained about the same for students statewide. The chart below shows the percentage of MCAS score variation attributable to community demographic factors, including average income, education level, poverty, ESL and single-parent status. These trend lines suggest that, after 14 years of education reform, demography still accounts for most of the difference in MCAS scores from district to district.

The chart below shows that community demographic factors continue to exert a powerful influence on MCAS achievement. It presents the correlation between district-level achievement and community demography statewide on six core MCAS exams from 2003 to 2006. Overall, the influence of demography on achievement is highest in the middle and high school years. It is lower in the elementary years, but still accounts for more than 50% of score variation. Notably, the influence of demography is not trending downward; making the accomplishments of the higher performing schools identified in this study all the more impressive.

3) The Community Effects Factor (CEF) model analyzes the impact of local demographics on educational outcomes. It was developed in a doctoral dissertation by Robert Gaudet, *Education Achievement Communities: A New Model for "Kind of Community" in Massachusetts Based on an Analysis of Community Characteristics Affecting Educational Outcomes*, May 1998, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

IMPACT OF DEMOGRAPHY ON STATEWIDE MCAS ACHIEVEMENT 2003–2006



A FOUNDATION FOR URBAN SUCCESS

Recognizing the substantial challenges that confront inner city schools and the students who attend them, this study sought to identify the policies, practices and programs that urban educators have found to be most supportive of — or detrimental to — student learning. These solutions, drawn from within the urban context, are not mutually exclusive from solutions drawn from other contexts. They may, however, emerge as more important for urban schools or come with important lessons relative to implementation within the urban context.

Urban educators commonly lamented what they perceive as a lack of well-defined and accessible knowledge and technical assistance to help them improve their schools. However, they did define a range of district- and school-level practices, policies and programs that they believe are central to urban students' success. Their comments suggest that while districts provide many of the resources that support school improvement, success is determined at the school level, where strategies and resources are implemented. They suggest that **higher performing schools are more proactive and balanced in their approach to three critical domains, which form a foundation for success in urban schools. They include:**

- **School Leadership and Staffing**
- **School Culture**
- **Curriculum and Instruction**

There is no lack of research suggesting the value of effective practices in these three domains. However, in the context of this study, they were arrived upon through a thorough analysis and consideration of the factors that interview respondents believed were supporting and hindering success in their schools, as well as the researchers' observations of the differences between higher and lower performing schools within each district and across all of the study districts. Thus this conclusion was driven by the interview findings as opposed to a presupposed conceptual framework.

Why is a strategic focus on these three factors fundamental to success in urban schools? As presented in the model on the next page, a school's leadership and staffing, school culture, and curriculum and instructional strategies define the student experience. In turn, the school operates within the context of the district, which provides the school with a variety of human, instructional, and operational resources and supports, as well as with strategic direction. Both the district and the school function within the larger context of the community, and the student operates within both the community and his or her specific home context.

This research underscores that the community/home has complex and profound influence on the educational process. Educators noted the ways in which poverty,

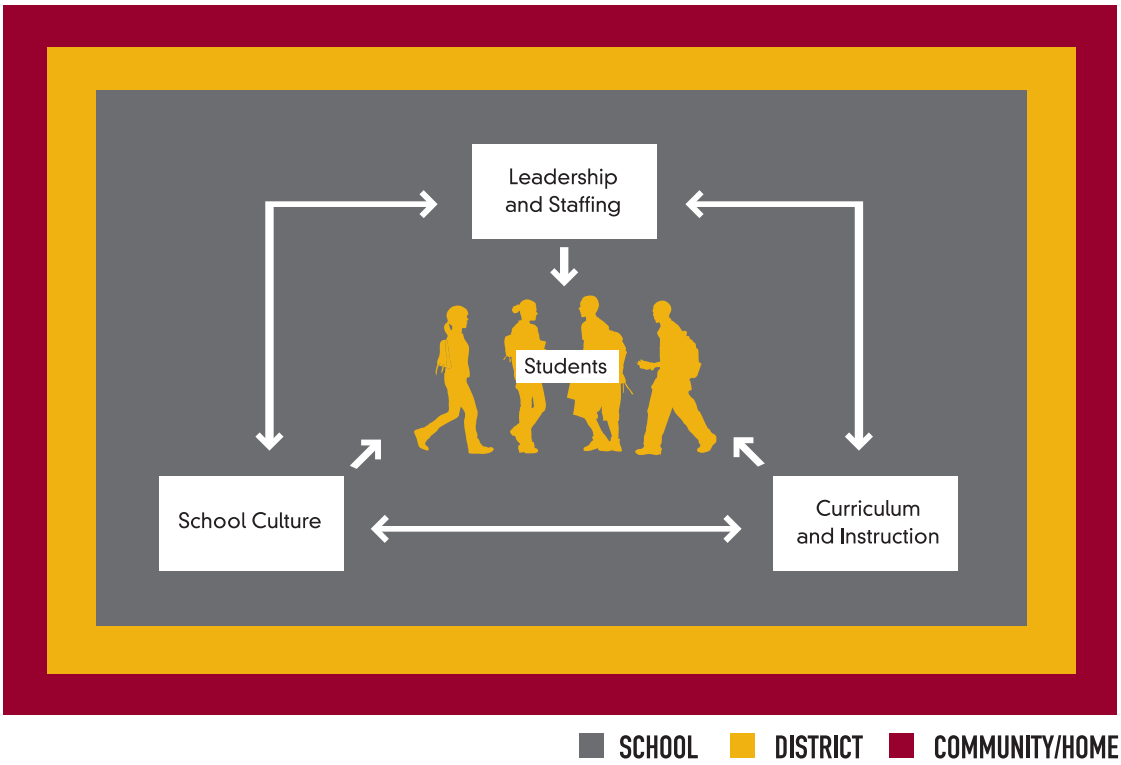
Within higher performing schools, strategies focusing on leadership and staffing, school culture, and curriculum and instruction coalesce to provide a robust intervention to address the complex challenges confronting urban students. The highest performing schools displayed intense and balanced focus on these three domains.

housing insecurity, low educational attainment and high rates of ESL limit many parents' focus on and ability to support their children's education, as well as a school's ability to collaborate with the community and individual families. These perspectives illuminate the correlation between urban demography and low student achievement and clarify the challenge faced by many urban schools and students. They also underscore that ***the challenge is not defined by the potential of urban students, which is boundless, but by the values and resources of the community and home context in which students are immersed***, which may detract from student readiness and receptivity to education.

Accordingly, strategies for educational reform in urban districts must consider the need to mitigate adverse community and home factors that may affect disproportionately high numbers of students. It is a challenge that, if left unaddressed in the primary grades, is likely to increase as students grow older, are confronted with mounting educational deficits and become more inclined to embrace the values and attitudes of their peers. These attitudes frequently do not support a turnaround in student performance, but may instead foster a distancing from the goal of educational attainment.

The three-pronged approach recommended by this research is intended to ensure that urban students are fully supported in the educational environment. This means that they receive services from caring and well-qualified educators, who have access to appropriate instructional resources and methods, and that they receive their education in a school setting with clearly defined cultural expectations that both nurture and demand student achievement. While attention to these strategies cannot guarantee student success, it can ensure that all children have an opportunity to succeed.

Our findings suggest that there is no one simple model for improving student achievement in urban schools. Not every higher performing school was outstanding in its address of all three areas, nor were all of the lower performing schools entirely lacking in these domains. And schools did not necessarily attend to these domains in exactly the same ways. In addition, some noteworthy practices may have gone undetected by this research. Notwithstanding this, the following exploration of key practices related to leadership and staffing, school culture, and curriculum and instruction should provide a solid foundation for those seeking strategies to improve student success in urban schools.



SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND STAFFING

That school leadership and staffing strategies are critical to student achievement is not surprising. After all, these are the people who translate the strategic direction and resources provided by the district into direct services to students. This section presents the leadership and staffing-related practices that differentiated higher performing from their lower performing counterparts. It also identifies district-level strategies that were acknowledged as beneficial across nearly all schools and discusses differences in how schools utilized those resources.

At the onset, it is important to note that this study affirms the critical role of school leadership. Most leaders of higher performing schools were consistently described by their staff as exceptional and central to school success. The defining characteristic of effective leaders may be their ability to motivate staff and marshal resources in support of school improvement. Their willingness to move past the status quo and advocate for what they believe works, even if it runs contrary to district policy, also figures prominently in their success.

It is critical that principals use all available discretion and opportunity to hire the "right" people. The hiring process should not be passive, as staffing is too critical to leave to chance. Unfortunately, principals' authority to interview and hire whomever they believe to be the best available candidate is often limited.

Although leaders of schools in our lower performing cohort were often respected and appreciated by their staff, far less compelling connections were drawn between student achievement and leadership practice. At the same time, some principals who were newly appointed to lower performing schools were proactively repositioning their schools in hopes of boosting achievement.

The following are essential practices that define effective school leaders and their approach to staffing. They reflect practices described as central to many higher performing schools' success. These practices were often either not noted or explicitly described as lacking by staff of lower achieving schools. We note where practices are not exclusive to one or the other cohort of schools.

The Entrepreneurial Leader

Effective leaders actively sought and acted upon new strategies to improve their schools, and communicated these strategies clearly to staff. They embraced innovation and risk-taking in the classroom, but also managed it, so as to protect the bottom line concern of effective instruction. They were not complacent and did not allow their staff to be either. Some were adept at garnering resources and forging partnerships with community organizations, but only to the extent that the resources aligned with the school's mission and objectives. Flexible and reflective in their approach, principals of higher performing schools often delegated responsibilities, distributing leadership in order to build capacity within the school.

The Right People in the Right Roles

Effective leaders used all available discretion and opportunity to hire the "right" people. The clear message was that the hiring process should not be passive, because staffing is too critical to leave to chance. Unfortunately, principals' authority to interview and hire whomever they believe to be the best available candidate was often reported to be limited. Principals who had this discretion often hired teachers they had worked with in other schools, which helped to ensure a good "fit" between leaders and staff. Some schools held positions open for extended periods of time — or revised or eliminated positions — rather than hiring a candidate or retaining a member of staff whom they felt was ill-suited to the school or position. Several principals of higher performing schools had the opportunity to replace a substantial number of staff at the onset of their tenure.

Effective leaders maximized staff effectiveness by placing them in the right roles. This sometimes meant pushing people out of their comfort zones. For some teachers, this meant leaving the classroom to serve as an instructional coach or serving as a mentor to a new teacher. For others, it meant taking a new grade assignment that would allow them to remediate the skills of incoming students (e.g., grade 9) or students who are in key MCAS years, such as grade 4 or 10. Title 1 staff and other specialists were sometimes deployed to assist less effective teachers or those with large or complex classroom populations.

SCHOOL:
Muriel Snowden International School (Grade 9 to 12). Boston, MA.

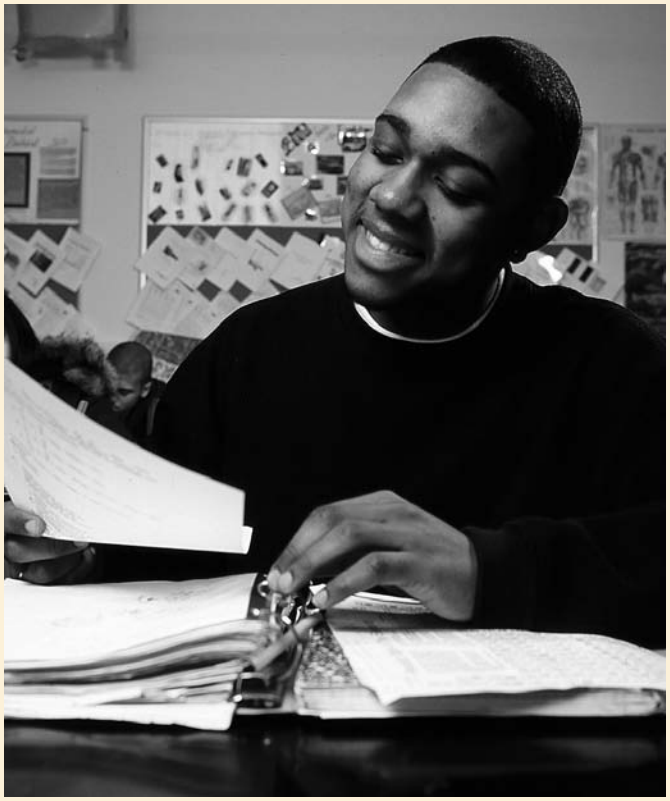
HEADMASTER:
Dr. Gloria Coulter has served in this role for 24 years.

2006 DATA:*
450 students. 70% low income, 94% non-white, 43% first language not English.

Muriel Snowden International School

Dr. Gloria Coulter has served as headmaster of Snowden for 24 years. She is an articulate and experienced educator who conveys a deep commitment to the school and a clear vision and strategy for accomplishing its mission. Her leadership team has great and varied experience, and serves as a catalyst for school improvement. The team is focused on the specific goal of preparing students for college through a multi-dimensional international studies curriculum. This clarity of purpose provides a sound basis for decisions related to the pursuit of grant and program resources, as well as curriculum and instructional planning. Snowden has proven adept in its ability to attract and maintain connection to valuable outside resources. Most prominent are ties to the Harvard Leadership Development Initiative and the Calderwood Foundation, as well as several colleges and universities that provide student interns.

The Calderwood Writing Initiative focuses on improving teachers' writing skills and changing how they think about writing in their teaching. The program started with twelve volunteer participants in 2004 and over 50% of the school's teachers have now participated. Calderwood offers much more than the standard "sit and listen" professional development program. Teachers must write extensively and share what they write in discussion and through formal and informal publications. What they learn through this process translates into thoughtful writing assignments and feedback, not only in ELA, but in other classes, such as history, theatre and science.



Snowden has participated in the Harvard Leadership Development Initiative for several years. In addition to working directly with a "change" coach, leaders and teachers attend several PD events each year focusing on a wide range of subjects, such as managing change, student engagement, data analysis, and curriculum and instruction. They are facilitated by faculty of the Harvard Graduate School of Education or other guest experts. Harvard provides this professional development to Snowden free of charge and "without strings," which is a key concern to Dr. Coulter, who is wary of grant requirements that distract from core objectives.

*Data source: School and District Profiles data from Massachusetts Department of Education (http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/). Student population data in case study sidebars correspond to the time at which the case study was completed.

Staffing to Support Key Initiatives

The support teachers receive in implementing school-wide improvement strategies was central to their success. Teachers in higher performing schools frequently characterized their principals as demanding, but also as extremely supportive of teachers who are trying to meet those demands. There was a motivational aspect to principals' support — a sense that they share a common commitment — and this often equated to high morale and energized staff within higher performing schools. This support often manifested in tangible terms as staffing and material support to the implementation of school priorities.

Instructional coaches were central to supporting instruction in every school we visited. Generally mandated and supported by the district, these coaches are usually ELA or math specialists, sometimes with secondary responsibility for social studies or science curricula. Their roles were largely defined by the district, but principals in higher performing schools deployed them particularly well. Principals frequently had authority to hire these staff and emphasized getting the right people into these roles. Coaches are vital resources and there is a strong consensus that districts should continue to prioritize funding for these positions.

Teachers were clear that collegial support is critical to working through instructional and behavioral problems as they arise. Staff of several higher performing schools emphasized the "open door" culture within their school and described the ability to engage their colleagues as critical to school success. Development of a collegial staff was not characterized as an accidental phenomenon. It was commonly attributed to selective hiring and retention of staff, as well as to school scheduling and staffing strategies that created time for faculty to meet to plan, problem solve and support one another.

A few lower performing schools lacked staff resources in comparison to their paired school. The basic staffing for schools within each district was generally very similar. However, in those few instances where variation within a district was noted, the lower performing school oftentimes had fewer staff resources, and noted that they had less instructional support and scheduling flexibility to support planning. The cause was not always clear, but sometimes related to school size, the placement of grant programs, or the legacy of programs within a building. While low staffing levels were not commonly the difference driving achievement, they did in some cases impede behaviors that appear to support success.

SCHOOL:
Frank H. Freedman Elementary School (K to 5). Springfield, MA.

PRINCIPAL:
Dr. Gloria Williams has served in this role for 14 years.

2006 DATA:
219 students. 81% low income, 84% non-white, 17% first language not English.

Frank H. Freedman Elementary School

Teachers emphasize that the Freedman Elementary School works well because Principal Williams has shaped the staff over time. One teacher offered, "After the principal, success comes from staff who expect the same from these students that they would from their own children and 'take it personally.' The boss shouldn't have to push, but should just direct teachers who take on student success as a mission." Another teacher added, "She chooses good people to work here. She doesn't want to have to watch over her teachers, rather, she instills responsibility in us. She weeds out people who don't feel this way and what remains are people with a true passion for kids in the building." Williams acknowledges that staff turnover may have been a necessary component of the school's improvement.

Dr. Williams also deploys staff to achieve maximum impact and support key instructional objectives. As an example, her entire staff supports the school's "literacy framework." Per district guidelines, Freedman provides 2.5 hours of daily ELA instruction. All of the school's content specialists — including science, music/drama, physical education, ELL, and ESL teachers — serve as "curriculum support" teachers during the ELA block. This ensures two teachers are in every classroom during this critical time of the day. Paraprofessionals are utilized in the same way. All of these staff received literacy instruction training to ensure they can fill these roles capably.

Leader and Staff Development

A commitment to professional growth is essential. There was broad consensus that district-wide professional development (PD) has improved substantially in relevance and content. Teachers generally were eager to participate in PD required to use new curriculum tools or instructional techniques. Leaders and staff of higher performing schools frequently related a tremendous emphasis on professional growth, which set them apart from staff of other schools. Some higher performing schools initiated special training in response to school priorities. Gaining resources and permission to conduct this PD required initiative and sometimes a willingness to advocate at the district level, at which higher performing schools seemed to excel. District PD events provide a rare opportunity to meet teachers from other schools and exchange ideas and practices.

Leader development is an emerging priority and districts are making investments in this regard. Numerous principals had recently begun the National Institute for School Leadership's (NISL) executive development program, which is intended to enhance instructional leadership capacity. They frequently remarked on the value of this training and of the opportunity to meet with other principals to exchange ideas. Some principals in higher performing schools developed leaders among their staff through mentoring or outside training. Two of these schools were noted by district leaders for developing staff who assumed leadership roles in other schools or the district office.

CONCERNS: LEADERSHIP AND STAFFING

- Continuity of leadership is essential and high turnover rates are a problem in many low performing schools. Two principals of higher performing schools retired during the course of this study, underscoring an emerging problem.
- Principals often lack the authority to make key hiring decisions, frequently due to contractual rules. Newer teachers in some districts reported that they are "bumped" from one position or school to another with startling frequency, which may hinder their development.
- Principals feel that they have very limited ability to dismiss tenured staff who are not working effectively in their roles and are not responding to supportive action.
- A reduction in student support and "specials" (art, music, gym) staff in many schools has reduced flexibility to convene other teachers for planning purposes during the regular school day.
- District level principals' and coaches' meetings, as well as PD events, are among the few mechanisms to support district-wide knowledge sharing and dissemination, but they are not typically designed for that purpose and therefore do not necessarily facilitate such activities.
- Even in successful schools with energized staff who feel their principal is supportive, concerns were expressed that teachers are "burning out" because they cannot keep up with what the job demands.

SCHOOL CULTURE

It is easy to view school culture as a "soft" variable, subordinate to more overtly measurable or operational considerations, such as teacher qualifications or the tools and techniques used to bring the curriculum to life in the classroom. In fact, interviews indicate that school culture is where the battle to educate urban students may be won or lost, and that oftentimes it is the commitment that higher performing urban schools make to establish a positive school culture that distinguishes them from less effective schools.

There is no single, agreed upon definition of school culture. As defined through interviews of school leaders and staff, it manifests as a set of core beliefs and expectations that are internalized to the point that they guide the actions and reactions of both staff and students alike. In essence, school culture is a known sense of "how we operate" and "what we strive for" in these buildings. This definition is generally consistent with conceptions of school culture defined in the academic literature. Respondents offered thoughtful perspectives on the operative culture within their schools, which are presented in this section. However, it is important first to understand why this strategic focus emerges as a pivotal factor in urban students' success.

Nationwide, there is a well-documented crisis in the initial readiness and long-term success of economically disadvantaged urban students. Adverse community and home factors certainly do not affect all students equally and some urban students benefit from their community and home life. However, in the aggregate, problems endemic to many urban neighborhoods, such as poverty, housing instability, limited parental educational attainment and limited English language skills correlate negatively with achievement on standardized tests such as MCAS. According to educators, school culture is a critical tool to remediate these adverse educational factors.

A positive school culture works because it helps remediate some of the disadvantages that are common within urban communities. It does this by providing a framework to guide adult and student behaviors and goal-setting within the school context. This framework may be consistent with that fostered in the home or community, but it may also present values and expectations that are higher or more clearly communicated than they are in those other contexts. ***In addition to enhancing students' predisposition to follow a successful path, a healthy school culture can also catalyze school staff, increasing their motivation, focus and efficiency.***

Ultimately, school culture can create a positive group affiliation that helps both students and staff to accept and embrace specific attitudes, goals and behaviors that support student success. It is not a panacea and will not eliminate competing beliefs and priorities that staff may hold or students may encounter outside the school setting, but it does establish a baseline expectation that can greatly motivate and influence both groups at the individual and collective level. Following are observations related to staff and student culture.

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Staff Culture

School principals (and headmasters) are commonly said to "set the tone" in their building. Interviews affirm this viewpoint and highlight that school culture doesn't just take care of itself. ***Staff of higher performing schools commonly attributed success to their leaders' persistent focus on building healthy staff and student cultures.*** As visitors to many schools, the research team observed that staff in higher performing schools were generally upbeat and energized. In contrast, staff of several lower performing schools described negative dynamics and isolation among or between leaders and staff. Following are some of the key attributes of staff culture in the higher performing urban schools we visited. These include a unified vision, collegial relationships, shared accountability and a belief in teacher efficacy.

SCHOOL:
May Street Elementary School (K to 6).
Worcester, MA

PRINCIPAL:
Karrie Allen has served in this role for 6 years.

2006 DATA:
244 students. 41% low income, 41% non-white, 30% first language not English.

May Street Elementary School

Staff commitment and buy-in to major school improvement initiatives was cited as a key reason for May Street's success. This shared vision started with the school's "Genre Initiative," which engaged staff to understand why students were struggling with genre-related questions on the ELA MCAS test. Together, they inventoried the school's classroom literature and identified gaps in the curriculum. After exhaustive discussions, the school purchased new materials and set about improving students' knowledge through consistent new curriculum tools and instruction. The initiative was viewed as a school-wide success and its results influenced other positive changes.

The Genre Initiative was crucial to achieving staff buy-in to future changes, in large part because of the process that led to its success. That process became a model for how the school works. At May Street, change occurs through open communication and shared decision-making, and is managed carefully by the principal, who leads by example. She allows staff to both identify and design the solutions to problems, giving them ownership of the improvement process. This has resulted in a 'We're in this together' dynamic that has blossomed in an environment where no one, especially the principal, looks to take credit.

This process is made possible by the school's emphasis on time to meet and plan. May Street has adopted a schedule that allows for weekly faculty meetings throughout the year — one for teachers in K–2 and the other for teachers in grades 3–6. These groups meet separately every other week. Each meeting has an agenda and is attended by the principal, but is facilitated by teachers. These meetings are very focused and productive, typically dealing with curriculum and instructional issues, sharing of student work and problem-solving.

Creating a Unified Vision

Higher performing schools were coherent in their approach to operation and improvement. Leaders and staff expressed a common vision, goals and methods for pursuing school-wide objectives. These objectives focused on effective instructional practices, but also on a commitment to creating a caring, well-disciplined and learning-focused culture. While a unified vision was not unique to the higher performing schools, it was far more common among them. Discussions of key practices in lower performing schools often varied widely across interview groups and reflected a lack of common focus or method. This was sometimes attributed to a lack of trust or to poor communication within the building.

Clear communication of school priorities and the opportunity for staff to give input to those priorities were often noted to be keys to a unified vision. Some interviews suggested that bringing faculty together to develop the state mandated School Improvement Plan (SIP) was a unifying process, but others reported that few staff were substantially involved. SIPs were seldom cited as critical to school success. There was a concern that SIP development can be so data-focused that it discourages a focus on how building culture factors into achievement and that something is therefore lost in the process. Leaders of higher performing staff often noted that they had moved away from administrative foci in their whole-staff meetings to focus more on planning and dialogue. Principals in some lower performing schools had taken this step too, but it was clear that some staff felt they had no real input to these meetings.

Collegial Relationships: Ongoing Communication and Collaboration

Schools whose staff conveyed a unified vision frequently commented on the open and productive nature of communication and collaboration within their school. These factors are vital to maintaining a unified vision as it comes under stress. Most schools' staff said leaders send a positive message when they are open and responsive to staff ideas and concerns, and prioritize time to plan and discuss issues confronting their school. These behaviors were more commonly described in higher performing schools, but not in lower performers. In a sense, leaders must prioritize time to "be collegial" and engage in substantive discussions about instruction, school operation and the actions required to improve school effectiveness.

Common planning time (CPT), whether organized by grade, department or some other basis, was a key support to collegial engagement and development of a unified vision. Leaders in higher performing schools emphasized the need for this time to be focused and agenda-driven. Some schools substantially reworked daily schedules to maximize CPT, while others were unable to devise such a solution. There was a near universal interest in securing more time to plan and focus on the implementation of new initiatives. Unfortunately, cutbacks in "specials" (such as music, art, and gym) have not only limited students' exposure to those subjects, but have created coverage issues that further limit CPT.

Staff of several higher performing schools kept their classroom doors open and actively engaged and supported each other, which illustrated the high level of trust within the building. Reflecting on their experience in other schools, they considered this unusual. In contrast, staff of some lower performing schools commented on their isolation from other teachers and related little sense that leaders listen to or respond to their ideas or concerns. They also reflected little sense of collegial support or interest in pursuing it. Professional development programs and school-based working groups were noted as useful opportunities for staff to engage one another and develop trust, if they are well run.

Shared Accountability

Higher performing schools exhibited a school-wide commitment to success and their staff emphasized shared responsibility for the implementation of school-wide initiatives and policies, particularly with regard to student discipline and achievement. In contrast, interviews in many lower performing schools suggested that leaders and staff were inconsistent in their implementation and support of discipline or instructional practice. The result was fragmentation of practice and a weakening of the collective school vision and culture.

Staff from these higher performing buildings often described the "it's not my job" attitude they observed in other schools and emphasized the value of having everyone attuned to what's going on in the hallways. Knowledge and communication regarding student behavior were noted to avert larger problems and sometimes lead to counseling referrals for students who need help. Unfortunately, counselors were generally in short supply. Some small schools had as little as one day per week of a counselor's time, limiting their ability to work with students or staff on a consistent basis.

SCHOOL:
William B. Rogers Middle School (6 to 8).
Boston, MA

PRINCIPAL:
Dr. Michael McCarthy, served in this role for 13 years (now retired).

2006 DATA:
560 students. 73% low income, 91% non-white, 24% first language not English.

William B. Rogers Middle School

The Rogers's success in fostering student achievement is built upon the school's bedrock values of respect and professionalism, which were repeatedly emphasized by school staff. As one teacher noted, the story starts with these values "because respect and a willingness to work hard must be instilled" before you can have effective instruction. The successful integration of these values into the school's daily life was largely attributed to the consistent messages and behaviors modeled by Principal McCarthy and emulated by his staff.

At The Rogers, respect is a multi-directional phenomenon that encompasses the behaviors not only of students, but also of teachers and administrators. While staff noted that not every member of the school community lives up to the ideal, they asserted that it was nonetheless a pervasive theme and a deeply held value. The respectful environment has nurtured a sense of community and collegiality within the school. The principal shows his respect to students every morning, greeting them as they arrive at school, shaking hands and making inquiries about school and family. In this way, he connects with and shows his personal interest in them. He also clearly conveys his high expectations regarding social conduct and academic effort.

Among other means, The Rogers uses a simple communication tool to monitor student behavior throughout the school day. It is a daily log, commonly referred to as the "Clipboard," which follows each classroom of students as they move from teacher to teacher throughout the day. It offers a running record of those students' individual and collective performance and behavior. It serves as an accountability mechanism for students, a communication tool for teachers, and, through the use of incentives, as a positive inducement for students to do their best each day.

Shared accountability also extended to student achievement. ***Staff of higher performing schools were on-point and consistent with regard to instructional focus and practice, and saw student achievement as a school-wide responsibility.*** This was frequently encouraged by teacher participation in vertical (cross-grade) curriculum planning meetings and the use of student assessment findings, which were less commonly emphasized by staff of lower performing schools. It was suggested that past leaders in some struggling schools did not enforce fidelity of practice, which led to inconsistent quality and focus in instruction.

Accountability mechanisms varied. Some higher performing schools focused on training, common planning and classroom observation, and trusted in the professionalism of staff; while others were more demanding, inspecting lesson plans and student work, and requiring specific visual artifacts be posted in the classroom. Many staff complained that compliance-focused tasks distract from instruction, while others embraced them as reasonable measures that ensure the building is on task. There was no clear finding as to how much oversight and documentation is too much. ***However, an awareness that there is a point at which accountability measures can become overbearing and unproductive is needed.***

Teacher Efficacy

Teachers in higher performing schools projected a sense of empowerment and a belief in their ability to make an impact on students' lives. While they frequently expressed concern regarding factors that were beyond their school's ability to control, they convincingly related their belief that they could make a difference. This sense of efficacy was less prevalent in lower performing schools. Teacher efficacy and morale seemed to correlate and translate directly into enthusiasm for their work. Staff of higher performing schools were typically energized as they described their school and its practices, eager to share their thoughts on the factors that influence student success and motivated by the challenges of teaching in an urban setting. This often corresponded with an enthusiasm for new ideas and a willingness to accept change as progress, rather than defend against it.

Teachers' sense of efficacy appeared to be enhanced by recent or historical success with regard to student achievement; the ability of the school to exert control over key aspects of instructional practice; and a belief in the ability of urban students to succeed. Several threats to teacher efficacy were identified, including increasing class sizes, the loss of programs that impact students' school-readiness or need for academic remediation and what were perceived as rigid instructional mandates that emphasized control of process, rather than responsiveness to school mission and student learning.

SCHOOL:
Edgar B. Davis Community School (K to 6*).
Brockton, MA

PRINCIPAL:
Darlene Campbell has served in this role for 6 years.

2006 DATA:
700 students. 73% low income, 72% non-white, 31% first language not English.

Edgar B. Davis Community School

In 2001, Davis Elementary was a school with poor student achievement and discipline. The school's new principal, Darlene Campbell, believed that student achievement was an end-product of a healthy school culture, motivated people with high expectations and a curriculum that was well conceived and implemented. She acknowledged that no leader could effect these changes without the support of building staff, and believed leaders and staff must pursue their goals together, as partners. As a veteran educator and administrator, she believed that a leader's role was not simply to articulate clear goals and implement new programs, but to support staff and students throughout the implementation process, and to be as accountable to them as they were to her.

Principal Campbell moved aggressively to create the healthy school culture she believed would support student achievement. She made it clear that she would support teachers and give them flexibility, but that they were expected to be team players and to be accountable for their work. Staff comments suggest that Campbell did not ask for cooperation and accountability, so much as demand it, but that this tough approach was accepted because she, in turn, was accountable to them. It was also suggested that "this school may not be for everyone, there's lots of accountability for student performance," but the teachers who chose to stay were clearly energized by the school's success and believed in their efficacy.

* The Edgar B. Davis Community School converted from a K to 6 to a K to 8 configuration in September 2007. This change was subsequent to the case study process.

Principal Campbell took a similar approach with students, which may best be illustrated by two initiatives. First, she "shocked the system" by cracking down on disruptive behaviors and consistently issuing tough consequences. This caused an initial spike in suspensions, but changed students' perceptions of what was acceptable, resulting in much better behavior. Another key was "Play by Play," a program that she developed to motivate students and instill in them a belief that they can achieve academic success if they work together with teachers and take responsibility for their effort. Several teachers said they were initially skeptical, but now believe that this program is effective because they've seen the results.

SCHOOL:
Lt. Clayre Sullivan School, Holyoke, MA (K–8).

PRINCIPAL:
Christine Zajac has served in this role for 3 years.

2007 DATA:
670 students. 71% low income, 63% non-white, 18% first language not English.

Lt. Clayre Sullivan School

Christine Zajac became principal of the Sullivan School in 2004 after serving 15 years as its Assistant Principal. Within Holyoke, the school is known for its consistent leadership, high standards and positive school culture. The Sullivan's teachers are energized and the school's success is largely attributed to selective hiring practices and its reputation as a demanding teaching environment, which have rendered a capable and mission-driven staff. "This is a high-energy school with high expectations of teachers and students" was a consistent refrain during interviews.

The school and its staff exude a sense of caring and commitment. Classroom walls are brightly painted and window shades in every classroom are hand-decorated in playful themes. These interior decorating projects were done by staff on their own time, with some assistance from parents. Routines and rituals guide the school day — in the classroom, the corridors and on the playground. In this way they manage and define student conduct, and constantly reinforce the school's respectful culture.

Student Culture

Staff culture sets an essential foundation for student culture, as it establishes a set of agreed upon norms that collectively define "the way we do things." When a student enters a school for the first time, she has little awareness of school culture, but is immediately immersed in it. She will quickly begin to absorb that culture, whether it is orderly or chaotic, consistent or idiosyncratic, accountable or loose. All students share in this process of acculturation. Through it they define their relationship to school and internalize a set of beliefs about what it means to be a student and what they personally and collectively can expect to accomplish.

Higher performing schools displayed a culture that was not merely safe and nurturing, but also challenging, supportive and goal-focused. Some schools were working to maintain long-established traditions and cultures, while others had only recently "turned around." This latter group showed that "out of control" schools can be brought to rein. Understanding that healthy staff cultures in these schools were a prerequisite for healthy student cultures, at least four student-centered cultural foci emerged as central to success, including:

- Developing positive relationships
- Building a positive identity
- Implementing high standards for student achievement
- Implementing high standards for student conduct

Developing Positive Relationships

Respectful peer relationships are critical to maintaining a positive environment for students. Many schools, not just those with high achievement, emphasized the need for respect among children, and among children and adults. There was a more overt emphasis on social and emotional development at the elementary and middle school levels, where various program models have been adopted. Many schools had counseling staff who worked on school-wide programs as well as with individual students. Efforts to develop positive peer relationships often interacted closely with disciplinary practices.

Building a Positive Identity

Many higher performing schools promoted traditions or utilized rituals and routines to create a school identity. They established a positive identity in order to foster a sense among students that they are members of a greater group and to associate a set of positive behaviors and aspirations with that group. Educators viewed this as an effective cultural tool because young people yearn for acceptance and because many lack the structure of a consistent routine in their home life. It was noted that the

effectiveness of this strategy depends upon the consistency with which the rituals, routines and expectations are presented and reinforced throughout the day. Schools commonly focused on themes related to academic excellence and respect. Rituals were often organized around transition times, which are otherwise difficult for students and present management problems to school staff.

Implementing High Standards for Student Achievement

It has become almost cliché to say that educators must believe that every child can become academically proficient. In fact, none of the schools in this study had achieved that level of success. ***Policies and practices in some of the highest performing schools reflected a conviction that students cannot achieve by belief alone. They must also be motivated, supported and held accountable for their performance.*** Educators consistently remarked upon the deficits of incoming students at every level — elementary, middle and high school. Test results suggest that they are not overstating this problem. Some educators reported that social promotion, advancing a student to the next grade level without mastery of grade-level curricula, is common. Many schools now conduct ongoing assessments of skills and knowledge in ELA and math, particularly at the elementary level. However, few appear to actively discuss assessment results with students and use them as a basis for personal goal-setting.

Implementing High Standards for Student Conduct

As important as it is for students to set high goals for achievement, it is equally important that they have a clear understanding of how to conduct themselves in school. Behavior problems affect not only the student exhibiting the negative behavior, but fellow students as well. While programs, interventions, slogans and routines provide positive inputs to student behavior, they must be accompanied by clearly communicated and consistently enforced expectations. This was a hallmark of many of the higher performing schools we visited. No one approach to discipline was emphasized; it was consistency that counted.

Staff of higher performing schools frequently highlighted the effectiveness of the leadership team and/or counselors in addressing behavioral issues. They also noted that their open door culture provided them with the collegial support they needed to avoid unnecessary referrals to the principal or assistant principal's office. Some of these schools had very clear behavioral management plans and protocols in place, which helped to minimize disruptions due to behavioral episodes. Leaders and staff in some lower performing schools seemed at odds regarding discipline, whether it was consistent and who was responsible for it.

Some higher performing schools also identified instruction and transition management as key components of their behavior management strategy. **These schools emphasized the need for students to be busy and engaged in the classroom, and for their day to be well managed.** Quality instruction, they emphasized, keeps students engaged, while limiting and carefully structuring transitions reduces the likelihood of problems in the hallways.

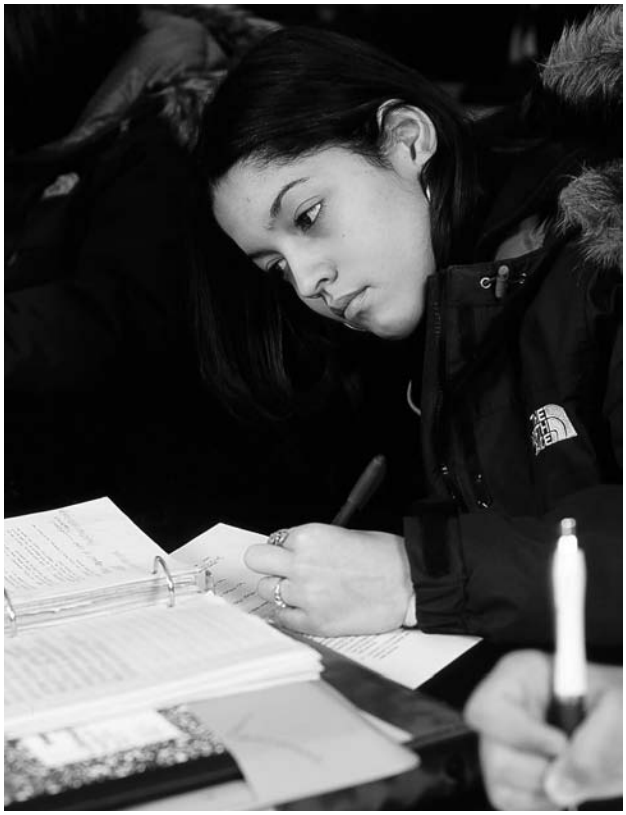
CONCERNS: SCHOOL CULTURE

- There is no policy-driven mandate to improve school culture and many schools therefore find it difficult to prioritize time for activities that develop and reinforce positive culture.
- School–wide planning facilitates staff communication and collaboration, which is central to culture. This time is in short supply and often focused on other priorities. In many schools, staff cutbacks have reduced the "coverage" needed to support in-school planning time.
- Culture takes time to develop and is easily disrupted, particularly by leadership changes. Staff in several successful schools worried that the culture and traditions they have built will not survive their principal's retirement.
- Many lower performing schools suffer from poor morale, which dampens enthusiasm and can lead to a weaker commitment to the school (or even the profession). In contrast, many staff of higher performing schools were energized by the school and their colleagues, and made it a priority to stay.
- Student mobility is a pervasive concern. District curriculum frameworks and pacing mitigate the effects of transience, but don't address differences in school culture. Positive cultural effects take hold gradually, while negative effects may accumulate quickly and be difficult to reverse.
- Many urban students cope with significant upheaval in their home lives, which disrupts their focus in the classroom. Unfortunately, many schools have limited counseling resources and coordination with outside agencies was generally described as poor.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

If well-qualified teachers and specialists, functioning within a healthy school culture, set the stage for student success, then effective instructional strategies are the means to deliver a successful performance. Education reform has directed tremendous energy and resources toward the development and delivery of a more standardized curriculum within Massachusetts schools, beginning with the State Curriculum Frameworks, which outline specific knowledge and skills to be pursued at every grade level for all subjects. MCAS provides periodic assessment of student progress toward mastery of the content and skills outlined in four core subjects — English language arts (ELA), mathematics, science, and history.

The frameworks guide curriculum planning at the district level and implementation at the school level, but fall short of specifying the curriculum tools (or programs) to be employed in pursuit of each standard. All of the districts engaged by this study have developed district-wide curricula for ELA and math and use purchased "turn-key" programs to deliver much of the content of those curricula. Science and history curricula are also in place, however, the programs and resources to support them vary widely.



The study districts commonly provide a range of instructional resources to support curriculum implementation, typically including building-based coaches, targeted professional development, student assessment tools and analysis and, to a lesser extent, instructional technology.

Schools implement these resources at the local level, with varying degrees of autonomy to customize their use of material, program, and personnel resources. The availability of these resources to schools within each district was generally equitable across schools serving the same grade levels (i.e., elementary, middle, K to 8, or high school), with some exceptions These include:

1. Smaller schools tended to have fewer total staff resources, because allocations were in many instances formula driven — based on student census.

2. The placement of substantial building-based grant programs created schools with relative wealth in specific resources in comparison to other schools.

3. Some districts displayed a mix of school buildings, ranging from state-of-the-art to antiquated. Newer buildings often have features not available in older schools, such as computer labs, gym space, libraries and art or music rooms.

These caveats notwithstanding, most districts appear committed to offering similar curriculum and instructional support resources across their schools. ***Considering the impact of these resources on school performance within the same district, it appears that the crucial variable was how these resources were utilized at the school level.***

Following are findings relative to school-level strategies associated with instruction, organized into three broad categories relating to instructional focus, support and monitoring.

Instructional Focus

A Move to Research-based Curricula

All districts and virtually all schools have adopted district-wide, research-based ELA and math programs (such as Open Court Reading or Connected Math), and schools generally report that they have adequate materials to support implementation of these programs. Most districts have invested heavily in developing district-wide K to 12 ELA and math curricula. Investments in science and history vary from one district to the next, but generally lag, particularly at elementary level. ***Use of a district-wide curriculum creates operational efficiencies and builds system consistency.*** This may benefit students who move frequently within the same city, because it increases instructional consistency across schools.

There were some instances where rigid guidelines surrounding implementation of curriculum tools limited the flexibility of schools to take steps to remedy gaps in the curriculum. ***Higher performing schools more frequently challenged these restrictions and preserved their ability to plan and respond instructionally.***

Emphasis on ELA and Math

To date, state and federal testing and accountability systems have emphasized ELA and mathematics.[4] As a result, districts have placed tremendous emphasis on improving ELA and math curriculum and instruction. One indication of this focus is the implementation of ELA and math blocks in the school day. These near-ubiquitous daily instructional blocks, ranging among the study schools from 90 to 150 minutes, are generally set by district policy. Many educators see this focus as essential in urban schools, where these skills are often underdeveloped. However, there are also concerns that the curriculum has narrowed around these subjects, reducing students' exposure to a well-rounded and engaging education.

4) ELA/reading and math exams have been in place for several years. Tests administered in grades 3 (reading), 4 (ELA and math), 6 (math), 7 (ELA), 8 (math) and 10 (ELA and math) have been factored in to schools' Adequate Yearly Progress requirements, which has further incentivized a focus on these specific exams.

SCHOOL:
John Westall Elementary School (K to 5).
Fall River, MA

PRINCIPAL:
Cheryl O'Neil has served in this role for 2 years.

2006 DATA:
216 students. 79% low income, 40% non-white, 25% first language not English.

John Westall Elementary School

Westall has a history of instructional innovation and many school staff referred to it as "the pilot" school for their district. As a result, its staff has an uncommon depth of experience using important techniques such as differentiated instruction, small-group interventions and the use of assessment data to inform instruction. Owing to its long use of "inclusion" to serve students with special needs, the building also boasts several teachers who are dually certified to teach regular and special education, and its instructional assistants have received substantial training.

Westall was the first school in Fall River to implement the Literacy Collaborative (LC) approach to ELA instruction, which emphasizes balanced literacy and focuses on small-group instruction. Westall was very committed to this program and a member of staff was a district LC trainer. However, this program was discontinued in 2004, when the district adopted a Reading First-approved curriculum, Harcourt Trophies. Westall took a nuanced approach to implementing Harcourt, using it as the centerpiece of instruction, but supplementing it with key components of LC, such as Guided Reading and Writers' Workshop.

School and district staff agreed that this blended approach allowed Westall's teachers to utilize Harcourt's wealth of standards-aligned content and still retain the flexibility to differentiate instruction and meet individual learners' needs through LC techniques. Staff emphasized that they use Harcourt extensively, but selectively, designing standards-based lesson plans that take advantage of the curriculum, but do not reflect an obsession with "getting through the book." Westall teachers emphasized the focus within their school on knowing the State Curriculum Frameworks inside and out, and said this was essential to their lesson planning and their efficient use of the Harcourt program.

Focus on Gap Analysis and Response

Leaders and staff frequently reported that off-the-shelf ELA and math programs used by their districts do not fully cover the content or skills required by the state frameworks. They frequently used supplemental programs to cover these "gaps," which were often reported to have been identified at the individual school level. Many educators felt that more could be learned from curriculum pilots and that gaps should be known before implementation and PD begins. Educators in a few schools believed pilots were perfunctory exercises and decried what they saw as little formal evaluation or impact on purchasing decisions. ***Notably, higher performing schools were frequently at the forefront of curriculum and other pilot initiatives. They were also quick to diagnose gaps and develop solutions to them.***

Responding to the Needs of Diverse Learners

Having additional staff in the classroom facilitates small-group work and the need for assistance increases with class size and complexity. Having well-qualified support staff is important in urban classrooms, particularly those that include students with special needs or English language learners. Educators noted the value-added of such "inclusion" classes in cases where they were supported by well-trained paraprofessionals, Title 1 teachers, special education teachers or coaches, but were skeptical of the efficacy of lesser-staffed models. Staffing for these more complex classes was reportedly lean in the middle and upper grades, in particular. In some districts the presence of these resources was fairly even across schools. In those where they were not, higher performing schools generally displayed the richer staffing model.

A few higher performing schools also described an emphasis on differentiated instruction, which they viewed as critical in urban schools, where many students perform years below grade level. This emphasis was developed through these schools' history and deep commitment to serving special needs students in an inclusion setting. Leaders in many of the study schools felt their staff would benefit from additional training in this technique, but noted that it requires time to become proficient at this skill.

An Emphasis on Remediation

The need for an increased focus on remediation of basic literacy and math skills was noted by educators at the elementary, middle and high school levels. Higher performing schools more frequently found resources to support it. Educators emphasized that they need additional time and the flexibility to use a range of teaching strategies in order to move these students toward grade level or help them pass MCAS. Overall, elementary schools displayed the greatest capacity in this regard, with resources such as Reading Recovery and Reading First devoted to early identification and intervention. Teachers in higher grade levels find it increasingly difficult to find time to remediate basic skills, as they are responsible for presenting other content related to their subject areas, which allows little time for instruction targeted to basic skills.

Several schools, including several of the higher performing schools, cited after-school programs and Saturday or summer school programs as critical opportunities to both increase the time available for instruction and use alternative strategies to reach students who aren't responding to conventional interventions during the school day. ***Higher performing schools frequently noted the role of their extended day, weekend or summer school programs in student success.*** They target these programs to the students who they believe are best positioned to benefit from them. They staff them with teachers, where possible, and blend remediation with other enrichment activities that attract and retain participants. Unfortunately, these programs are generally grant-funded and schools report that many of their programs have been discontinued or are in jeopardy of such. There is little indication that these programs are sustainable without ongoing outside financial support.

A Focus on Efficiency

The most commonly reported obstacle to improved student achievement was the lack of time. Educators overwhelmingly reported that curriculum standards are more explicit and comprehensive than they were in the past. At the same time, student assessment and program monitoring requirements have risen and cut into time for instruction. Because the length of the school day has remained largely unchanged, ***most schools have adopted a range of strategies to increase efficiency and time on instruction.*** The most common of these has been to reduce lunch and recess time, to minimize transitions between class periods or to eliminate events or elective projects that don't relate directly to the priorities defined in the curriculum or school improvement plan.

Higher performing schools described an emphasis on school-wide planning and knowledge of the state curriculum frameworks as central to instructional efficiency. They commonly identified the need to be selective in their lesson planning, so that instruction focuses on the most relevant elements of instructional texts and workbooks. The notion that a teacher needs to "get through the book" was in these cases replaced by an understanding that she or he must utilize the book effectively to deliver the curriculum. Higher performing schools accomplished this through building awareness of the frameworks, as well as through grade-level and vertical (cross-grade) instructional planning.

Leaders of some higher performing schools avoided grants or programs that distract from the school's core objectives. They emphasized that funding is not pursued for its own sake, but because it fits with school goals and philosophy. Many schools also noted that extended day and weekend programs are among of the simplest means through which to expand the time available for instruction. A minority of teachers indicated that they would be interested in extending the school day if they were compensated proportionately.

CONCERNS: INSTRUCTIONAL FOCUS

- Testing has greatly focused schools on ELA and math instruction, often at the expense of other subjects considered integral to a comprehensive education, including the arts. This is particularly true at the elementary level.
- Teachers note that curriculum tools often fail to fully address the frameworks or include extraneous content. This discovery process often seems to occur inefficiently, one school at a time.
- Educators described a constant "churn" of curriculum and programs in some districts. By the time they've mastered a tool or technique, the strategy has changed.
- Staffing models for classes integrating substantial numbers of students with special needs or limited facility with English are often lean, particularly in upper grade levels.
- Extended day, Saturday and summer school programs provide an opportunity for academic remediation, the need for which is widespread. These programs are not widely available.
- Teachers want flexibility to devote extra time to content that students are struggling to master. Some worry that the curriculum has become "a mile wide and an inch deep" and pacing intensifies this.
- Teachers worry that reduced lunch and recess time, and limits on just-for-fun activities, have drained the fun out of students' days, impeding social development and enjoyment of school.
- Elementary educators view kindergarten and pre-school as essential to urban students' success. Some cities have yet to implement mandatory full-day kindergarten, leaving students unprepared for first grade.
- Common planning time was frequently found to be essential to building-level instructional planning, but was frequently found to be in short supply.

SCHOOL:
Sgt. William H. Carney Academy (pre-K to 6).
New Bedford, MA.

PRINCIPAL:
Marcia Anselmo served in this role for 20 years (now retired).

2006 DATA:
620 students. 76% low income, 51% non-white, 8% first language not English.

Sgt. William H. Carney Academy

Carney Academy benefits from the support of two math and two ELA coaches, as well as a grant-funded Reading First Specialist. All have prior experience as classroom teachers or Title 1 specialists and have participated in training provided by Rigby Literacy or through the Mass Insight Math Achievement Partnership. All Carney Academy teachers are required to meet with a math and ELA coach at least once per week to ensure that lesson plans are implemented and supported as necessary. The principal reviews meeting schedules to ensure that these meetings occur.

Coaches were described as central to the support of instruction, providing teachers with coaching and mentoring, assisting in student assessment and data analysis, supporting academic intervention groups, and developing curriculum maps and pacing schedules to guide standards-based lesson planning. As members of the school's leadership team, they also serve as an extension of the principal and were in some cases noted to serve as a buffer between the principal and staff, allowing teachers to openly discuss their needs with an instructional leader not involved in their evaluation.

Coaches led the development of curriculum maps and pacing guides to facilitate the math, science and social studies curricula. Teachers explained that, prior to these maps, they frequently had to improvise and jump from one book to another to cover the standards. The maps have lessened the complexity of this task and support more consistent lesson planning across classes. Lesson plan books are collected and reviewed for content and pacing by the principal and assistant principal on a bi-weekly basis. The fact that this monitoring is not done by the coaches is significant, as it reinforces their role as teacher supports rather than supervisors.

Instructional Support

Educators identified a range of instructional resources that are crucial to curriculum implementation and have a direct impact on school effectiveness. In addition to staff development (see page 10), salient factors include supplemental instructional leadership and staff, student assessments, instructional technology, instructional planning time and parent resources.

Supplemental Instructional Leadership and Staff

Urban districts provide a variety of staff resources to support building-level instruction. Among them, ***instructional coaches, identified by a range of titles, have perhaps the broadest impact on instructional design and delivery.*** While coaches' roles vary across (and sometimes within) districts, they commonly lead or assist the principal with the: implementation of curriculum maps; collection, analysis, and interpretation of student assessment data to guide instruction; coaching and mentoring of teachers; and monitoring of classroom practices and instruction. They may also develop school-level curriculum maps. In some schools, they may work as co-teachers, supporting small-group instruction.

In many schools, coaches function as extensions of the principal, providing instructional leadership without the encumbrance of supervisory status, which can hinder communication and the coaching relationship between leaders and staff. Coaches typically serve on their school's instructional leadership team and play a role in development of the school improvement plan. They also frequently meet with other building-based coaches as part of a district team and in this way can serve as an important conduit for communication across schools and with a district. ***Coaches were more frequently reported to play prominent leadership roles in higher performing schools, though this was not exclusively the case.***

Leaders emphasized that coaches are among their most important hires. One new principal of a very low performing school noted that the first thing she needed to do was find a way to remove and replace the school's coaches, whom she considered a poor fit for the role. These positions enjoy varying degrees of stability, sometimes assigned based on need, as defined by MCAS performance. These positions are sometimes grant-funded and they are relatively new positions in some districts. ***Instability in school assignment or uncertainty regarding districts' long-term commitment to coaching positions can cause well-qualified teachers to opt against assuming these positions.***

Other supplemental staff resources were universally cited as critical to student success. Title 1 staff, special or regular education paraprofessionals, and inclusion specialists are influential at the classroom level, while behavioralists, technology specialists and counselors all increase schools' capacity to focus on the diverse needs of students. Availability of this variety of resource types was uneven and frequently driven by school size.

Student Assessment

Staff in higher performing schools more frequently described the centrality of student assessment to their instructional planning and delivery. One of the greatest impediments to use of student assessment data appears to be the need for "translation" from a set of results into an effective instructional response to those results. Several higher performing schools were noted by district leaders to have principals with this particular skill and that was strongly supported in staff interviews. While MCAS is the benchmark for school performance, school leaders and staff find that ***assessments that return quick results are far more valuable than MCAS is to ongoing instructional strategy,*** as they provide an immediate basis for focusing lesson plans at the grade, classroom or individual level.

While assessment data are beneficial, educators also noted that a proliferation of assessments can distract from instruction. This concern was particularly common at the elementary level, where a greater volume of ongoing assessment was reported. Some schools presented assessment calendars showing near-constant assessment activity in the winter and spring months, in particular. These staff maintained that a barrage of assessment made it difficult to maintain instructional continuity. ***Teachers emphasized that schools should assess with purpose and only generate as much data as they can process and act upon.***

Instructional Technology

School-level instructional technology (principally computers and educational software) plays an important role with respect to student assessment and instruction in some schools. However, ***many schools lack functional computers, Internet access or staff with appropriate training to support the use of the technology they do have.*** This is particularly true in small, older elementary and middle schools. Teachers in schools with functional technology noted how well students respond to computer-based instruction and implementing it in their school projects. In the best-equipped and staffed schools, instructional technology was also a critical support to student assessment. Equipment without qualified staff was noted to result in poor utilization.

SCHOOL:
Tracy Elementary School (K to 5).
Lynn, MA.

PRINCIPAL:
Dr. Mary Dill has served in this role for 7 years.

2007 DATA:
215 students. 84% low income, 82% non-white, 54% first language not English.

Tracy Elementary School

A key element of the Tracy Elementary School's success is the effective use of its Leadership Team, which consists of the principal, a curriculum instructional teacher (a curriculum specialist whose role is defined by the school), a Title 1 literacy teacher, an MCAS math specialist and the school's lead special education teacher. This team leads curriculum implementation and supports teachers by assisting classroom instruction, providing professional development, analyzing student assessment data and performing MCAS tutoring. This team provides an individualized response to each classroom's needs.

Leadership Team members spend much of the day in the classroom facilitating instruction. They participate in small-group instruction and provide teachers with the support and insight needed to work more effectively with students. At the school-level, this team works with teachers and the principal to identify and resolve gaps between the curriculum and the state frameworks. In addition to helping staff with special education issues, the lead special education teacher also helps staff solve behavior problems, which are infrequent at Tracy.

The Leadership Team also analyzes student assessment data and translates them into findings that are meaningful to teachers, allowing them to tailor their instruction to better meet the needs of their students. Because the team is comprised of personnel who provide direct classroom services across the school and also monitor progress through data analysis, they both provide instructional support and reinforce classroom-level accountability for curriculum implementation.

SCHOOL:
Edward F. Parthum School (K to 8).
Lawrence, MA.

PRINCIPAL:
Sharman Sullivan has served in this role for 5 years.

2006 DATA:
1250 students. 85% low income, 84% non-white, 71% first language not English.

Edward F. Parthum School

The Lawrence Public School District provides notable support to students who are English Language Learners (ELL). It funds after-school and summer school programs targeted to these students, and provides teachers with PD focused on strategies for assisting students whose first language is not English. The district also promotes a "Buddy System" in which new ELL students are paired with successful Spanish-speaking students who can help translate and otherwise support them.

Parthum School teachers use a range of strategies to foster success among ELL students. Many staff members speak Spanish and one teacher from the Dominican Republic was noted to serve as a cross-cultural bridge for many students. Beginning level ELL students are often assigned to a small group that is facilitated by an ESL teacher. School-wide, staff relate great sensitivity to issues that affect second language learners. They use multiple instructional methods, such as visuals, graphic organizers and simulated situations, so that students do not have to rely solely on language for understanding. The school conducts an after-school Fast ForWord program, which serves many ELL students, and follows the district's Buddy System guidelines.

Instructional Planning Time

Education reform has created an imperative to plan within public education and higher performing schools stood out in this regard. The imperative for school planning relates to both instructional preparation and the development of collegial relationships among staff and leaders. Many schools altered their schedules or used stipends to increase time for departmental, grade level or whole-school planning. It is difficult to make a broad statement about what schools should do in this time, but what appeared to set higher performing schools apart was the purposeful and collaborative nature of common planning time. On this collaborative theme, staff of some lower performing schools felt that the principal dictated the meeting, which led to lower interest among teachers.

A focus on multi-directional planning was also evident among higher performing schools. In these cases, there was an emphasis on multi-disciplinary planning and integration, as well as on vertical planning across grade levels. These approaches were noted to enhance instructional coordination and understanding among staff of the ways in which instructional accountability is shared across departments and grades.

Parent Resources

The urban context defines many of the resources and experiences available to students outside of the school environment. ***Educators emphasized that parents are among the most fundamental supports to student learning and expressed great concern that many of their students' parents were unavailable or unable to effectively assist them with their assignments.*** Many teachers who had previously taught in more affluent communities highlighted a stark contrast in parent support as a key factor constraining student achievement. Some schools have taken very proactive approaches to engage parents in the academic component of their children's education, but there was little sense of widespread success, even among those schools.

It was evident that the ties between urban schools and their students' parents or guardians are often weak. Getting parents to attend a student performance or open house is positive, but was not noted to improve student performance. Uncertainty was expressed about how to more productively engage parents in the educational aspect of their child's school experience. However, there was some agreement that it will require an intervention that increases parents' interest in education, as well as their ability to assist students with assignments and expose them to experiences that enhance their general fund of knowledge.

CONCERNS: INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

- Coaching positions must be stable and clearly defined to attract qualified candidates. Instability manifests as uncertainty of funding, multi-building assignments and potential school transfers.
- MCAS results are the benchmark of school performance and are useful to curriculum planning, but many respondents were dismayed by the time it takes for results to become available.
- Assessment data are often overwhelming to schools. Some schools feel they have too much information and relate little of the expertise needed to translate them into instructional action.
- Student assessment schedules should be considered carefully and structured to minimize the disruption they cause to classroom instruction and routines. Assess with purpose.
- MCAS may not capture a school's "value-added" to students who arrive well below grade-level. Student mobility and skills deficits are common in urban schools.
- The availability of instructional technology and specialists is very uneven across and, to a lesser extent, within districts. This is particularly evident at the elementary and middle school level.
- Opportunities for multi-disciplinary and cross-grade-level planning are limited. They are often left to be worked out at the building-level, which results in inconsistent practices across schools.
- Many educators are uncertain how to effectively connect with disengaged parents and impart to them the skills or resources needed to more proactively support their child's education.

SCHOOL:
Rebecca Johnson Elementary School (pre-K to 5). Springfield, MA.

PRINCIPAL:
Veta Daley has served in this role for 10 years.

2006 DATA:
670 students. 93% low income, 94% non-white, 28% first language not English.

Rebecca Johnson Elementary School

From the outset, Principal Veta Daley established high expectations and accountability for all students and educators. Teachers report that instructional expectations are very clear and align with the School Improvement Plan (SIP). Classroom walk-throughs ensure compliance with standards for curriculum and instruction. The school's instructional leadership team visits classes on a regular basis to observe and provide feedback to staff on their instructional practices. These visits sometimes result in intervention plans to assist teachers who need to improve an aspect of practice.

Principal Daley herself will often visit these classrooms immediately thereafter to ensure that changes have been correctly implemented. Staff noted that, when necessary, she will manage teachers very closely to ensure that critical objectives are achieved. Staff did not portray this behavior negatively. Rather, they noted that in a school built upon trust, respect and collegiality, such feedback is expected and well-received. As Daley commented, "As Instructional Leader of the school, I'm in the business to help, not to destroy!"

Interviewees reported that accountability is also maintained in a less formal manner by collegial pressure to succeed and their deeply-held belief in pursuing high standards. Principal Daley sets high standards for staff and students alike. Daley expects all of her students to take the MCAS. If a student has not arrived at school on the day of the test, she or a teacher may go to the student's house to pick him/her up before testing begins. Daley proudly stated that 100% of the school's students took the MCAS in 2005.

Instructional Monitoring

Education Reform has driven Massachusetts' public schools toward a common set of learning standards. MCAS is one measure of performance against those standards, but districts and schools are also held accountable for their practices through structured processes managed by agencies such as the Massachusetts Department of Education and the Massachusetts Office for Educational Quality and Accountability. Although district-wide curricula, curriculum tools, professional development and testing systems provide a foundation for more consistent practice, they cannot guarantee it. For this reason, district and school leaders emphasize the need for principals to maintain oversight of instructional practice and to ensure it conforms to district and other relevant standards.

Why is it important to have accountability systems at the school level? Outcome tests, such as MCAS and district assessments, provide important information that measure the extent to which students are or are not meeting established standards, but reveal little about what is actually happening at the point of instruction. Similarly, classroom walk-throughs by district staff, even if systematic and unannounced, can induce an "artificial" response and may reveal limited information regarding everyday instructional practice. ***School-level protocols and personnel are best positioned to provide ongoing oversight of instructional practices and to understand the factors that affect instruction at the classroom level.*** As described, school-level accountability protocols generally fell into two categories — those that were very structured and demanded specific evidence of practice, and those that were less formalized.

The structured approach was much more common and typically included systematic review of teacher lesson plans, student work and other evidence of practice, as well as classroom walkthroughs to observe what was being taught at any given point in time in each classroom. These activities were typically performed by the principal, sometimes assisted by the assistant principal and instructional coaches. Lesson plans were in some cases required to identify the standards being taught through the lesson. Required evidence of practice commonly included posting of the standards being pursued and other visual artifacts in the classroom. ***Many districts mandated this approach, so while numerous higher performing schools utilized it, so too did many lower performing schools.*** Some teachers seemed to appreciate the structure these protocols provided, while others felt that it created "busy work" that distracted from the time they have to focus on instructional planning and delivery.

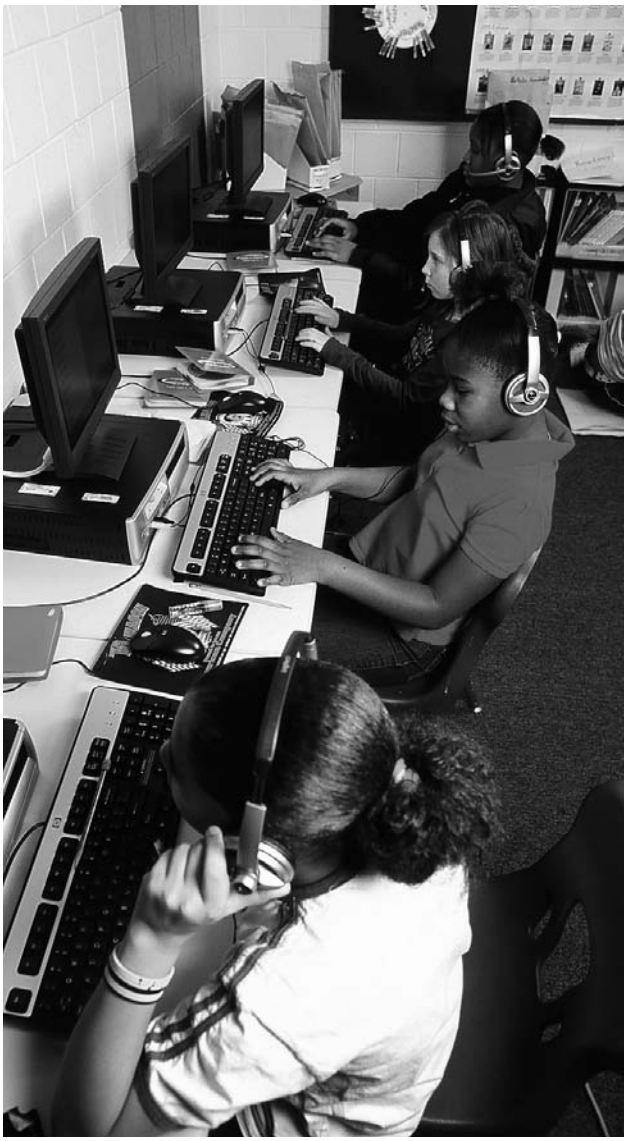
In contrast, educators in a few of the higher performing schools described systems that appeared to rely more upon teachers' professionalism and their focus on commonly agreed upon instructional priorities to maintain accountability. Principals in these buildings also visited classrooms to observe instruction and reviewed student work, but less emphasis was related with regard to monitoring and compliance. This approach seemed to work in schools whose staff also emphasized the presence of a collaborative and professional culture, and related a deep knowledge of the curriculum frameworks. However, new leaders in some lower performing schools identified a lack of oversight as a root cause of instructional inconsistency within their schools, and were implementing more robust management and accountability systems to address this problem. ***The mixed success of each of these two approaches suggests that both can contribute to effective implementation, but that building planning and culture may play a greater role in assuring fidelity of implementation.***

CONCERNS: INSTRUCTIONAL MONITORING

- Some early-elementary teachers resented the mandate to post standards on the wall, noting that their students were too young to understand them. More generally, some educators were concerned that district walkthroughs focused on what was on the wall, rather than what was being taught and how.
- Some teachers reported that they must teach in accordance with pacing guides, even if their students need more time to work on a concept. In this way, accountability mechanisms discouraged them from exercising their best professional judgment as to when to move their students on to the next topic.
- Accountability requirements have increased substantially without a corresponding increase in administrative staff or time to devote to compliance issues.

ADDITIONAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Following are some additional observations with implications for student achievement in urban schools. These observations generally relate to broader system issues that were identified through the interview process as critical to understanding and improving school performance.



The Tension between Standardization and Innovation

This study's school selection process provided an opportunity to thoughtfully weigh the relative performance of schools in urban districts across the Commonwealth. After accounting for student demography, there was often strikingly little variation in achievement levels. Although the higher performing schools engaged through this study consistently showed better performance or were improving more rapidly than their in-district counterparts, they were not in most cases highly successful in an absolute sense. This leaves us with the question: "Where are the superstar schools?"

It was generally apparent during school visits that higher performing schools brought a better balance of staffing, cultural and instructional strategies to the table than did lower performing schools. At the same time, these schools generally operated with similar staff and instructional resources, served similarly disadvantaged student populations, and functioned in similar statutory and contractual environments. It should therefore come as little surprise that a system with so many common features, mandates, opportunities and constraints should produce only a degree of variation in achievement — or that building culture, which is inherently more idiosyncratic than the other inputs, should be among the critical factors distinguishing school performance.

This elucidates an important tension between the drive toward standard practices and the continuing need to allow innovation to flourish in the educational environment. Notably, some of the higher performing schools sought authority to implement certain initiatives on their own terms, while educators in some lower performing schools felt that they had little or no flexibility to innovate or challenge mandates they found to be unhelpful. ***This suggests that as education reform moves forward, it must balance the need for standardization with the need to innovate and view them as complementary, rather than contradictory, directions.***

The Need for Effective Change Management Practices

The urban schools and districts engaged through this study are managing multiple and ongoing changes. Some are nearly universal, such as the implementation of new curriculum tools, increasing use of student assessments and data, and new school-wide planning processes. About half of these schools had recently undertaken more substantive structural changes. These include:

- Dramatically altered grade configurations, including both the merger of elementary and middle schools into K to 8 schools and the division of K to 8s into elementary and middle schools.
- Slightly altered grade configurations, typified by the migration of grade 6 students into or out of a middle school, or the addition or loss of full-day kindergarten programs.
- The sub-division of some high schools into smaller schools or into smaller learning communities housed within a single school.

These changes — combined with budget decisions, grant program funding and other external factors — have resulted in a substantial shuffling of personnel, students and programming in most schools. Although they are generally undertaken with the explicit goal of school improvement, these changes also create a level of upheaval and a sense of unending transition.

The question that emerges is whether the pace of change can be sustained and at what point constant tinkering with schools and instructional models becomes a detriment to school improvement. While few urban educators would suggest that student achievement is at an acceptable level, ***many suggested there would be value in allowing systems to stabilize and teachers to develop competence with new tools and structures.*** In short, they want time to see whether what they are doing will work. As ongoing changes are considered, they desire input to decisions, adequate planning processes, timely notice of planned changes and the opportunity to assess what is working and what is not.

The Lack of Knowledge-sharing and Dissemination Systems

One of this study's underlying questions related to how effectively school-level practices are disseminated within and across districts. ***Overall, systems to support the identification and dissemination of emergent promising practices are underdeveloped and there is a sense that while systems are now more standardized, schools still function in relative isolation*** from one another. As a result, there is only limited opportunity in most districts for educators to engage their colleagues in other buildings and share locally developed practices that might enhance school effectiveness.

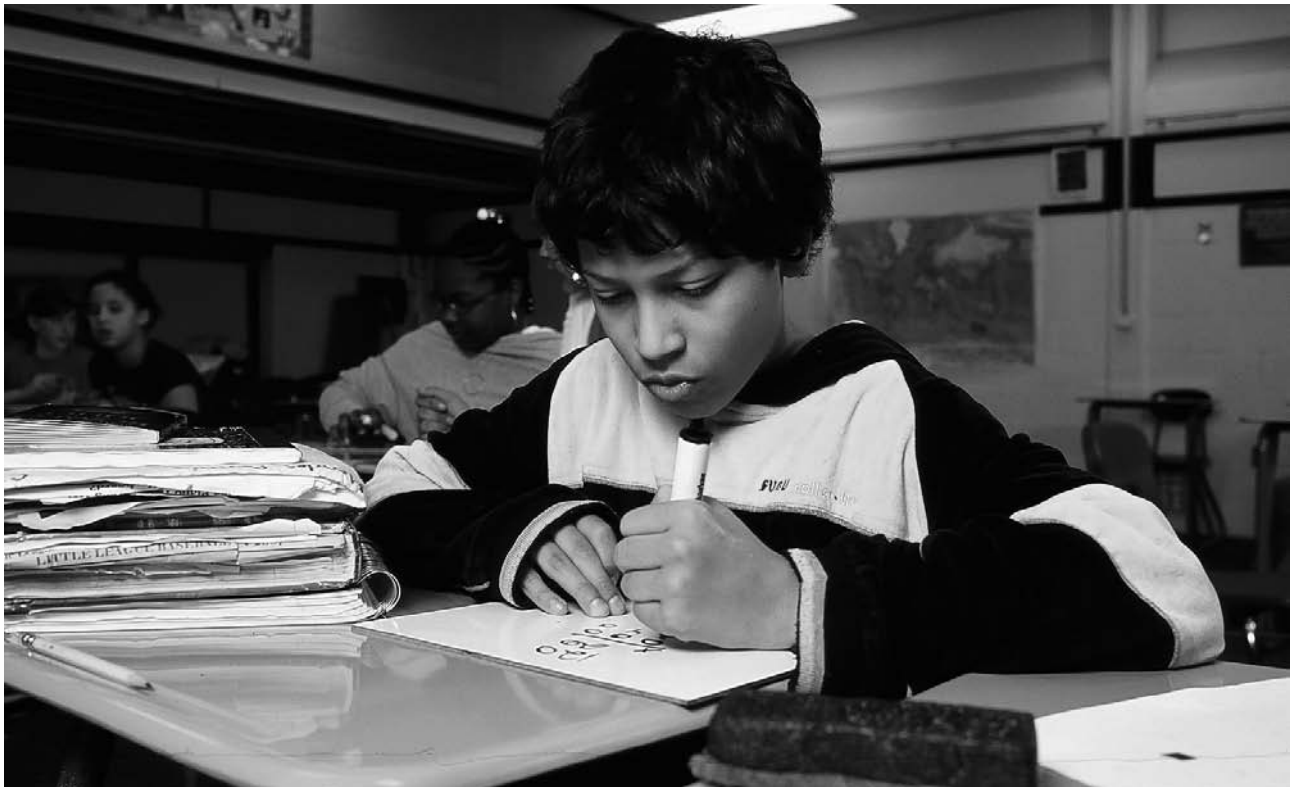
At present, district professional development events, principals' meetings, and coaches' or specialists' meetings serve as the infrastructure for school-to-school dialogue in most systems. Participants suggested that these forums are not explicitly designed for this purpose and therefore do not consistently serve it well. Many educators report that they use the Internet to identify helpful instructional resources, but this process appears to leave discovery to the individual teacher or school and does not capitalize on the vast experience available within the local district.

The Need for Well-conceived Assistance and Intervention

District and school leaders believe accountability systems would better promote school improvement if accompanied by more robust technical assistance. They emphasized that technical assistance should be tailored to match the specific problems, resources and constraints presented by the school or district and suggested that a nuanced and thoughtfully targeted strategy would produce better results than a "one size fits all" solution.

Collection and dissemination of effective practices developed for use in specific environments may enrich district and school interventions by offering a range of methodologies in response to identified needs. For example, this study suggests that some schools are becoming proficient in certain practices and may serve as models for others that are struggling in areas such as:

- The use of data to support instruction
- Identification and resolution of gaps between curriculum tools and the State Frameworks
- School-wide or multi-directional (cross-discipline or cross-grade) planning



A technical assistance program would require a high standard for verification and documentation of effective practices and the resources to effectively integrate appropriate solutions into the schools that need them. It is clear that as 2014, the year set for all students to be proficient in ELA and math, grows near, there will be increased pressure to develop appropriate and effective interventions to support the improvement of underperforming schools. Further research is required to better define how technical assistance can best be structured and implemented.

External Factors that Shape School Performance

Although district and school practices clearly have a profound influence on student achievement, it also important to understand that demography remains closely correlated with student achievement and that this manifests itself consistently in school-level MCAS results. The first phase of this study's school selection process relied on an analysis of secondary data related to school population and performance. Much of the variation in achievement between schools was predictable in light of their student poverty and English language learner (ELL) rates, in particular.

Further, when district leaders were engaged in the selection process, it quickly became apparent that there were other factors not evident in the data that exert influence of school-level achievement trends. Such as:

- Some districts had recently "re-zoned" or reconfigured schools, causing shifts in student and even staff populations across schools and clouding the view of achievement trends within them.
- Some elementary and middle schools host district-wide gifted and talented programs, while others may serve as feeders to those programs, losing top students in the process.
- Some schools serve a greater number of at-risk students due to program placement or may experience greater student transience than other district schools.
- Where intra-district choice exists, schools with good reputations may benefit from strong parent demand, with invested, advocacy-oriented parents most likely to work through bureaucratic processes to get their children into that school. This may create a positive "enclave effect" at higher performing schools, with some corresponding negative effect at other schools.

All of these and many other factors that may shape aggregate student achievement may often be unknown or underappreciated by those examining school-level results. With the stakes for schools very high, these influences should be fully understood and communicated in discussions of relative school performance within urban districts.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is intended to provide educators, policymakers and education reform advocates with additional insight into the factors that distinguish higher performing urban schools from similar schools with lower student achievement. The study process made clear the tremendous investment that urban educators have in improving educational opportunities for their students, as well as the willingness of those educators to engage in constructive dialogue about their schools' strengths and weaknesses, triumphs and tribulations. Following are key conclusions that resulted from this study and the researchers' recommendations for policy and practice.

Conclusions

Some urban schools are in fact gaining traction on the road to improved student achievement. Interviews with more than 600 educators in 30 schools in 10 urban districts suggest that the higher performing schools engaged through this study differ in important ways from similar, but lower performing, schools. Following are the practices and behaviors that typified the higher performing urban schools and generally distinguished them from their lower performing counterparts.

- **Higher performing schools built a solid foundation for student achievement through a balanced emphasis on leadership and staffing, school culture, and curriculum and instruction.** This three-pronged approach helps to ensure that urban students are fully supported in the school environment. Specifically, that they receive services from caring and well-qualified educators, who have access to and utilize appropriate instructional resources and methods, and that they receive their education in a school setting with clearly defined cultural expectations that both inspire and demand student achievement. This cultural component was noted to be particularly crucial in urban districts.

- **Leaders of higher performing schools actively pursued new strategies and resources they believed would improve their schools, and communicated these strategies clearly and supported their implementation.** They embraced innovation and risk-taking in the classroom, but also managed it, so as to protect the bottom line concern of effective instruction. They were not complacent and did not allow their staff to be either. Some were adept at garnering resources and forging partnerships with community organizations, but only to the extent that the resources aligned with the school's priorities. Flexible and reflective in their approach, principals of higher performing schools often delegated responsibilities, distributing leadership to build capacity within the school.

- **Leaders of higher performing schools used all available discretion to hire staff who were well-qualified and highly motivated. They placed staff in roles where they would make the greatest impact on student success.** They focused on finding people who were well qualified and appeared a good "fit" for the school. In some cases, leaders held positions open for extended periods of time — or revised or eliminated positions — rather than hiring a candidate or retaining a member of staff who they felt was ill-suited to the school or position. These principals tried to maximize staff effectiveness by placing them in the right roles. This sometimes meant pushing staff out of their comfort zones and into new roles, such as becoming an instructional coach or working with students in a key grade level.

- **Higher performing schools displayed positive staff cultures that were typified by collegiality, a sense of efficacy, a unified vision and shared accountability for school improvement.** Educators in these schools were energized and trusting of one another. They used planning time to collaborate, communicate, and get "on the same page" as they pursued school improvement. People and ideas moved freely between classrooms, and staff were engaged and supportive of one another. They shared accountability for discipline and achievement, approaching them as whole-school activities. They related a "can do" attitude and believed that they were making a difference.

- **Higher performing schools displayed positive student cultures that were safe and nurturing, but also challenging, supportive, and goal- and accountability-focused.** These schools invoked positive traditions or utilized consistent rituals and routines to establish a school identity. Through these strategies, students come to identify themselves as part of a greater group and assume that group's values. These values include high standards for personal conduct and achievement. In some of the best schools, students are actively supported and held accountable for meeting these standards. A positive staff culture, as described above, is critical to the building-wide consistency needed to sustain a positive student culture.

- **Curriculum and instruction were intensely focused and higher performing schools constantly fine-tuned them to ensure alignment with standards and to maximize instructional efficiency.** A tremendous emphasis on English language arts (ELA) and math was universal. Higher performing schools used student assessment data and a broad knowledge of the State Curriculum Frameworks to identify gaps in their curriculum and lesson planning. They proactively implemented supplemental programs to resolve these gaps. Their knowledge of the frameworks allowed them to align lesson planning with state standards and to emphasize the salient content within texts and workbooks, thereby increasing instructional efficiency. These practices required a substantial commitment to instructional planning.

- **Higher performing schools focused on intervention and remediation of students' academic deficits. Often through after-school, weekend and summer school programming.** While not universally available, after-school, weekend and summer school programming was identified as a critical support to students who lacked basic skills or were struggling in their preparation for MCAS. These programs increase the time available for instruction and allow educators the flexibility to employ alternative strategies to reach students who require them. At the elementary level, these programs often complement early intervention programs, whereas they may be the only time for remediation at upper grade levels. Well-qualified instructors and clear objectives are central to program quality.

- **Higher performing schools used assessment data to guide instructional planning and delivery, and benefited from leaders and coaches who could translate results into instructional action.** These schools analyzed data in mixed groups of staff in order to diagnose the root causes of performance problems. While grade-level planning was fairly common, vertical (multi-grade) and interdisciplinary (multi-subject) team planning set several schools apart. These planning sessions were commonly facilitated by principals or instructional coaches. Higher performing schools emphasized shared accountability and used data to understand what each classroom must do to improve MCAS achievement. Student assessment data were also used to fine-tune lesson plans and to structure intervention groups.

- **Higher performing schools focused on implementation at the school and classroom level. Monitoring for fidelity of implementation was important, but planning and staff culture were also critical.** Although districts employ a variety of monitoring and compliance practices, school-level protocols and personnel are generally best positioned to monitor instruction. Accountability systems fell into two categories: those that were very structured and demanded substantial evidence of implementation and those that included less monitoring, trusting more in staff professionalism. The mixed success of each of these approaches suggests that both can contribute to effective implementation, but that building planning and culture may play just as great a role in assuring fidelity of implementation.

Recommendations

The interview process provided educators with an opportunity to share their perspectives regarding the policies, practices and programs that are and are not working in support of improved student achievement in their schools. Following are recommendations that come directly from educators, as well as the researchers' synthesis of the implications of study findings for practice and policy. It is hoped that they will contribute to the ongoing dialogue regarding how to improve urban schools.

What Schools and Districts Can Do

- **Make school culture a priority and a central tenet of urban school improvement.** School culture emerges through this research as an essential element of success in urban schools, but lacks a sense of priority because it is difficult to define and, therefore, measure. However, this and other studies suggest that specific behaviors and resources can facilitate a positive school culture. Fundamentally, staff must be motivated and unified in their pursuit not only of goals, but of the means to achieving those goals. Schools need more time to meet and focus on culture and how to integrate it into their school-wide improvement plan. In some schools this may require expert consultation and facilitation.

- **Invest in leaders and enhance building-level leadership capacity.** Schools are complex organizations and urban schools serve particularly complex populations. As one generation of principals and other building leaders prepares to retire, we must ensure that there is an adequate supply of qualified replacements. This new generation of leaders will require a broad base of training, but will also need to have the credibility that comes with past experience teaching in urban classrooms.

  Implementing distributed leadership models at the school level will expand school capacity in the immediate term and support effective implementation of new initiatives within the school environment. As an example, instructional coaches already serve in non-supervisory leadership roles that enhance instructional capacity in many schools. Districts and schools must work actively to identify potential leaders and support their entry into intermediate building-level leadership roles and effective leader development programs. Districts should also increase opportunities for current principals to network as part of their ongoing leader development and support strategies.

- **Give leaders more authority to shape their staff through selective hiring.** Leaders and staff in higher performing schools identified effective hiring as central to school success. However, school leaders in some districts have very limited control of hiring, with contractual rules cited as the chief constraint. Similarly, teachers with limited tenure may have little say in where they are placed in some districts. The "fit" between staff and leader emerged as critical to school success, suggesting that limitations on leaders' discretion to shape the school staff may hinder success. Districts should also carefully consider the fit of leader to school staff when new leaders are hired. While leaders need authority to hire and manage staff, protections must also be afforded to teachers to ensure that this authority is not abused.

- **Maintain schools' flexibility to customize instruction in response to student needs.** This study underscores an inherent tension between standardization and innovation or customization. The ability to supplement district-wide curriculum tools, to take extra time to ensure that students master important concepts or to use alternative approaches to teaching in response to the needs of an individual or student sub-group is vital to student success. However, many educators noted limitations on schools' ability to exercise their judgment in these regards, commonly citing district or grant program mandates as causes. A balance must be struck between the implementation of uniform standards or programs and the compelling need for schools to utilize a variety of instructional methods to proactively motivate and respond to the diverse needs of the students they serve.

- **Improve instruction and overall school flexibility through enhanced support staffing.** There is broad agreement among educators that large urban classrooms benefit academically from the presence of well-qualified instructional support staff. In addition, many schools lack the staffing to support in-school teacher meeting time and have difficulty identifying substitute teachers who function effectively. Increased availability of well-trained assistant teachers, paraprofessionals or interns would enhance schools' ability to provide small group instruction to diverse learners, facilitate effective classroom management and provide greater building-level staffing flexibility.

- **Continue to invest in thoughtfully conceived professional development.** The availability and quality of teacher professional development (PD) has increased substantially in recent years. Teachers value PD and urge that it be carefully conceived and targeted to the staff who need it most. They were concerned about PD programs that take them out of the classroom for extended periods of time, which disrupts instruction. Among PD needs, further training in differentiated instruction techniques was most frequently identified as a priority. Some educators emphasized the need for well-trained teaching assistants (or paraprofessionals) who can effectively support classroom instruction.

- **Increase the time available for instruction through efficiency and by expanding the time school is open and providing instruction.** Educators consistently identified a lack of time as a critical constraint on their ability to bolster achievement. Current mandates direct much of their time to English language arts (ELA) and math instruction, yet students continue to struggle and require remediation in these subjects. The time crush is likely to intensify as science and history become greater priorities and assessment and planning requirements expand Further, there are concerns that the curriculum is narrowing around tested subjects, due in part to time constraints. These findings suggest a need for increased extended day, weekend and summer school opportunities, staffed by well-qualified instructors. This study also highlights opportunities to add efficiency to the school day through smart scheduling and effective instructional planning.

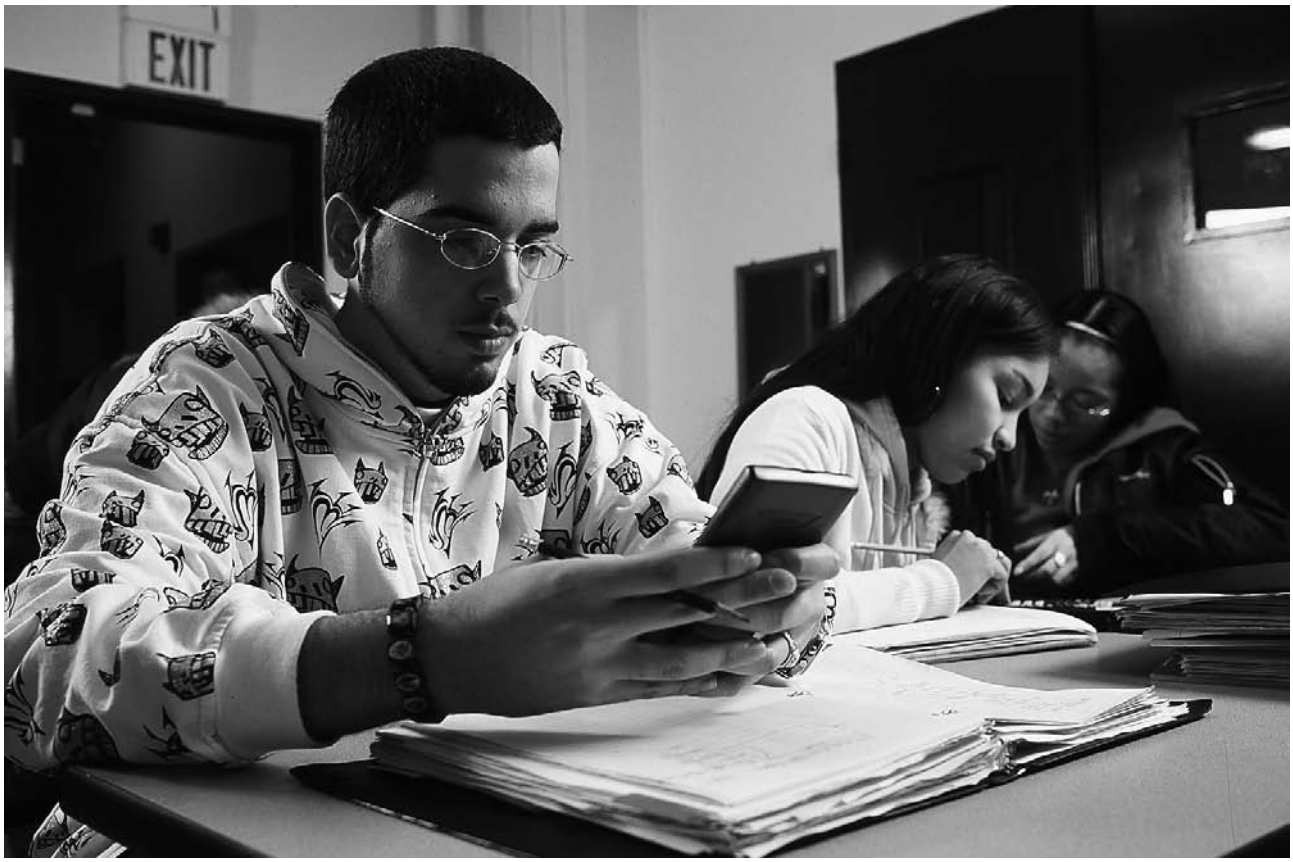
- **Create more opportunities and implement effective models for school-wide planning**. School-wide planning emerged as critical to communication and the development of collaborative relationships among leaders and staff. Many schools struggle to find time to meet and plan, making it difficult to build a unified vision or to coordinate curriculum within and across grades or disciplines. Higher performing schools described their planning time as focused, but not so controlled by the principal as to render it a one-way communication. Efficient scheduling, increased staffing to free teachers to meet during the school day, and stipends for out-of-school day planning time may help. A dedicated funding stream may be required to improve and support school-level planning.

- **Increase attention and resources targeted to remediation at all levels**. Despite an intense focus on ELA and math, many students at all grade levels continue to struggle with basic literacy and numeracy. Social promotion may perpetuate this problem in some districts. Middle and high school educators relate the need for intense remediation of literacy deficits, in particular, as a prerequisite to the study of other subjects. Extended day, summer school and weekend programs can provide time for remediation as students pursue grade-level curriculum during the regular school day, without reducing access to other classes that may increase these students' interest in school. Students who require remediation may present any number of complicating characteristics and these should be accounted for in the design of effective remedial programs.

- **Provide well designed full-day kindergarten and expand pre-school availability for at-risk students.** Elementary educators were unified in their opinion that effective full-day kindergarten programs provide a critical opportunity to develop early literacy and numeracy skills, and noted that many students enter into school with very low functioning in these regards. Additionally, kindergarten was described as an important transitional year during which social skills and expectations are developed. Full-day kindergarten was not universally available in the districts engaged through this study, but was described anecdotally as a critical support to achievement and performance in subsequent elementary grades. Inconsistent attendance by at-risk students was noted in some schools. Some teachers also emphasized that there is insufficient space in pre-kindergarten programs in their cities and that these programs should be available to all children who present academic or social risk factors.

- **Manage change carefully so it does not adversely effect school performance.** Urban districts and schools are implementing a constant stream of changes to curriculum, instructional methods, programs and staffing. More changes are on the horizon as science and history begin to receive greater emphasis. Many districts have also undertaken substantial restructuring of schools and student assignment plans. Although changes are undertaken with the goal of school improvement, they can also create upheaval and a sense of unending transition that can threaten continuity and school success.

  Districts must consider whether the pace of change in their schools is sustainable and productive. This requires that they assess whether other recent changes have been successfully implemented. Many educators suggested that systems need time to stabilize and teachers need time to become proficient with new tools and methods. As ongoing changes are considered, staff desire transparent decision processes, timely notice of changes — and the opportunity to assess what is working and what is not.



What State Policymakers Can Do

- **Employ better tools and more nuanced analyses when assessing school effectiveness.** Many educators noted a need for better methods of assessing school effectiveness. While MCAS provides value as a measure of student mastery of established standards, it does not support multi-point comparisons that provide insight into individual students' relative progress toward those standards. This limitation frustrates many educators who feel that some of their best work — with students who arrive with profound deficits — is currently unnoticed and even judged as failure. These educators related a need for accountability systems to measure students' baseline knowledge and use that as a benchmark against which educational value-added can be assessed.

At present, the measurement of school effectiveness tends to focus on individual and aggregate student achievement, and often fails to incorporate important contextual information. When assessing effectiveness, it is important to understand that many factors exert influence on school-level achievement. Most notably, demographics account for a majority of the variation in MCAS performance. Other important contextual factors identified through this research include the placement of district programs for gifted students (or those who are educationally at-risk), the re-assignment of students within a district (sometimes called re-zoning), or the effects of intra-district school choice, which may result in enclaves of uncommonly motivated parents and students clustered in more highly regarded schools — and a corresponding lack of such parents and students in schools that are regarded as underachieving.

- **Provide substantive and well-conceived technical assistance to under-performing schools and districts.** District and school leaders believe accountability systems would better promote school improvement if accompanied by more robust technical assistance. They emphasized that technical assistance should be tailored to match the specific problems, resources and constraints presented by the school or district, and suggested that a nuanced and thoughtfully targeted strategy would produce the best results. At this point in education reform, it is not enough to say that a school is failing — solutions and support must be made available and utilized. Further research is required to define the content and structure of a more effective technical assistance system

- **Increase funding and administrative capacity to support knowledge-sharing and dissemination.** Systems to support the identification and dissemination of emergent promising practices within Massachusetts' urban schools are underdeveloped, and while systems are now more standardized, schools still function in relative isolation. There are limited opportunities in most districts for educators — leaders, teachers or support staff — to engage their colleagues in other buildings to share practices that might enhance teacher or school effectiveness. Similarly, educators related only limited awareness of best practice resources. The state should play a more proactive role in gathering and disseminating relevant knowledge. It should also facilitate opportunities for educators to network and engage in dialogue related to school improvement.

- **Improve capacity to serve students who are English language learners.** Many urban schools serve substantial numbers of students who live in homes in which English is a second language. Educators frequently raised concerns that programs to serve students who are English language learners (ELL) are not sufficiently robust and that schools lack staff who can facilitate dialogue between teachers and their students' non-English speaking families. Given that Massachusetts cities with high proportions of non-English speaking households generally display very low MCAS achievement, it may be time for a substantial re-assessment of how and what educational services are provided to these students.

- **Develop adequate and predictable funding streams to support the recommendations of this research.** Among the key findings of this study is the need for an expansion of the time available for quality instruction and school-wide planning, as well as expertise and support staffing to make these capacities more robust. Some of this expansion can be achieved through more efficient scheduling and staff deployment, as well as funding of instructional coach, student support and specialist positions. Initiatives such as full-day kindergarten, expanded pre-school programs, extended day programs, and the provision of effective services targeted to English language learners will also require substantial new resources. These investments are needed if urban schools are to achieve substantial improvement.

  Pilot funding of initiatives to improve urban schools in accordance with these findings may encourage the development, documentation and evaluation of a broader range of solutions to specific urban problems and thereby increase the return on public investment in these areas, while also enriching the state's technical assistance capacity.

- **Recognize that a more robust intervention may be required to fully meet the goals of education reform and bring all urban students to MCAS proficiency.** After more than a decade of education reform in Massachusetts, demography remains a reliable predictor of student achievement. While some urban schools are "gaining traction," few have achieved and maintained very high levels of student proficiency on MCAS. It may be time to assess whether the basic public school model is sufficient as an intervention for inner city students who may disproportionately confront substantial problems in their home or community. The challenge is to develop an intervention that can more consistently meet the needs of urban students. This intervention may require a set of tools and resources that focus not only on students' direct academic needs, but also on the range of social, emotional, and economic issues that exert chronic and episodic impacts on their ability to succeed academically. It may also require interventions that occur outside the school environment and impact directly upon the home or community.

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