How Is Your School District Performing?

A look at

Littleton

Public Schools

2004–2006

EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT AUDIT COUNCIL

Office of Educational Quality and Accountability

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The five-member Educational Management Audit Council (EMAC) and its agency, the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA), were established by the Massachusetts Legislature in July 2000 to examine public school districts in the commonwealth. The mission of the EMAC and EQA is to provide independent verification of schools' and districts' efforts to promote higher levels of academic achievement among their students, as measured by the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests.

The Office of Educational Quality and Accountability would like to acknowledge the professional cooperation extended to the audit team by the Massachusetts Department of Education; the superintendent of the Littleton Public Schools, Diane G. Bemis; the school department staff; and the town officials of Littleton.

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INTRODUCTION

Test scores provide one method of assessing student achievement, but a variety of factors affect student performance. The Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) was created to examine many of these additional factors by conducting independent audits of schools and districts across the commonwealth. The agency uses these audits to:

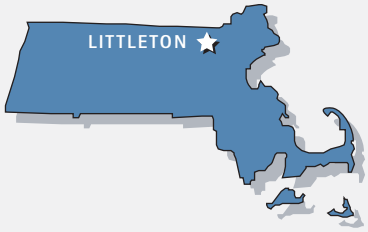
- Provide a comprehensive evaluation of each school district's performance;
- Publish annual reports on selected districts' performance;
- Monitor public education performance statewide to inform policy decisions; and
- Provide the public with information that helps the state hold districts and schools, including charter schools, accountable.

In January 2007, the EQA conducted an independent examination of the Littleton Public Schools for the period of 2004–2006. The EQA analyzed Littleton students' performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests and identified how students in general and in subgroups were performing. The EQA then examined critical factors that affected student performance in six major areas: leadership, governance, and communication; curriculum and instruction; assessment and evaluation; human resource management and professional development; access, participation, and student academic support; and financial and asset management effectiveness and efficiency.

The review was based on documents supplied by the Littleton Public Schools and the Massachusetts Department of Education; correspondence sent prior to the EQA team's site visit; interviews with representatives from the school committee, the district leadership team, school administrators, and teachers; numerous classroom observations; and additional documents submitted while the EQA team visited the district. The report does not take into account documents, revised data, or events that may have occurred after June 2006. However, district leaders were invited to provide more current information.

Putting the Data in Perspective

Littleton, MA



DISTRICT

Population: 8,184
Median family income: $83,365
Largest sources of employment: Manufacturing and educational, health, and social services
Local government: Board of Selectmen, Executive Secretary, Open Town Meeting

SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

School committee: 5 members
Number of schools: 4
Student-teacher ratio: 14.2 to 1
Per Pupil Expenditures: $9,564
Student enrollment:
- Total: 1,562
- White: 95.8 percent
- Hispanic: 0.7 percent
- African-American: 1.6 percent
- Asian-American: 1.5 percent
- Native American: 0.0 percent
- Limited English proficient: 0.0 percent
- Low income: 4.0 percent
- Special education: 17.4 percent

Sources: 2000 U.S. Census and Massachusetts Department of Education.

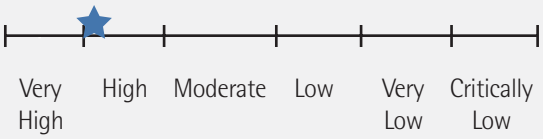
EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT AUDIT COUNCIL ACTION

The Educational Management Audit Council accepted this report and its findings at their meeting of October 1, 2007.

MCAS Performance at a Glance, 2006

	DISTRICT	STATE
Average Proficiency Index	88	78
English Language Arts Proficiency Index	92	84
Math Proficiency Index	83	72

Performance Rating



The Average Proficiency Index is another way to look at MCAS scores. It is a weighted average of student performance that shows whether students have attained or are making progress toward proficiency, which means they have met the state's standards. A score of 100 indicates that all students are proficient. The Massachusetts DOE developed the categories presented to identify performance levels.

HOW DID STUDENTS PERFORM?

Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) Test Results

Students in grades 3–8 and grade 10 are required to take the MCAS tests each year in one or more specified subject areas, including English language arts (ELA), math, and science and technology/engineering (STE). Beginning with the class of 2003, students must pass the grade 10 math and ELA tests to graduate. Those who do not pass on the first try may retake the tests several more times.

The EQA analyzed current state and district MCAS results to determine how well district students as a whole and subgroups of students performed compared to students throughout the commonwealth, and to the state goal of proficiency. The EQA analysis sought to answer the following five questions:

1. Are all eligible students participating in required state assessments?

On the 2006 MCAS tests in ELA, math, and STE, eligible students in Littleton participated at levels that met or exceeded the state's 95 percent requirement.

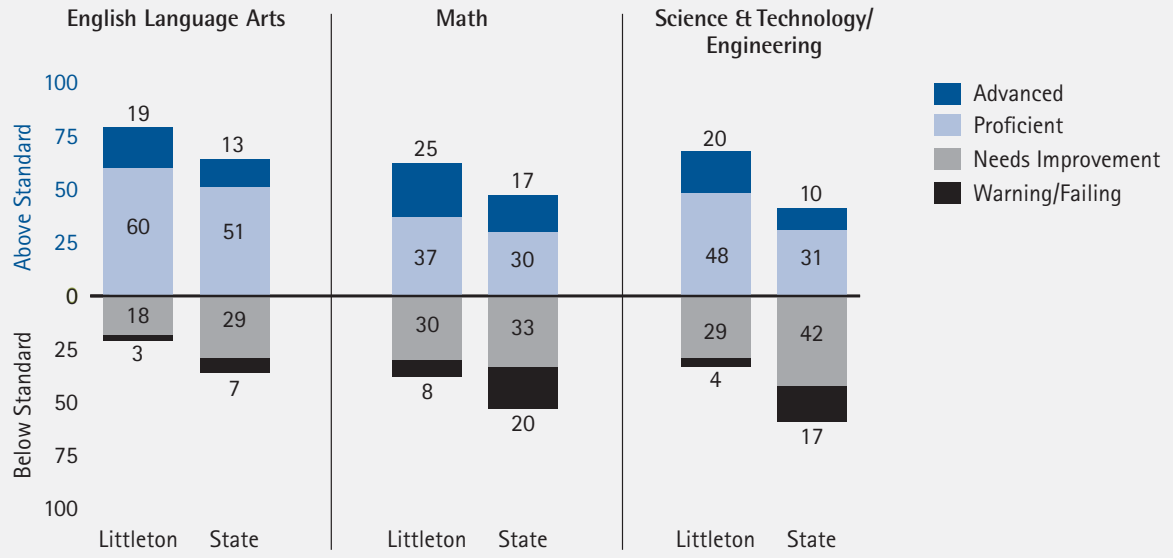
2. Are the district's students reaching proficiency levels on the MCAS examination?

On average, more than two-thirds of all students in Littleton attained proficiency on the 2006 MCAS tests, much more than that statewide. Nearly four-fifths of Littleton students attained proficiency in English language arts (ELA), more than three-fifths of Littleton students attained proficiency in math, and more than two-thirds of Littleton students attained proficiency in science and technology/engineering (STE). Ninety-eight percent of the Class of 2006 attained a Competency Determination.

- Littleton's average proficiency index (API) on the MCAS tests in 2006 was 88 proficiency index (PI) points, 10 PI points greater than that statewide. Littleton's average proficiency gap, the difference between its API and the target of 100, in 2006 was 12 PI points.

LITTLETON SCORES COMPARED TO STATE AVERAGES, 2006

Percentage of students at each proficiency level on MCAS



- In 2006, Littleton's proficiency gap in ELA was eight PI points, eight PI points narrower than the state's average proficiency gap in ELA. This gap would require an average improvement in performance of one PI point annually to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP). Littleton's proficiency gap in math was 17 PI points in 2006, 11 PI points narrower than the state's average proficiency gap in math. This gap would require an average improvement of two PI points per year to achieve AYP. Littleton's proficiency gap in STE was 13 PI points, 16 PI points narrower than the statewide average.

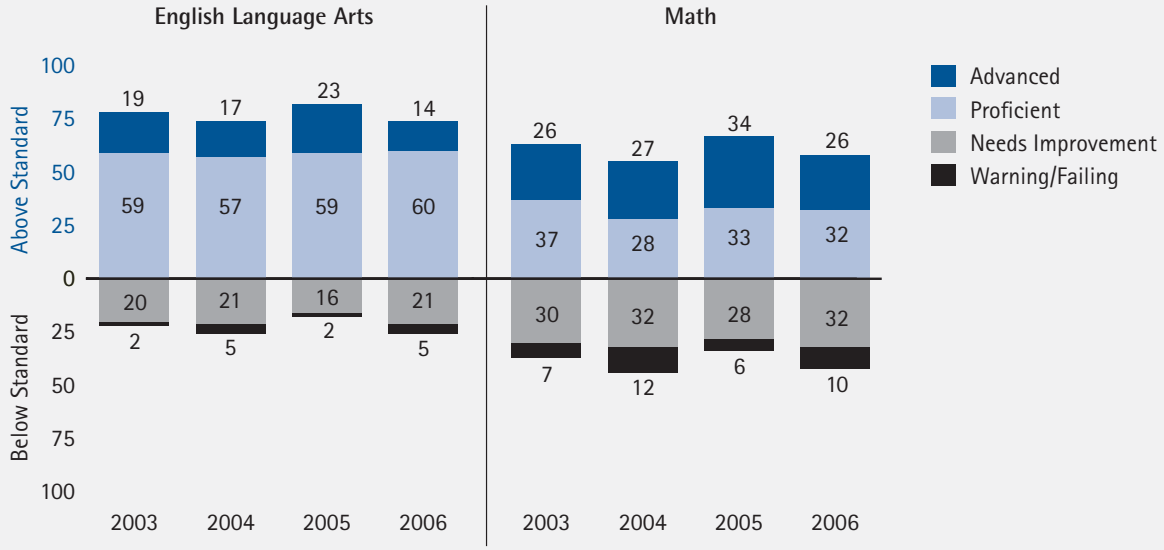
3. Has the district's MCAS test performance improved over time?

Between 2003 and 2006, Littleton's MCAS performance showed a decline overall, in ELA, and in math, and an improvement in STE.

- The percentage of students scoring in the 'Advanced' and 'Proficient' categories fell by five percentage points between 2003 and 2006, while the percentage of students in the 'Warning/Failing' category increased by three percentage points. The average proficiency gap in Littleton widened from 13 PI points in 2003 to 16 PI points in 2006.
- Over the three-year period 2003-2006, ELA performance in Littleton declined at an average of less than one PI point annually.

LITTLETON ELA SCORES COMPARED TO MATH SCORES

Percentage of students at each proficiency level on MCAS

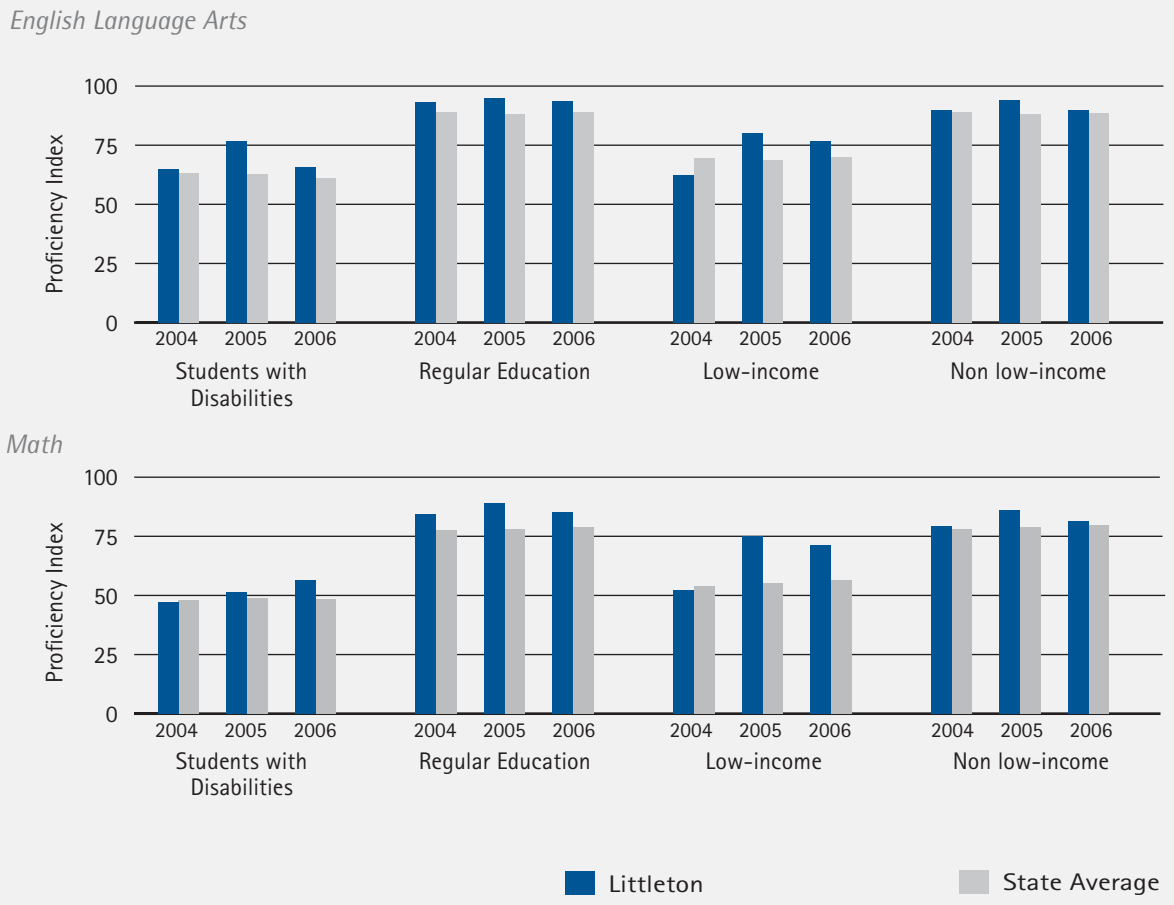


- Math performance in Littleton also showed a decline, at an average of slightly more than one PI point annually over this period.
- Between 2004 and 2006, Littleton had improved STE performance, increasing at an average of two PI points annually over the two-year period.

4. Do MCAS test results vary among subgroups of students?

- MCAS performance in 2006 varied substantially among subgroups of Littleton students. Of the six measurable subgroups in Littleton in 2006, the gap in performance between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups was 21 PI points in ELA and 28 PI points in math (regular education students, students with disabilities, respectively).
- The proficiency gaps in Littleton in 2006 in both ELA and math were wider than the district average for students with disabilities, low-income students (those participating in the free or reduced-cost lunch program), and male students. Less than half of students with disabilities and low-income students attained proficiency, while two-thirds of male students did so.
- The proficiency gaps in ELA and math were narrower than the district average for regular education students, non low-income students, and female students. For each of these subgroups, roughly three-fourths of the students attained proficiency.

LITTLETON STUDENTS' IMPROVEMENT OVER TIME, COMPARED TO STATE AVERAGES



5. Has the MCAS test performance of the district's student subgroups improved over time?

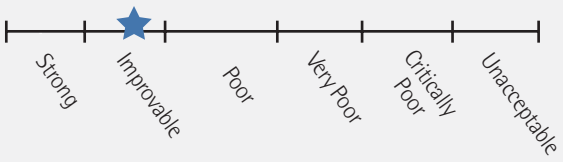
- The performance gap between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups in ELA widened from 23 PI points in 2003 to 28 PI points in 2006, and the performance gap between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups in math widened from 26 to 29 PI points during this period.
- In Littleton, all subgroups of students had a decline in performance in ELA between 2003 and 2006. The subgroup with the greatest decline in ELA was low-income students.
- In math, all subgroups in Littleton with the exception of low-income students showed a decline in performance between 2003 and 2006. The subgroup with the greatest decline in math was students with disabilities.

Performance at a Glance

Management Quality Index

The Management Quality Index is a weighted average of the district's performance on 67 indicators that measure the effectiveness of a district's management system. Littleton received the following rating:

Performance Rating:



WHAT FACTORS DRIVE STUDENT PERFORMANCE?

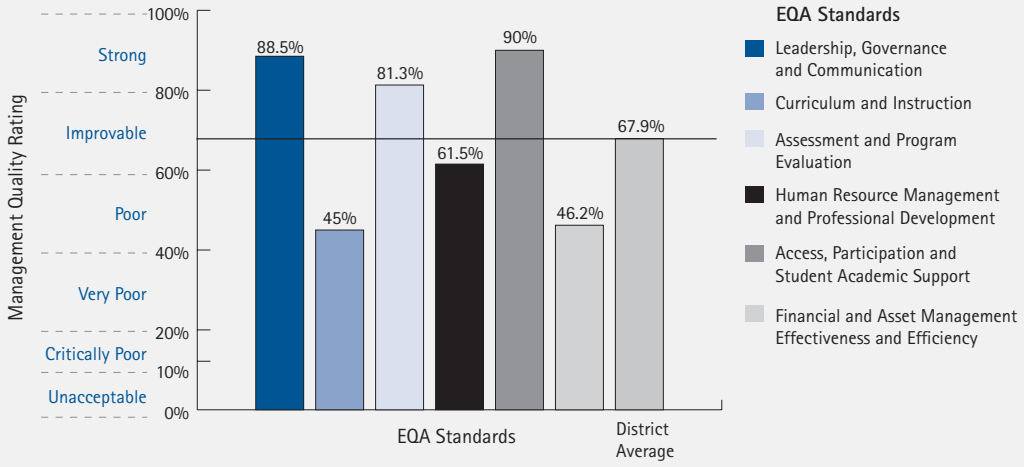
Overall District Management

To better understand the factors affecting student scores on the MCAS tests, the EQA analyzes district performance on 67 indicators in six areas: leadership, governance, and communication; curriculum and instruction; assessment and program evaluation; human resource management and professional development; access, participation, and student academic support; and financial and asset management effectiveness and efficiency. Taken together, these factors are a measure of the effectiveness — or quality — of a district's management system. A score of 100 percent on the Management Quality Index (MQI) means that the district meets the standard and performed at a satisfactory level on all indicators. However, it does not mean the district was perfect.

In 2006, Littleton received an overall MQI score of 'Improvable' (67.9 percent). The district performed best on the Access, Participation, and Student Academic Support and Leadership and Governance standards, scoring 'Strong.' It was rated 'Poor' on the Curriculum and Instruction and Financial management standards. Given these ratings, the district performed much better than expected on the MCAS tests. During the review period, student performance remained flat in ELA, but improved slightly in math. On the following pages, we take a closer look at the district's performance in each of the six areas.

A CLOSER LOOK AT MANAGEMENT QUALITY

Littleton, 2004–2006



Leadership, Governance, and Communication

Ultimately, the success or failure of district leadership was determined by how well all students performed. As measured by MCAS test performance, Littleton ranked among the 'High' performing school districts in the commonwealth, with scores that were 'Very High' in ELA and 'High' in math.

Leadership and Communication

The leadership of the Littleton Public Schools consisted of the superintendent and the five-member school committee, which experienced complete turnover during the review period. In the last election, the chairperson of the school committee shared all pertinent, but not confidential, information with each candidate. Newly elected members met with the superintendent and other members of the committee prior to their first school committee meeting. While the committee did not have a formal mentoring program in place, veteran members offered support via the telephone, in-person meetings, and e-mail. The committee had subcommittees in the areas of budget and policy that met on a regular basis and shared information with the entire committee. The policy subcommittee continually worked on the policy manual to ensure that it reviewed and updated all policies on a regular schedule.

The district website provided a great amount of information, including updated notices of importance issued by the office of the superintendent, as well as links to each of the four schools.

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

In this area, districts are rated on 13 performance indicators. Littleton received the following ratings:

Areas of Strength

- The entire school district utilized various sources of data to aid in the development of programs to best meet the needs of the student body. Administrators, team leaders, and staff members met on a regular basis to review available data to assist the district in making sound decisions.
- The district had a District Improvement Plan (DIP) in place for the entire period under review, as well as a School Improvement Plan for each of the four buildings that were in alignment with the DIP.
- The district posted a great deal of information on its website, which it updated on a regular basis.

Areas for Improvement

- The superintendent in place during the period under review did not work closely with the school committee, town officials, and administrators during the development of the budget, and only sought input from the administrative team when he had to cut the budget.

Planning and Governance

The superintendent delegated the leadership of each school and program to the relevant administrator, and the district practiced controlled site-based management within the parameters set by the superintendent. The central office team met on a weekly basis and the administrative team met biweek-

ly. The superintendent set agendas for all meetings, and members of the administrative team had ample opportunity to introduce topics deemed necessary.

The district had a District Improvement Plan (DIP) in place for all the years under review, which the administrative team and the school committee reviewed on a regular basis. While the goals of curriculum and instruction, professional development, assessment, community and communications, and culture and climate did not change, the objectives, timelines, and strategies changed on a regular basis as the district continued to use data and assess student achievement. The DIP appeared on the website and was available in the form of a brochure to all interested parties. Curriculum brochures for each grade level were available in each building. The district prominently displayed its vision and mission statements in each school, as well as in the office of the superintendent.

The district analyzed MCAS data on a regular basis to review and modify programs, and utilized a multitude of other assessment tools. The superintendent provided the school committee and the community at large with an annual district report card, outlining the MCAS results and reporting on the achievements of the district. While the district used aggregated assessment data regularly, the only use of disaggregated data applied to the special education subgroup.

Members of the teaching staff had 90-minute professional development periods scheduled over 24 days, in addition to the use of time at general faculty meetings held every other week. These periods afforded staff members the time to review data and to work in grade level/department sessions to share information and various teaching strategies.

Curriculum and Instruction

The Littleton Public Schools faced a number of challenges in the areas of effective curriculum development and instructional practice — essential elements of efforts to improve student performance.

Aligned Curricula

A curriculum initiative began in Littleton two years prior to the period under review, but the district interrupted the work the following year and turned its focus to assessment because of concerns about student performance on the MCAS tests. The written curriculum in Littleton had gaps in certain domains at some grade spans. Most of the documents were working drafts and many were incomplete.

Littleton's benchmarks in each domain at every grade level measured the taught and tested curriculum. Littleton attempted to improve achievement by measuring student progress against benchmarks, providing early intervention and adopting programs. During the four-year interval from 2003 to 2006, there was little increase in the percentage of regular and special education students attaining proficiency on the MCAS tests; the achievement gap between regular education and special education students did not close; and the disparity between proficiency in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics in favor of ELA remained.

The district had infrastructure to ensure horizontal alignment of the curriculum, and the district was building infrastructure to ensure K-12 vertical alignment. The principal of each school was the curriculum leader. Littleton had leadership positions in reading and mathematics at the elementary level spanning grades K-5 and department head positions spanning grades 6-12. Changes in the curriculum tended to be student or cohort specific and short-term rather than broad and systemic, and district leadership did not use data on the accomplishment of the annual student performance goals routinely to update or

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

In this area, districts are rated on 10 performance indicators. Littleton received the following ratings:

Areas of Strength

- Curriculum development in Littleton was increasingly expansive in scope during the review period, evolving from a fragmented school-based approach to a more comprehensive process spanning two levels, K-5 and 6-12. The district created infrastructure in 2006-2007 for an integrated K-12 approach.

Areas for Improvement

- Littleton had neither a process nor a cycle for continuous curriculum review and renewal during the review period, nor did the district have a systematic procedure for using student achievement results to inform curriculum planning.
- Littleton did not have a systematic procedure for using student achievement results to inform curriculum planning.
- The curriculum documents in Littleton were left as working drafts in various stages of completion when the district turned from curriculum development to assessment.

modify the curriculum. In 2006-2007, the district created elementary and secondary curriculum councils consisting of the specialists, department heads, and other staff. These councils have been meeting jointly with the superintendent and curriculum coordinator to implement a K-12 approach.

Effective Instruction

Littleton assessed the relationship between student achievement and learning time at the elementary level, but did not conduct analysis at the middle and high school levels. The district increased instructional time in mathematics from 45 to 60 minutes daily at the elementary level to address deficiencies in student learning. The high school schedule did not provide weekly extended or double periods for laboratories in biology, chemistry, and physics. Instead, teachers conducted laboratories within the scope of the five 48-minute periods, compacting the curriculum.

Appropriate technology was available during the period under review, but successive reductions in funding for assistive personnel, maintenance and repair of equipment, acquisition of hardware and software, and professional development constrained the use of technology as a tool for both instruction and data analysis. Personnel reductions diminished leadership and services in technology. As a result, computers were out of service for longer periods, and teachers were not informed of new applications. School data team leaders lacked technology for scoring assessments and analyzing results and trends.

Littleton did not actively monitor teachers' instruction in order to ensure an emphasis on high expectations and mastery. Supervision was infrequent, and the district did not support the heterogeneous grouping and open enrollment practices with adequate resources to ensure that teachers could address the range of differences in their classes. Littleton did not use student achievement data to determine needed resources and professional development offerings to improve teaching and learning.

Assessment and Program Evaluation

Student assessment data include a wealth of information for district and school leaders on strengths and weaknesses in the local system, providing valuable input on where they should target their efforts to improve achievement.

Student Assessment

The district used several forms of assessment to measure student learning. Tests such as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), Group Mathematics Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GMADE), and Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) were in place, and the Stanford Reading and Mathematics Test had also been used during a part of the review period. In addition, the Clay Observation Survey was given to grade 1 students who were considered at risk, based upon the DIBELS results. Beginning at grade 3, the MCAS tests were added to the assessment battery. While it initially used a consultant to analyze the data, the district evolved into using its own data analysis mechanism to interpret the data and gather more timely information on student progress.

Benchmarks known as "bull's-eyes" were used to measure student progress throughout the school year. Each school had data teams whose role was to monitor progress toward having all students reach the benchmarks. The data teams set "smart goals" that allowed them to work collaboratively to ensure a common focus on the benchmarks and predictable results in their attainment. The curriculum coordinator made regular reports to the school committee on MCAS results, and links to the results, along with the school report card, were prominently displayed on the district website.

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

In this area, districts are rated on 8 performance indicators. Littleton received the following ratings:

Areas of Strength

- Teachers and administrators made consistent and regular efforts to report student assessment results to parents, the community, and other stakeholders.
- The district used curriculum benchmarks called "bull's-eyes" to ensure that students were learning essential parts of the content areas.
- Littleton trained school leaders in data analysis, and used formative and summative assessment strategically to identify struggling students and track the accomplishments of student-centered goals at each school.

Areas for Improvement

- There was no consolidated or centralized mechanism for districtwide analysis or action. The district used "smart goals" as the basis of the feedback loop for benchmark assessment, but their use focused on student learning within the building and there was no mechanism to report the results to other professional staff members.

Program Evaluation

Many programs within the district were evaluated using student assessment results. At the high school, for example, changes were made to the Advance Placement (AP) Physics course based upon AP test results. At the elementary schools, programs such as Title I were monitored for effectiveness using the DIBELS, while others were monitored using pre- and post-test assessments. At the middle and high schools, common midterm and final examinations were used to monitor the effectiveness of programs. The results were used effectively to inform instructional techniques, and sometimes to change the level or order of course offerings, but not to change curriculum content.

Common midterm and final examinations were in place at the high school, and common examinations were in place for science from grade 6 onward. In 2006, the district participated in the external program evaluation conducted by the Malcolm Baldrige Commitment to Excellence project and received the annual award. However, few other internal or external audits were conducted during the period under review.

Human Resource Management and Professional Development

To improve student academic performance, school districts must recruit certified teaching staff, offer teacher mentoring programs and professional development opportunities, and evaluate instructional effectiveness on a regular basis in accordance with the provisions of the Education Reform Act of 1993.

Hiring Practices and Certification

The Littleton Public Schools identified, attracted, recruited, and hired effective, certified professional staff during the period under review. All teachers were licensed, and none were employed on waiver. Principals had almost complete autonomy in selecting staff. Polices and practices encouraged professional growth and placed a high priority on retaining teachers. However, the district's employment, supervision, and professional development processes were neither linked nor supported by appropriate levels of funding.

The mentoring program within the district was well organized and built on a long-standing tradition of mentoring and support for new teachers. Mentors were trained in advance and assigned to teachers new to the district. The program provided written guidelines for regular monthly meetings and topics for discussion. The district held mentoring meetings regularly, and used feedback from the participants to review and revise the program for the following year.

Mentoring for new administrators within the district was less formal and less defined. All new administrators received mentor assignments, but there were no written guidelines, and administrators reported a range of experiences. The process for administrators was described as valuable but unstructured.

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

In this area, districts are rated on 13 performance indicators. Littleton received the following ratings:

Areas of Strength

- All professional staff examined all had appropriate Massachusetts licensure. The district employed no staff members on waivers.
- The district had a comprehensive mentor program for teachers, though the mentoring program for administrators was undocumented and informal.

Areas for Improvement

- Littleton's professional development plan was not systemic, consistent, or informed by data.
- The district's employment, supervision, and professional development processes were not linked, nor were they supported by appropriate levels of funding.
- Littleton principals were constrained in their supervisory roles by ambiguity in the teachers' contract.

Professional Development

It was not clear how the district chose the professional development opportunities it offered. Teachers reported that the leadership often asked for suggestions for professional development activities, but they never received any feedback on how the leadership finally selected topics or why it made those choices. Individual teachers could avail themselves of a generous reimbursement practice, but the district did not generally pay for conferences and workshops; the district did provide a substitute teacher, however, if a teacher chose to pay registration and transportation costs.

Evaluation

Teacher evaluations were not done on a timely basis, and some teachers had not been evaluated at all for a period of years. There were few administrator evaluations available in personnel folders reviewed by the EQA examiners. Administrators did adhere to a procedure for five-minute classroom walk-throughs. Principals were responsible for providing instructional leadership, but felt constrained in their evaluative roles by what they perceived as ambiguity in the teachers' contract.

Access, Participation, and Student Academic Support

Students who are at risk of failing or dropping out need additional support to ensure that they stay in school and achieve proficiency.

Services

The district used formative assessments and summative data to identify students at risk of not attaining proficiency on MCAS tests. Math scores did not improve much over the review period and lagged behind ELA scores. Furthermore, the achievement gap between special education students and regular education students did not improve during this period.

The district provided a range of programs that were comprehensive, accessible, and rigorous. The elementary and middle schools grouped students heterogeneously, providing academic support in the classroom for special education students as needed. The district had a large support staff including special education teachers, speech aides, instructional aides, reading specialists, and math specialists. These professionals and paraprofessionals made it possible for the schools to use an inclusion model for most students.

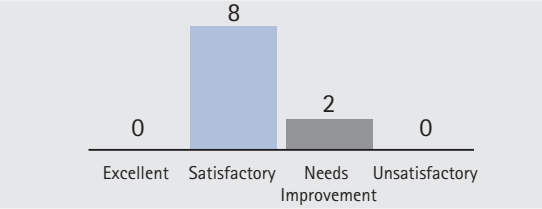
The high school had three levels of instruction: college preparatory, honors, and Advanced Placement (AP). All courses were open to all students, although teacher input and counseling played a large role in determining course selection. The results of the AP exams were unsatisfactory in many disciplines. EQA examiners attributed these low scores to the heterogeneous population of many AP classes at Littleton High School, and the district concurred.

The only significant subgroup in Littleton was special education students. All other subgroups represented less than 10 percent of the district's enrollment. The model of inclusion drove all major decisions in the district, and therefore

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

In this area, districts are rated on 10 performance indicators. Littleton received the following ratings:



Areas of Strength

- The district was effective in retaining most students through graduation.
- The district offered a range of academic programs for its students including special education programs, college preparatory classes, and honors and Advanced Placement classes. A variety of after-school activities was also available to all students, and the district espoused a philosophy of inclusion for all students.
- The district used formative assessments and summative data to identify students who did not meet expectations. Academic support services were in place at all levels for students at risk.
- The district provided transition activities for students advancing between grades and schools.

Areas for Improvement

- The district had no dropout recovery program.

all programs and activities were open to all students. Administrators tracked student data carefully to make sure that the special education students were proportionally represented.

Attendance

The district was effective in maintaining high rates of attendance for students and staff. During the period under review, the district's student attendance rate was in the 95 to 96 percent range, with the greatest number of absentees in grades 10-12. The average rate of teacher absence was 4.6 days per academic year, including professional development days.

Discipline

The school committee reviewed and approved discipline, suspension, and exclusion policies in 2004. The district posted these policies on its website, and printed them in all student handbooks. At the elementary schools, classroom teachers handled most discipline issues. The middle school had an in-house suspension program in place; the high school did not, and instead the district instituted a Saturday School in 2005. According to administrators, the number of referrals declined dramatically over the two years that this disciplinary measure was in place.

Dropout Services

The district was effective in retaining most students through graduation. The dropout rate for grades 9-12 was 0.6 percent in 2004, although no data were available for the last two years of the review period. The district had procedures in place to provide alternative schedules to meet the graduation requirements of potential dropouts. However, no program was in place for dropout recovery.

Financial and Asset Management Effectiveness and Efficiency

Effective districts develop budgets based on student needs, submit financial documentation in a timely fashion, employ staff with MCPPO credentials, and ensure that their facilities are well maintained.

Budget Process

The superintendent developed the annual school budget with no evidence of input from administrators, teachers, or the public. The few budget-related documents covering the period under review made available to EQA examiners were not clear, comprehensive, or complete and did not provide accurate information on funding sources, history, and trends. The district did not implement an evaluation-based review process to determine the cost effectiveness of programs, initiatives, and activities as part of the budget development process, nor was the budget process based, in part, on student performance data and needs. The district did not use an ongoing analysis of aggregated and disaggregated student assessment data to assure the budget would be effective in supporting improved achievement for all students.

Financial Support

The district exceeded the net school spending requirement in each of the years under review by an average of 24.4 percent. An examination of the district operating budgets appropriated at annual town meeting revealed that appropriations increased by 0.9 percent from FY 2003 to FY 2004, decreased by 1.5 percent from FY 2004 to FY 2005, and increased by 2.4 percent from FY 2005 to FY 2006, for a total increase of $212,419 or 1.7 percent from FY 2003 to FY 2006. During this period, the teacher salary schedule in the collective bargaining agreement with the teachers association increased by an average of three percent each

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

In this area, districts are rated on 13 performance indicators. Littleton received the following ratings:

Areas of Strength

- The district and community had appropriate written agreements that detailed the calculation of indirect charges levied on the school district budget by the community.

Areas for Improvement

- The district did not use an open, participatory process to develop its budget, and the budget did not provide accurate information on all fund sources, budgetary history, and trends.
- Although the district exceeded net school spending requirements by an average of 24.4 percent during the period under review, it was required to eliminate staff and reduce spending on instructional materials, equipment, and supplies.
- As part of budget development the district did not implement an evaluation-based review process to determine cost effectiveness of its programs, initiatives, and activities, and did not base budgetary decisions, at least in part, on student performance data and needs.
- The district's payroll and financial management software system did not enable administrators to track spending and other financial transactions regularly and accurately.

year, and out-of-district special education costs increased by an average of 10 percent per year. These increases, coupled with stagnant operating budget appropriations, placed a strain on the funds available to the district for instruction and other direct student services, resulting in staff eliminations and spending reductions on instructional supplies, materials, and equipment.

The town passed a general override of $1.2 million for the district in FY 2006 that alleviated the strain on the district's operating budget for that fiscal year. The town also approved a debt exclusion override to build a new middle school that opened in January 2007.

Facilities and Safety

The district has four school buildings. The high school was built in 2001, the middle school opened in January 2007, and the two elementary schools were last renovated in 1998. All schools were adequately maintained and clean and provided an environment conducive to productive teaching and student learning.

Security was evident in all schools. Doors were locked, and visitors had to identify themselves using an intercom at the main entrance to gain entry; once inside, they were required to sign in. Some schools had a remote video camera/buzzer system. The district had a safety/crisis plan in place that the superintendent of schools, the police chief, and the fire chief reviewed on an annual basis. Regular drills occurred annually, and all new members of the educational community received training relative to the procedures set forth in the district manual.

CONCLUSION

The Littleton Public Schools was considered to be a 'High' performing district, marked by student achievement that was 'Very High' in ELA and 'High' in math on the 2006 MCAS tests. The EQA gave the district a Management Quality Index rating of 'Improvable,' with the highest rating in Access, Participation, and Student Academic Support, and the lowest in Leadership and Governance.

The Littleton school district has experienced a change in leadership over the past few years, with a new superintendent, curriculum coordinator, and business manager hired during the latter half of 2006. The longest-serving school committee member has served for only three years. Interviewees credited the recently departed superintendent with instituting many necessary innovations, albeit at the expense of his popularity. Increases in negotiated teacher compensation and out-of-district special education costs, coupled with stagnant operating budget appropriations, placed a strain on the funds available for instruction and other direct student services, resulting in staff eliminations and spending reductions on instructional supplies, materials, and equipment. The annual net economic loss resulting from school choice was approximately $500,000. The town passed a general override of $1.2 million for the district in FY 2006 that alleviated the strain on the district's operating budget for that fiscal year. The town also approved a debt exclusion override to build the new middle school that opened in January 2007.

During the review period, the district became deeply committed to the use of data as an integral part of the educational process. So far, the district used the data for instructional purposes more than for curriculum or professional development planning, but the foundation for improvement was in place. The district also increased its assessment efforts over the past four years, employing several standardized tests of literacy and math competency, such as the DRA, DIBELS, GMADE, and GRADE, in addition to the MCAS tests. The district recently developed the capacity to analyze the assessment results in-house.

Although the development of preliminary curriculum documents was one of the district's highest priorities over the last five years, it had suspended their development prior to the review period to address student achievement concerns through a focus on assessment. The fragmented curriculum documents had gaps at some grade spans, although the district had infrastructure to ensure horizontal alignment of the taught and tested curriculum. Development of vertical alignment was just beginning. During the review period, curriculum development evolved to a more comprehensive process spanning two levels: K-5 and 6-12. The district created infrastructure in 2006-2007 for an integrated K-12 approach. Central

office administrators proposed a four-phase, six-year curriculum cycle in 2006-2007 to ensure timely revision of curricula informed by student achievement data.

The data teams in the district measured student progress in essential parts of the tested content areas using curriculum benchmarks, and used formative and summative assessment strategically to identify struggling students and track attainment of student-centered goals at each school. The district provided academic support services at all levels for students at risk. Despite a focus on improving student achievement, the district saw little improvement in MCAS proficiency or in the achievement gap between special education students and regular education students.

Littleton offered an inclusive range of comprehensive, accessible, and rigorous academic programs, including special education programs, college preparatory, honors, and Advanced Placement courses, as well as a variety of after-school activities. Heterogeneous grouping and a large support staff of special education teachers, speech aides, instructional aides, reading specialists, and math specialists allowed the schools to use an inclusion model for most students.

Littleton had effective hiring practices for professional staff. Principals had almost complete autonomy in selecting staff. All teachers had appropriate Massachusetts licensure. Policies and practices encouraged professional growth and placed a high priority on retaining teachers. The district had a well organized mentoring program for new teachers. Mentoring for new administrators was less formal and less defined, lacking written guidelines.

Lack of clarity in the teachers' contract regarding the supervisory responsibilities of principals led to ineffective and inconsistent supervision and evaluation. Furthermore, teacher evaluations had not been done on a timely basis, and some teachers had not been evaluated at all for a period of years. EQA examiners found few administrator evaluations in personnel folders they reviewed. However, in the final year of the review period, the superintendent introduced a new tool for the evaluation of administrators.

Several principals stated that a lack of a systemic approach to professional development was a weakness in the district. The district's human resources, supervision, and professional development processes were not linked nor supported by appropriate levels of funding. It was not clear what drove the district's professional development plan, but it was clear that, while there were peripheral connections to student achievement, there was no direct connection with measured student progress.

APPENDIX A: EQA'S DISTRICT EXAMINATION PROCESS

EQA's examination process provides successively deeper levels of information about student performance. All school districts receive an MCAS data review annually, but they do not all receive the full examination every year.

Based on the MCAS results, Educational Management Audit Council (EMAC) policy, and random sampling, approximately 60 districts statewide received a site review. Still other districts — those that do not meet certain performance criteria set by the state Department of Education — received an even more detailed review.

Data-Driven Assessment

Annually, the DOE and EQA's staff assess each public school district's results on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests to find out how students are performing. This review seeks to answer five basic questions:

1. Are the district's students reaching proficiency levels on MCAS?
2. Do MCAS test results vary among subgroups of students (such as minority and low-income students and students with disabilities)?
3. Has the district's MCAS test performance improved over time?
4. Has the MCAS test performance of the district's student subgroups improved over time?
5. Are all eligible students participating in required state assessments?

Standards-Based Examination

Districts with MCAS results that fall within certain thresholds of performance, particularly districts that score below average, may be selected to receive a site review. This review seeks to provide a more complete picture of why the district is performing at that level, examining district management, planning, and actions and how they are implemented at the building level. It focuses in particular on whether the district uses data to inform its efforts.

The report analyzes district performance in six major areas: leadership, governance, and communication; curriculum and instruction; assessment and program evaluation; human resource management and professional development; access, participation, and student academic support; and financial and asset management effectiveness and efficiency. EQA examines a total of 67 indicators to assess whether the district is meeting the standards and provides a rating for each indicator.

APPENDIX B: EXPLANATION OF TERMS USED IN EQA REPORTS

ABA: Applied Behavioral Analysis

ADA: Average Daily Attendance

ALT: MCAS Alternative Assessment

API: Average Proficiency Index (of the English Language Arts Proficiency Index and Math Proficiency Index for all students)

ATA: Accountability and Targeted Assistance

AYP: Adequate Yearly Progress

CAP: Corrective Action Plan

CBM: Curriculum-Based Measures

CD: Competency Determination — the state's interim Adequate Yearly Progress indicator for high schools based on grade 10 MCAS test passing rates

CMP: Connected Math Program

CORI: Criminal Offender Record Information

CPI: Composite Proficiency Index — a 100-point index combining students' scores on the standard MCAS and MCAS Alternative Assessment (ALT)

CPR: Coordinated Program Review — conducted on Federal Education Acts by the DOE

CRT: Criterion-Referenced Test

CSR: Comprehensive School Reform

DCAP: District Curriculum Accommodation Plan

DIBELS: Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills

DIP: District Improvement Plan

DOE: Department of Education

DPDP: District Professional Development Plan

DRA: Developmental Reading Assessment

ELA: English Language Arts

ELL: English Language Learners

EPI: English Language Arts Proficiency Index

ESL: English as a Second Language

FLNE: First Language Not English

FRL/N: Free and Reduced-Price Lunch/No

FRL/Y: Free and Reduced-Price Lunch/Yes

FTE: Full-Time Equivalent

FY: Fiscal Year

Gap Analysis: A statistical method to analyze the relationships between and among district and subgroup performance and the standard of 100 percent proficiency

GASB: Government Accounting Standards Board

GMADE: Group Math Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation

GRADE: Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation

GRADU: The graduation yield rate for a class four years from entry

IEP: Individualized Education Program

Improvement Gap: A measure of change in a combination of the proficiency gap and performance gap between two points in time; a positive improvement gap will show improvement and convergence between subgroups' performance over time

IPDP: Individual Professional Development Plan

IRIP: Individual Reading Improvement Plan

ISSP: Individual Student Success Plan

LASW: Looking at Student Work

LEP: Limited English Proficient

MASBO: Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials

MASC: Massachusetts Association of School Committees

MASS: Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents

MAVA: Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators

MCAS: Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System

MCAS-Alt: Alternative Assessment — a portfolio option for special needs students to demonstrate proficiency

MCPPO: Massachusetts Certified Public Purchasing Official

MELA-O: Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral

MEPA: Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment

MPI: Math Proficiency Index

MQI: Management Quality Index — an indicator of the relative strength and effectiveness of a district's management system

MUNIS: Municipal Information System

NAEYC: National Association for the Education of Young Children

NCLB: No Child Left Behind

NEASC: New England Association of Schools and Colleges

NRT: Norm-Referenced Test

NSBA: National School Boards Association

NSS: Net School Spending

Performance Gap: A measure of the range of the difference of performance between any subgroup's Proficiency Index and another subgroup's in a given district

PI: Proficiency Index — a number between 0–100 representing the extent to which students are progressing toward proficiency

PIM: Performance Improvement Management

PQA: Program Quality Assurance — a division of the DOE responsible for conducting the Coordinated Program Review process

Proficiency Gap: A measure of a district or subgroup's Proficiency Index and its distance from 100 percent proficiency

QRI: Qualitative Reading Inventory

Rate of Improvement: The result of dividing the gain (improvement in achievement as measured by Proficiency Index points) by the proficiency gap

SAT: A test administered by the Educational Testing Service to 11th and 12th graders

SEI: Sheltered English Immersion

SIMS: Student Information Management System

SIOP: Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol

SIP: School Improvement Plan

SPED: Special Education

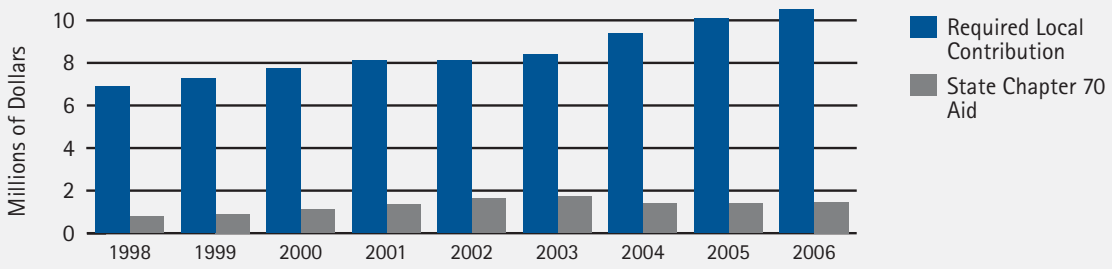
STE: Science and Technology/Engineering

TerraNova: K–12 norm-referenced test series published by CTB/McGraw-Hill

APPENDIX C: STATE AND LOCAL FUNDING, 1998–2006

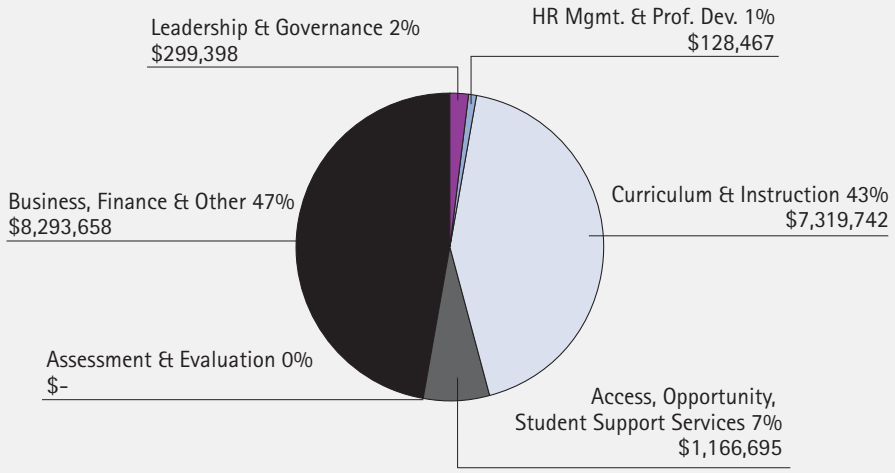
A school district's funding is determined in part by the Chapter 70 program — the major program of state aid to public elementary and secondary schools. In addition to supporting school operations, it also establishes minimum requirements for each municipality's share of school costs. The following chart shows the amount of Littleton's funding that was derived from the state and the amount that the town was required to contribute. The district exceeded the state net school spending (NSS) requirement in each year from FY 2004 through FY 2006. Over this period, NSS increased from $13,975,831 to $ 14,599,851; Chapter 70 aid increased from $1,387,507 to $1,464,107; the required local contribution increased from $9,361,446 to $10,499,232; and the foundation enrollment decreased from 1,597 to 1,532. Chapter 70 aid as a percentage of actual NSS increased from 9.9 to 10.0 percent over this period. From FY 2004 to FY 2005, total curriculum and instruction expenditures as a percentage of total NSS decreased from 60 to 58 percent.

WHERE DOES THE FUNDING FOR LITTLETON PUBLIC SCHOOLS COME FROM?



HOW IS THE FUNDING FOR LITTLETON PUBLIC SCHOOLS ALLOCATED?

FY05 Expenditures By EQA Standards (With City/Town Charges)



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