



Gardner Public Schools Level 3 District Review

November 2010

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
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Overview of Level 3 District Reviews

Purpose

The Center for District and School Accountability (DSA) in the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) conducts district reviews under Chapter 15, Section 55A of the Massachusetts General Laws. This review is focused on “districts whose students achieve at low levels either in absolute terms or relative to districts that educate similar populations.” Districts subject to review in the 2009-2010 school year were districts in Level 3 of ESE’s framework for district accountability and assistance¹ in each of the state’s six regions: Greater Boston, Berkshires, Northeast, Southeast, Central, and Pioneer Valley. The eight districts with the lowest aggregate performance and least movement in Composite Performance Index (CPI) in their regions were chosen from among those districts that were not exempt under Chapter 15, Section 55A, because another comprehensive review had been completed or was scheduled to take place within nine months of the planned reviews.

Methodology

To focus the analysis, reviews collect evidence for each of the six standards: Leadership and Governance, Curriculum and Instruction, Assessment, Human Resources and Professional Development, Student Support, and Financial and Asset Management. The reviews seek to identify those systems and practices that may be impeding rapid improvement as well as those that are most likely to be contributing to positive results. Team members previewed selected district documents and ESE data and reports before conducting a two-day site visit in the district and a two-day site visit to schools. The teams consist of independent consultants with expertise in each of the standards.

¹ In other words, as Level 3 was defined at the time of district selection, districts with schools in corrective action or restructuring.

Gardner Public Schools

The site visit to the Gardner Public Schools was conducted from June 1-4, 2010. The site visit included visits to the following district schools: Waterford Street (pre-K-2), Helen Mae Sauter (1-3), Elm Street (3-5), Gardner Middle School (6-8), and Gardner High School (9-12). Further information about the review and the site visit schedule can be found in Appendix B; information about the members of the review team can be found in Appendix A.

District Profile²

Gardner is located in north central Massachusetts, along Route 2, 28 miles north of Worcester and 59 miles northwest of Boston. Known as the “Chair City” and “Furniture Capital of New England,” Gardner is one of the smallest cities in the state with a population of approximately 21,000 residents. Gardner’s furniture manufacturing history dates from 1826 with the establishment of the Heywood-Wakefield chair factory complex. By 1910, 20 manufacturers were producing over four million chairs per year, with railways connecting them to markets. After flourishing for over a century and a half, Gardner’s furniture manufacturing base declined steadily from the middle 1970’s until the closure of its last major furniture manufacturer, Nichols & Stone Chair Company, in 2008. Most manufacturers had either moved to the southern United States where labor was cheaper, or gone out of business because of foreign competition. Today, only furniture outlets remain in Gardner as a vestige of the past.

Dating from the more prosperous years, Gardner has amenities including a municipal golf course, an indoor swimming pool, a hospital, a community college, and parks, but the city is currently experiencing significant economic hardship. According to the Division of Local Services, the section of Route 2 encompassing northern Worcester county and extending west through Franklin and northern Berkshire counties is one of the state’s most economically challenged areas. The undulating topography, remoteness to eastern Massachusetts markets, and inaccessibility to transportation networks limit the movement of goods and people more than in other areas of the state. The number of jobs in the manufacturing sector in the Leominster-Fitchburg-Gardner region has declined by 37 percent since 1990, and the great recession has caused more widespread losses: the regional unemployment rate was 11.6 percent in April 2010, as compared with the statewide average of 9.1 percent.

The local appropriation to the Gardner Public Schools budget for fiscal year 2010 was \$20,869,234. In addition to the appropriation to the district budget, school-related expenditures by the city were estimated at \$28,674,643 for fiscal year 2010. In fiscal year 2009, the total amount of actual school-related expenditures, including expenditures by the district

² Student demographic data derived from ESE’s website, ESE’s Education Data Warehouse, or other ESE sources.

(\$20,823,355), expenditures by the city (\$6,928,862), and expenditures from other sources such as grants (\$6,761,968), was \$34,514,185.

Gardner bases its school budget on minimum net school spending. According to a review of the city budgets from 2007 through 2009, school expenses averaged 40 percent of the total municipal budget. Approximately 75 percent of the school budget comes from state aid. The 2008 Division of Local Services Financial Management Review of Gardner stated that the city needs to create “alternative opportunities for commercial and industrial development in order to mitigate the residential-reliant property tax base.” In fiscal year 2008, 86.6 percent of the total assessed value in Gardner was attributable to residential properties.

The review team found little evidence of advocacy for the schools in Gardner, although one school committee member interviewed spoke of the need for an override. The parents of school-age children are diminishing as a proportion of the overall community, and in influence. Over the ten-year interval from 1999 to 2009, student enrollment declined by nearly 17 percent, from 3,119 students to 2,600 students, while the total population remained approximately the same.

At the time of this review, the school department was anticipating increased local costs amounting to over two million dollars attributable mostly to an estimated \$800,000 reduction in local aid, a \$600,000 increase in health insurance premiums, and a \$365,000 increase in collectively bargained salaries. Having few areas left to cut save for personnel, the district was projecting a loss of 37 staff positions, including 17 teaching positions, for fiscal year 2011. Central office administrators told the review team that some of the teaching positions could be restored if the teachers’ association agreed to forego a salary increase. Negotiations with the teachers’ association were ongoing, but indeterminate at the close of this review.

Gardner has five school facilities: three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. The elementary schools include the Waterford Street School with an enrollment of 476 students in grades pre-K through grade 2, the Helen Mae Sauter School with an enrollment of 247 students in grades 1 through 3, and the Elm Street school with an enrollment of 475 students in grades 3 through 5. Gardner Middle School has an enrollment of 595 students in grades 6 through 8, and Gardner High School has an enrollment of 807 students in grades 9 through 12.

The three elementary schools are old, but well-maintained. The Helen Mae Sauter School was built in 1897, the Elm Street School in 1927, and the Waterford Street School in 1953. The middle and high schools were constructed in 1976 and 1997 respectively. The central administration offices are located in renovated and reconfigured portable classrooms adjacent to the Waterford Street School. Gardner is initiating a feasibility study for the Waterford Street School, and given the age and condition of its facilities and the changing demographics, the district will likely be confronting more decisions about school consolidation and renewal in the years to come.

Gardner has membership in the Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical High School district and two special educational collaboratives, FLLAC and CAPS. There are two parochial schools and one other Christian school in the city: Our Lady of the Holy Rosary (preK-8), Sacred Heart of Jesus Elementary (K-8), and Wachusett Hills Christian School (K-8).

Table 1: Comparison of Gardner Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity & Selected Populations 1999-2000/2009-2010

Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity	Percent of Total 1999-2000/2009-2010	Selected Populations	Percent of Total 1999-2000/2009-2010
African-American	2.6 / 3.8	First Language not English	3.2 / 6.4
Asian	1.6 / 2.1	Limited English Proficient	0.7 / 3.7
Hispanic or Latino	4.2 / 11.2	Low-income	22.3 / 45.5
Native American	0.2 / 0.3	Special Education	20.3 / 18.8
White	91.4 / 80.7	Free Lunch	--- / 35.6
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	--- / 0.0	Reduced-price lunch	--- / 9.8
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	--- / 2.0		
---Data not available			
Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website			

Over the ten-year period from 1999-2000 to 2009-2010, as shown in Table 1 above, Gardner experienced an increase of 7 percentage points in its percentage of Hispanic students, as well as increases in the percentages of students whose first language was not English (3.2 percentage points) and of limited English proficient students (3 percentage points). Over the last seven years, Gardner has increased English language development tutoring and sheltered English immersion classes for limited English proficient students.

The percentage of low-income students in Gardner has more than doubled, from 22.3 percent in 1999-2000 to 45.5 percent in 2009-2010. This results in part from the declining regional economy and rising unemployment rate. Consequently, the district is contending with the problems associated with poverty, including high student absenteeism, high suspension and dropout rates, and low achievement and low graduation rates. In 2009, 16.2 percent of Gardner's students were chronically absent, a term defined by ESE as absent more than 10 percent of their days in membership. The rates of chronic absenteeism were highest for African-American students (26.7 percent) and Hispanic students (24.3 percent). Other indicators of unmet student needs based on 2008-2009 data provided by ESE include Gardner's four-year graduation rate of 66.7 percent, compared with the statewide rate of 81.5 percent; its dropout rate of 5.1 percent compared with the statewide rate of 2.9 percent; and out-of-school suspension rate of 9.3 percent compared with the statewide rate of 5.3 percent. In 2009, Gardner's retention rate reached 18.5

percent for 9th grade students and 13.2 percent for 10th grade students. Most of these students were credit-deficient because of absenteeism and had multiple suspensions for rule violation.

Student Performance³

As shown in Table 2 below, in 2009 Gardner made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics in the aggregate, but not for subgroups in either discipline. The district was in corrective action for subgroups in both disciplines.

Table 2: 2009 District and School AYP Status

District/School	ELA					Math				
	Status 09	CPI 09	CPI Chg 08-09	AYP Agg	AYP Sub	Status 09	CPI 09	CPI Chg 08-09	AYP Agg	AYP Sub
Gardner	CA-S	84.0	1.40	Yes	No	CA-S	73.1	3.10	Yes	No
Helen Mae Sauter ES	II1-A	82.1	6.5	Yes	Yes	None	79.4	8.0	Yes	Yes
Elm Street ES	CA-S	77.4	0.9	No	No	II2-A	68.1	-0.8	No	No
Waterford ES	II1-A	81.9	8.6	Yes	Yes	None	71.9	-0.5	Yes	No
Gardner MS	RST1-S	88.6	0.2	Yes	No	RST2-A	74.1	5.4	Yes	Yes
Gardner HS	II2-S	92.6	1.4	Yes	No	II2-S	90.4	2.1	Yes	No
Note: A or Agg = Aggregate; CA = Corrective Action; CPI = Composite Performance Index; II1 = Identified for Improvement year 1; II2 = Identified for Improvement year 2; RST1 = Restructuring year 1; RST2 = Restructuring year 2; S or Sub = Subgroup Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website										

Individual school results varied. Gardner Middle School made significant gains. The school made AYP in the aggregate, but not for subgroups in ELA, and made AYP both in the aggregate and for subgroups in mathematics. The middle school was in the first year of restructuring for subgroups in ELA, and in the second year of restructuring in the aggregate in mathematics. Administrators attributed the gains by middle school students in mathematics to a tiered intervention program; however, since this approach uses three mathematics teachers at each grade level, it is jeopardized by impending staff reductions.

³ Data derived from ESE's website, ESE's Education Data Warehouse, or other ESE sources.

Elm Street School students did not make expected progress, especially in mathematics. The Elm Street School failed to make AYP in either ELA or mathematics either in the aggregate or for subgroups. The school was in corrective action for subgroups in ELA, and in the second year of being identified for improvement in mathematics. Gardner has recently adopted a new mathematics series at the elementary level with greater emphasis on reasoning and problem-solving. Both were targeted as areas of need by district leaders based on an item analysis of MCAS mathematics test results. Gardner is also transitioning from a basal series to a balanced literacy program featuring readers' and writers' workshop in an effort to improve student proficiency in ELA, especially in the elementary grades.

The Helen Mae Sauter School made Adequate Yearly Progress in ELA and mathematics both in the aggregate and for subgroups. The school was in the first year of being identified for improvement in ELA in the aggregate, and had no status in mathematics. The Waterford Street School made AYP in ELA in the aggregate and for subgroups, and made AYP in mathematics in the aggregate, but not for subgroups. The school was in the second year of being identified for improvement in ELA in the aggregate, and had no status in mathematics. Gardner High School made AYP in the aggregate in both ELA and mathematics, but not for subgroups. The school was in the second year of being identified for improvement for subgroups in both ELA and mathematics.

Table 3 below shows that Gardner's student proficiency rates are high and stable in the 10th grade in both ELA and mathematics; however, the review team did not analyze these results to determine the effects of the district's high dropout and retention rates. More than one-sixth of 9th grade students have been retained in recent years except in 2009-2010, when about one out of ten of the previous year's 9th grade students were retained; the district's dropout rate is well in excess of the statewide rate. It is therefore likely that some of the district's skill-deficient students are not subject to MCAS testing in grade 10, increasing the proficiency rates at that grade level.

As shown by Table 3, student proficiency rates declined from 2007 to 2009 (or in the case of 10th grade science, from 2008 to 2009) on 9 out of 17 assessments. On 8 out of 17 assessments, less than 50 percent of students tested scored Proficient or better. At all of three the tested grade levels, only about a third of the students scored Proficient or better in science. According to central office administrators and principals, the district science curriculum is topical and less fully developed than in the other core disciplines, and the time allotted to science instruction is limited and varies, especially at the elementary level.

Table 3: Percentages of Students Scoring Proficient and Above on the MCAS ELA, Mathematics, and Science and Technology Tests Over Three Years

	2007	2008	2009
Grade 10-ELA	79	76	81
Grade 10-Mathematics	70	67	72
Grade 10-Science	---	42	35
Grade 8-ELA	76	70	74
Grade 8-Mathematics	31	35	43
Grade 8-Science	23	32	34
Grade 7-ELA	73	65	65
Grade 7-Mathematics	33	34	46
Grade 6-ELA	81	72	69
Grade 6-Mathematics	49	54	56
Grade 5-ELA	62	64	52
Grade 5-Mathematics	36	36	29
Grade 5-Science	38	48	32
Grade 4-ELA	56	31	35
Grade 4-Mathematics	47	28	32
Grade 3-ELA	42	41	51
Grade 3-Mathematics	40	39	48
All Grades-ELA	68	60	62
All Grades-Mathematics	44	41	47

Note: 2009 percentages that are greater than the corresponding 2007 percentages are shown in **bold**.

---Data not available. In 2007 the grade 10 science test was not yet being used, along with ELA and mathematics, as part of the competency determination.

Source: School/District Profiles and District Analysis and Review Tool on ESE website.

Table 4 on the next page shows that student proficiency rates are uniformly higher in ELA than in mathematics in Gardner at every grade level subject to assessment. According to the 2009 results, the proficiency gap between ELA and mathematics is greatest in grade 8, where the gap was 29 points.

A comparison of the 2009 gaps with the 2007 gaps shows that the proficiency gap between ELA and mathematics is narrowing, especially in grades 6, 7, and 8; however, the narrowing at these grades, as in grades 4 and 5, was attributable to a decline in ELA proficiency rates as well as an increase in mathematics proficiency rates.

Table 4: Proficiency Gap Analysis: Comparison of Percentages of Students Scoring Proficient and Above on the MCAS ELA Test with Percentages of Students Scoring Proficient and Above on the MCAS Mathematics Test: 2007-2009

	2007	2008	2009	2007- 2009 Difference in Gap	Trend
Grade 10-ELA	79	76	81		
Grade 10-Mathematics	70	67	72		
ELA/Math Gap	9	9	9	0	Same
Grade 8-ELA	76	70	74		
Grade 8-Mathematics	31	35	45		
ELA/Math Gap	45	35	29	-16	Narrowing
Grade 7-ELA	73	65	65		
Grade 7-Mathematics	33	34	46		
ELA/Math Gap	40	31	19	-21	Narrowing
Grade 6-ELA	83	72	69		
Grade 6-Mathematics	49	54	56		
ELA/Math Gap	34	18	13	-21	Narrowing
Grade 5-ELA	62	64	52		
Grade 5-Mathematics	36	36	29		
ELA/Math Gap	26	28	23	-3	Narrowing
Grade 4-ELA	56	31	35		
Grade 4-Mathematics	47	28	32		
ELA/Math Gap	9	3	3	-6	Narrowing
Grade 3-ELA	42	41	51		
Grade 3-Mathematics	40	39	48		
ELA/Math Gap	2	2	3	+1	Increasing
Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website					

Findings

Leadership and Governance

Central office administrators and principals do not receive annual written formal evaluations.

During an interview, the superintendent informed the review team that she did not receive an evaluation from the school committee for 2008-2009. The superintendent explained that she had not received an evaluation last year because she and the school committee were in the process of changing the evaluation instrument to a narrative focusing on mutually agreed-upon goals. The school committee members interviewed by the review team confirmed that the superintendent was not formally evaluated in 2008-2009 because the evaluation instrument was under revision. The review team found that while the superintendent's personnel file contained no evaluation for 2008-2009, there were evaluations dated August 2008, June 2007, and June 2006. A review of the superintendent's contract showed provisions for an annual evaluation by the school committee.

Central office administrators told the review team that they had not received an annual formal, written evaluation from the superintendent in recent years. One central office administrator commented that no news could be good news. The superintendent stated that she was remiss in not preparing yearly evaluations on the performances of central office administrators. The lack of yearly evaluations was also confirmed in a review of the personnel files of these administrators.

The principals reported that while they had not received annual, formal written evaluations from the superintendent, there were instances when their performance was discussed at meetings with the superintendent throughout the year. When questioned about the evaluation of principals, the superintendent stated that she had prepared them for the 2008-2009 school year. Shortly after her interview, the superintendent provided the review team with a folder labeled 2008-2009 evaluations, containing an evaluation of each principal. These documents were neither signed nor dated, and there were no evaluations written by the superintendent in the principals' personnel files.

ESE recommends and the superintendent's contract provides that the school committee evaluate the performance of the superintendent annually, and it is the responsibility of the superintendent under Massachusetts law (G.L. c. 71, s. 38 and 603 CMR 35.06(1)) and individual Gardner administration contracts to evaluate central office administrators and principals annually. When there are no evaluations of administrators, there is no accountability or assurance of quality performance. Also, there is no identification of the means for improvement.

Six of the seven central office administrators have additional responsibilities stemming from the assignment of from one to four other districtwide roles.

A review of the district's organizational chart, policy manual, job descriptions, and the Massachusetts District Profile for Gardner provided by ESE showed that all but one of the seven central office administrators serve in roles in addition to their primary position. School

committee members, administrators, and teachers stated that central office administrators are assigned multiple roles. As a result of budget reductions, administrative positions have been eliminated, but the responsibilities in these eliminated positions have been added to the duties of the remaining central office administrators. The current assignments of the six central office administrators who serve in more than one role are shown by Table 5:

Table 5: Primary and Additional Assigned Roles for Gardner Administrators

Primary Role	Additional Assigned Role(s)
Superintendent of Schools	Education Preparation Director Human Resources Director
Assistant Superintendent	Curriculum Director Section 504 Coordinator and Grievance Officer Professional Development Director Oversees Home School Applications
Special Education Director	Oversees Guidance Homeless Liaison
School Business Manager	Oversees Food Services Oversees Transportation Services
Educational Technology Director	District Data Coordinator Education Data Warehouse contact Student Information Management System (SIMS) contact
Grants Coordinator	English Language Learner (ELL) Director Elementary Literacy Specialist Title I Director

Source: Gardner documentation and interviews

The school nurse leader is the only central office administrator with one assignment.

According to the administrators, none of the performance responsibilities in the job descriptions for the added roles has been eliminated. Based upon the documents in the job description binder for the district, an additional role assignment has added up to 18 additional responsibilities to the responsibilities of the primary position of a central office administrator. Some administrators expressed concern that the school committee and community expect them to perform all of the extra responsibilities assigned to them. Others commented that due to budget constraints, everyone in the school system is expected to do more with less.

Leaders who serve in multiple roles are unable to devote themselves fully to each assignment beyond their primary position. Administrators are often unable to follow up on initiatives in areas such as curriculum, assessment, and professional development while attempting to handle all the responsibilities of multiple roles. For example, the services to students and staff are much less than ideal when the special education director, while providing leadership to the special education program and overseeing approximately 30 out-of-district placements, being present in the schools to observe the teaching and learning process in inclusion classrooms, and offering support and encouragement to special education staff, must also address issues with the guidance department at the high school and supervise the preschool program.

Although the district has an improvement plan and each school has its own improvement plan, communication about the plans and progress towards attainment of the goals vary significantly.

The 2009-2010 Gardner Public Schools District Improvement Plan (DIP) contained three goals: to improve student learning and achievement as it relates to the performance of subgroups on the MCAS tests; to provide for a safe, clean, orderly, and learner-centered environment; and to increase parent and community involvement in the schools. The template for each goal had entries for action steps, dates, persons responsible, progress to date, and evidence. When questioned, the superintendent stated that she prepared the DIP with the assistance of the administrative council. The DIP was then submitted to the school committee, who reviewed but did not vote on it, and shared with the staff by the principals at faculty meetings. Some teachers interviewed by the review team were familiar with the DIP, while others were unaware of it. According to district administrators and principals, the DIP was developed after the School Improvement Plans (SIPs).

Progress to date was not reported in the section provided for it on the 2007-2009 and 2009-2010 plans. The superintendent stated during an interview that while there were no formal periodic or yearly presentations of progress towards attaining the DIP goals, reports touching upon the three DIP goals were made at school committee meetings throughout the year. The superintendent added that all school committee meetings were carried on cable television and covered by the local newspaper, *The Gardner News*.

Principals reported that they each prepared a SIP with the assistance of the members of their school councils. The principals went on to say that they each met with the assistant superintendent, who with the superintendent is responsible for aligning the SIPs and the DIP. Leadership personnel said that the SIPs were submitted to the school committee, who reviewed and approved them. Teachers told the review team that principals presented their SIPs at faculty meetings at the beginning of the school year.

The frequency and manner of reporting about progress toward attaining the goals in the SIPs varied. Some teachers stated that there were updates at certain meetings during the year, while others reported that they received little or no information. Some school council representatives said that they discussed SIP goal progress at monthly meetings. Central office administrators and principals told the review team that the principals make a presentation to the school committee

on their SIPs in May or June, focusing on the progress achieved towards attainment of yearly goals.

The manner of communicating DIP and SIP goals and progress toward the attainment of the goals to all stakeholders is inconsistent. The review team found little evidence that the DIP and SIPs were used as guiding documents. For example, the team did not find evidence that the plans were used as a reference for decision-making during the preparation and approval of the annual school department budget. Gardner lacks the systematic planning needed to inform educational decision-making and advocacy.

Curriculum and Instruction

Gardner has developed curriculum maps for all of the core disciplines at every grade level. These maps are based directly on the standards in the state curriculum frameworks, and are aligned both horizontally and vertically to ensure consistency at a grade level, and articulation from grade to grade.

The 2005 Technical Report from the former Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) cited Gardner for not having complete written curricula aligned with the state curriculum frameworks in the core subject areas. Central office administrators told the review team during this review that Gardner began to develop curriculum maps in the core content areas at every grade level in 2004, and completed the process in 2008-2009. They added that the maps are updated to reflect changes in sequencing and emphasis in an informal and continuous process.

Organized by month or term to serve as pacing guides, the maps contain the required curricular components in minimal detail. The maps address instructional strategies and assessment techniques, but these recommendations are mostly generic. The kindergarten through grade 5 English language arts maps contain the titles of the stories from the Harcourt Trophies series, reading and language components, state frameworks connections, vocabulary, and enrichment connections. The kindergarten through grade 5 mathematics maps contain topics, essential concepts connections, materials, and enrichment connections. The kindergarten through grade 5 maps for science and social studies are topical, consisting primarily of the essential concepts, knowledge (what students should know), skills (what students should be able to do), connections, spiraling concepts, and materials. Administrators and teachers stated that there is less definition of the curriculum in elementary science and social studies, leaving much of the program to teacher discretion.

The middle school maps in English language arts, science, and social studies are organized by topic and term. They contain the standards from the state frameworks, benchmarks or power standards, essential concepts, assessment techniques, and instructional strategies. The high school curriculum maps encompass the core subjects of English, mathematics, social studies, and science, and other disciplines such as foreign languages, art, business technology, technology education, music, and health and wellness. The high school maps are augmented by course

descriptions in the program of studies and detailed course syllabi including rubrics for student work and information on readings, projects, and assignments.

Principals stated that they expect teachers to refer to the maps in planning instruction; they monitor compliance in informal classroom visits and observations. In interviews, some teachers stated that they had participated in developing the maps by working in grade-level and across-grade-level teams. In classroom observations, the review team confirmed that lessons were timely according to the appropriate curriculum map.

Gardner has aligned the curriculum to the state curriculum frameworks in order to ensure student mastery and to facilitate curriculum analysis and revision. The maps serve as pacing guides, to keep instructional content and topics consistent across each grade within a school and between schools at the same grade level. Curricular consistency is especially important in Gardner in grades 1 and 2 at the Waterford and Sauter schools, and in grade 3 at the Sauter and Elm Street schools. The maps are the basis for the district's formative and summative assessments and facilitate analysis of curricular content, scope, sequencing, and emphasis in order to identify and address weaknesses.

Teachers' instruction during the review team's classroom observations was consistent with most of the district's stated instructional priorities. The review team found strong evidence of four of the six characteristics of instruction emphasized by the district, some evidence of another, and little evidence of the sixth.

The review team was able to observe instruction in only a small number of the district's classrooms because of the prevalence of end-of-the year culminating activities and testing. Specifically, the review team did not conduct observations at the high school on the two days the MCAS Science and Technology/Engineering tests were administered. On the other two days of the site visit, many high school classes were devoted to preparation for or administration of final examinations.

At the elementary level, students were sometimes away on field trips or engaged in schoolwide presentations. For example, at one school, 1st grade students hosted their middle school pen pals, and third grade students were at Sturbridge Village on a curriculum-related field trip. In another school, costumed 5th grade students presented themselves as historical figures to audiences of students from the other grades in the performance phase of their living museum project.

Because the sample of classes is small, the results of the observations are for the district as a whole, rather than by level. Too few high school classes were observed for valid disaggregation, and the results in the aggregate, including the high school, are more descriptive of instruction in kindergarten through grade 8 than in kindergarten through grade 12. The results are useful, however, for the narrower purpose of validating the district's stated instructional priorities.

When asked in interviews with the review team, central office administrators and principals stated six observable instructional priorities. Expressed as teacher expectations, they included stating and posting or writing the lesson objective; making the expectations for student behavior and learning clear; checking immediately for student understanding; maximizing class time for

instruction; differentiating instruction by need and level through grouping of students for targeted instruction; and encouraging student engagement and accountable talk.

The review team conducted observations of 27 general education classes, including 12 English language arts, 11 mathematics, and 4 other classes. The observations ranged between 20 and 30 minutes in length. Observers used a standard record form containing 15 characteristics of effective teaching and learning grouped under two categories: Organization of the Classroom, and Instructional Design and Delivery. Observers rated the prevalence of these characteristics using a three-point scale: solid evidence, partial evidence and no evidence.

Under the category of Organization of the Classroom, the review team found solid evidence of a classroom climate characterized by respectful behaviors, routines, tone, and discourse in 100 percent of the classes observed. In accordance with one of the district priorities, teachers were clear and explicit about their expectations for student behavior and learning in the observed classes. For example in one class, the teacher told the students that they could demonstrate readiness for the next activity by placing their writing in their writing folders, putting the folders in their desks, and looking up at her when they had finished. In another class, immediately before they attended a performance, the teacher asked the students to state the behavioral expectations for a good audience member.

In accordance with another of the district priorities, the review team found solid evidence in 89 percent of the classes observed that the learning objective for the day's lesson was evident. In most of the classes observed the objective was written on poster paper or the white board. In many classes the teacher made repeated reference to the objective as the lesson proceeded in order to reinforce the relevancy of the learning. For example, one teacher stated that it was important to adhere to the order of operations to ensure accuracy in problem solving. Another reminded students about what they would be able to do by the end of the lesson that they hadn't been able to do before.

The review team found solid evidence in 82 percent of the classes observed that available class time was maximized for learning, another district priority. Most teachers preserved instructional time by employing effective and efficient routines. For example in one class, the teacher quizzed students on mathematics facts while collecting their homework. In another, the teacher gave the five students who had finished first another activity to ensure that all of the instructional time was used productively.

There was solid evidence of some of the characteristics of effective instruction grouped under Instructional Design and Delivery in the district classes observed by the review team. Students were grouped by instructional need in elementary and middle school literacy classes and middle school mathematics classes, in accordance with district priorities. Teachers usually taught a mini-lesson, followed by guided practice with the students working in small groups and the teacher either circulating to monitor progress and provide assistance or conducting targeted small group follow-up lessons.

In accordance with district priorities, the review team found use of on-the-spot assessments to check for student understanding in observed classes. On-the-spot assessments were used to some

extent in 75 percent of observed classes. The review team observed solid evidence of their use in 57 percent of the classes observed, and partial evidence in 18 percent. For example, in a mathematics class, the teacher asked students to put up one finger if they were confused, three if they were relatively certain, and five if they were very certain. In another class, the teacher asked students to write a one-word character trait of the protagonist in the story they were reading as a class, went around to survey all of the responses, then called upon some students to state and explain the reasons for their characterizations.

The review team found solid evidence of instruction including a range of techniques in only 36 percent of the classes observed. In most classes, teachers relied on one mode of instruction, usually telling and asking, and there was little evidence of other modes such as discovery or multi-sensory learning.

Also, although one district priority is increasing student engagement and accountable talk, the review team found solid evidence of students articulating their reasoning and thinking in only 39 percent of the classes observed and solid evidence of students inquiring, exploring, or problem solving in pairs or small groups in only 36 percent of the classes observed. In one class, the teacher had students turn to each other to state a fact that they already knew about bears. In another, the teacher asked students to write a prediction about what would happen next in the story, and share it with the other students at their table. This approach was uncommon. The review team observed teachers asking questions requiring students to engage in a process of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation in only 11 percent of the classes observed. In most of the observed classes, teachers posed comprehension questions at the literal level.

There was a moderately high degree of fidelity to the district's instructional priorities in classrooms observed by the review team, especially in kindergarten through grade 8. This level of fidelity is critical to accomplishment of the district's instructional goals. When districts adopt new initiatives without ensuring districtwide conformity to the essential program design and instructional practices, the results are compromised. Programs must be implemented with integrity in order to produce the expected results.

Gardner lacks infrastructure and a process for continuous curriculum review and revision. The district has insufficient personnel in leadership roles to manage curriculum development and revision, and there is too little scheduled time for curricular meetings involving teachers within and across grade levels and departments.

Central office administrators and principals told the review team that Gardner does not have a phased cycle for curriculum development and review. The district also lacks a curriculum steering committee and standing curriculum subcommittees organized by discipline and grade span. This cycle and these structures are necessary for sustained curriculum development and renewal.

Administrators explained to the review team that curriculum development was not a high priority in Gardner until the downward trend in student achievement eventually resulted in placement of the Elm Street School in corrective action and the Gardner Middle School in restructuring. This created a sense of urgency. Administrators added that the Elm Street School's location in the low

growth/low achievement quadrant of ESE's district achievement and growth charts in both English language arts and mathematics confirmed the need for improvement. One administrator said that the decline in student performance and its consequences had been a wake-up call.

In the absence of a plan for curriculum development and review, it was reported in interviews that the assistant superintendent initiates ad hoc curriculum projects to meet immediate needs. For example, teachers at the elementary and middle school levels are revising the mathematics curriculum maps to incorporate the scope, sequence, and emphasis of the Sadlier-Oxford *Progress in Mathematics* program adopted in 2009 to replace the Silver Burdette program. It is not clear what curriculum project will be undertaken once this activity is completed. One administrator stated that district will identify and address the next most pressing need.

Gardner does not have enough leadership or planning time for curriculum development and review. The assistant superintendent serves as curriculum director and in a number of other roles including professional development coordinator, Section 504 coordinator, and Educational Personnel Information Management System (EPIMS) contact. The principals identified themselves as the curriculum leaders in their schools, but went on say that they had too many other responsibilities to fulfill this role. Gardner has had districtwide attendance rates lower than the statewide rate and high rates of suspension, and the principals are often preoccupied with the social problems arising from truancy and rule violation.

The grade 9 through 12 department heads abolished in 2005-2006 were restored in December of 2009 as grade 6 through 12 core curriculum leaders (CCLs) using American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds. Part-time leaders were appointed in four curriculum areas: English, mathematics, science, and social studies, but it is uncertain whether these positions can be maintained once the ARRA funds are depleted. The CCLs meet at least once each month outside of school hours with the grade 9 through 12 teachers in their disciplines, but have no scheduled planning time with teachers in their disciplines during the week. Although they each have an additional planning period and a duty-free period, they also have no scheduled time to meet with each other as a group, or with teachers of other disciplines. As a result, the district has very limited capacity for intradisciplinary or interdisciplinary planning.

Since December 2009, the CCLs have begun to meet with grade 6 through 12 teachers in their disciplines on the district's professional development days. Four full days and four half-days are scheduled during the year. Administrators told the team that the grade 6 through 12 meetings of teachers with the CCLs were the district's first vertical curriculum planning meetings in nearly twenty years.

Principals told the review team that they have limited curriculum planning time with teachers. Elementary school teachers have approximately 40 minutes of common time before school each day, but only two of these periods are used for grade level meetings. The remaining three are for special education Team meetings, parent conferences, and meetings on students making unsatisfactory progress. Similarly, middle school teachers have daily scheduled common planning time, but only two of these periods are reserved for grade and subject area meetings. Elementary teachers told the review team that there is no scheduled vertical planning time. After

elementary teachers meet with their grade level colleagues on early release days, they report to the teachers at the other grade levels on their objectives and progress, but according to both elementary and middle school teachers, there are no meetings of teachers across grade levels at either the elementary or middle school levels.

Gardner has no curriculum development and renewal cycle, minimal staffing of curriculum leadership roles, which may not be able to be maintained after grant funds run out, and inadequate planning time for curriculum work. Continuous development and modification of the curriculum enhances student learning, provides a focus for instruction, and facilitates the design, delivery, and assessment of learning experiences. Planning and management cannot be left to chance in this critical area of district responsibility.

Gardner has recently begun a number of promising initiatives intended to improve student achievement, but the viability and integrity of these initiatives may be affected by diminishing resources and support.

According to central office administrators, in response to the trend of low and declining student results on the MCAS tests in both English language arts and mathematics at the elementary level, and low though improving student results in mathematics at the middle school level, Gardner has recently instituted a number of programs and services. The district initiated a balanced literacy program in kindergarten through grade 8 and instituted a half-time literacy coach at the elementary level. It adopted a new mathematics series at the elementary level, Sadlier-Oxford, which has greater emphasis on critical thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving and better spiraling of content. At the middle school level, it introduced tiered instruction, using pre- and post-testing to form fluid instructional groups in mathematics, based on strengths and needs.

The district has introduced a range of formative assessment tools, including Galileo English language arts and mathematic testing in grades 1 through 8, Lexia reading testing in grades 1 through 5, and Study Island mathematics testing in grades 1 through 5. The latter two programs also have an instructional component with branching capabilities. The district uses these formative assessments for progress monitoring and for planning and assessing the effectiveness of instruction. The review team found widespread enthusiasm for all of these initiatives in interviews with school committee members, central office administrators, principals, and teachers, but all are new, not yet deeply rooted, and in need of continuing financial and consultative support.

In 2008-2009, the Gardner Middle School piloted tiered instruction in mathematics in grade 6. Under this model, students are assessed before instruction and placed according to their strengths and needs in one of three fluid groups instructed by a mathematics teacher. The students are assessed following instruction to determine their levels of skill acquisition, and the teachers reformulate the student groups based on student mastery and needs. In interviews with the review team, central office administrators and principals attributed the attainment of AYP in the aggregate in mathematics by Gardner Middle School in 2009 to this model of instruction, and recommended that it be extended to grades 7 and 8. They expressed uncertainty, however, as to

whether the 2010-2011 budget would be sufficient to sustain three mathematics teachers at each grade level; without them, the integrity of this approach would be jeopardized.

The Gardner Public Schools are making an effort to institute a balanced literacy program in kindergarten through grade 8 in association with the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development at Tufts University. This initiative is backed by much high-quality research demonstrating its effectiveness. The review team examined reports by district consultants indicating that many district teachers are just beginning to learn the preliminary strategies associated with the readers' and writers' workshop model of instruction. The teachers are also making a major transition from use of an anthology with programmed lessons and worksheets to use of trade books in leveled classroom libraries.

Gardner used ARRA funds in March 2009 to create a half-time literacy coach position at the elementary level to support embedded professional development for teachers. A teacher currently serves in this role for half the day while her class is taught by a co-teacher. Teachers sign up for the services of the coach in their classrooms voluntarily. While visiting one of the schools, the review team observed a demonstration lesson conducted by the coach in a 2nd grade classroom embodying many of the strategies of readers' workshop, including "think/pair/share," and an explicit emphasis on what good readers do. The review team was told by principals that coaching helps ensure fidelity of implementation of the district's instructional practices, and also that teachers are eager for this support. Teachers told the review team that they appreciate the immediate feedback from the coach, and that the coach's modeling shortens their learning curve in mastering new practices. Central office administrators, however, stated that it is uncertain whether the district can maintain this critical position in the absence of external funding.

Assessment

There are no uniform districtwide policies regarding the collection, analysis, and use of student assessment data. Each school in the district has procedures in place for these functions, but the procedures differ.

In a review of documents provided by the district and in interviews with administrators and teachers the review team found no evidence of districtwide policies on the collection, analysis, and use of student achievement results. Different procedures are in place in each school under the direction of the principal. The assistant superintendent provides aggregated and disaggregated data from MCAS tests to each school, and principals make use of the data in staff meetings. The district used TestWiz to analyze data when it was made available by ESE. This program supplied aggregated and disaggregated data for each grade level and subgroup. ESE's Education Data Warehouse now supplies the data analysis, but administrators stated that they preferred TestWiz. Administrators requested that the district purchase TestWiz, but the cost was prohibitive.

According to central office administrators, a district data team was formed in 2009-2010 and at the time of the site visit was working on a mission and vision statement. Once the roles and

responsibilities were determined, the goal was to establish a data team in each school for the 2010-2011 school year. The district compiled a 2009-2010 assessment plan, consisting of the assessments, administration dates, and grades subject to assessment. Review of this document showed, however, that it does not address procedures, timelines, district and school responsibilities, goals, or desired outcomes.

According to central office administrators and principals, principals and teachers collect assessment data throughout the school year. This data includes, but is not limited to aggregated and disaggregated results from the MCAS tests for each elementary school, the middle school, and the high school. The pre-K through grade 2 Waterford School uses the grade 3 MCAS test data to inform instruction. School administrators meet with their teachers during the first professional day in the fall to analyze the data and determine how to use it to improve instruction. The plans for data use vary from school to school.

During the remainder of the year, central office administrators and principals reported, there are meeting times when data may be discussed. The elementary staff meets informally before, during, and after school as opportunities are available, as well as during staff and grade level meetings. The middle school staff meets during common planning times, grade level meetings, and staff meetings. The high school staff meets during regularly scheduled department meetings. There are also four in-service half-days in the school calendar, one or more of which may be devoted to data analysis. Each principal is responsible for compiling and organizing data from the various standardized assessments before disseminating it to the staff.

According to central office administrators and principals, at the kindergarten through grade 5 level, the following standardized assessments are given throughout the school year to monitor student progress: the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE), the Standardized Test for Assessment of Reading (STAR), Galileo, and Measured Progress (Progress Toward Standards 3 (PTS3)). Common unit assessments based on the Houghton-Mifflin reading series and the Sadlier-Oxford mathematics series are also administered.

At the middle school level, the standardized assessments include Galileo and PTS3, and there are also common assessments in English language arts and mathematics. At the high school level, the Advanced Placement Tests (AP), Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT), and American College Testing program tests (ACT) are administered, in addition to mid-year and final examinations. Individual subject area assessments and some common assessments in core subject areas are used to assess student achievement and growth.

Gardner has many of the tools in place to develop a successful assessment system, and many exemplary assessment practices are in place in the schools, but without a comprehensive kindergarten through grade 12 district assessment policy and common procedures for school data teams at each level, the district is not using data consistently to measure student achievement and curricular and programmatic effectiveness. These variations in practice also compromise the district's use of assessment data as a source for educational decisions.

A lack of benchmark documents in core subject areas at the high school level hinders the formation and implementation of a comprehensive assessment system to improve student achievement.

Interviews with district and high school administrators revealed that lack of consistent subject area leadership has hindered the compilation of benchmarks and common assessments in core subjects at the high school level. Department chairs were eliminated at the high school in 1997. They were re-established in 2001-2002, but eliminated in 2005-2006. Preliminary benchmark documents were written in the spring of 2010 after the institution of the grade 6-12 Core Curriculum Leaders (CCLs) in December 2009, using one-time external funding. A review of core subject area benchmark documents and interviews with the CCLs revealed that there is no standard form or template. Administrators and the CCLs frequently referred to these documents as works in progress. Some consist solely of lists of activities based on the state framework. Others also include essential questions. Some are broken down by marking periods; some include generic instructional strategies and generic assessments. Few benchmark documents include a timeline or assessment schedule.

The CCLs stated that their goal for the 2010-2011 school year was to develop common assessments based on the benchmarks. Mid-term and final examinations are administered in all core subject areas, but not necessarily the same examinations for the same courses. The CCLs stated that they had, in various places, all of the information necessary to develop common assessments, and needed only to compile it in a uniform manner. In English, there was a summary of what has been assessed, but no common assessments at the time of the site visit. In mathematics, there were pacing guides indicating what needs to be assessed, and common assessments were being developed. In science, there were common assessments in technology/engineering, but not in the other science courses. Some of the American history classes had common assessments, but the other social studies courses had none.

The high school has begun the process of writing benchmark documents as a first step in the development of a comprehensive assessment system. The CCLs are working cooperatively in an attempt to develop common assessments in core subject areas. Common midterm examinations ensure consistency from class to class in the same course, reveal curricular strengths and weaknesses, and help to monitor student progress and target interventions. Common final examinations ensure student mastery of outcomes, as well as class consistency and curricular effectiveness. Without these tools, it is difficult to verify or improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Core subject benchmarks and benchmark assessments are in place at the elementary and middle school levels, where they are used to measure student progress.

A review of documents and interviews with district and school administrators revealed the existence of core subject benchmark assessments and grade level assessments at the three elementary schools and the middle school. The district data coordinator has created a Galileo, Study Island, and Lexia technical database to help school administrators correlate data. The

coordinator is also working with the ESE District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) to triangulate data for district use.

At the Waterford Street School, the review team learned from interviews, the principal and teachers review benchmark data regularly to measure student progress. In 2009-2010, data analysis identified weaknesses in reading comprehension and in solving word problems in mathematics. Teachers used this information together with a program evaluation conducted by Teachers 21 during the 2008-2009 school year to better prepare students for success on the third grade MCAS tests.

At the Helen Mae Sauter School, standardized assessments including Lexia, DIBELS, Study Island, and Galileo, as well as the balanced literacy program formative assessments, provide benchmark data to inform instruction and facilitate student placement. There are a variety of other tools for assessing student progress that provide benchmark data, including common assessments derived from the reading and mathematics series, and the program evaluation by Teachers 21. The principal creates a spreadsheet including assessment data from all sources and distributes it to teachers to inform instructional planning and evaluation of outcomes. Teachers meet informally throughout the month to discuss student progress, as well as discussing it during the regular monthly grade level and staff meetings.

At the Elm Street School, standardized assessments including DIBELS, Galileo, Study Island, STAR, as well as the balanced literacy program formative assessments, provide benchmark data that informs instruction and facilitates student placement. There are a variety of other tools for assessing student progress that provide benchmark data, including the Harcourt Themes common assessments in reading, the Sadlier-Oxford mathematics series common unit tests, and the program evaluation by Teachers 21. Students are assessed formally and informally daily. Examples of this assessment include open response writing prompts in literacy and word problems in mathematics. Teachers meet informally to discuss the results and implications throughout the month, and at twice-monthly grade level and staff meetings.

At the middle school, grade level and content area literacy teams meet regularly to analyze data. Common assessments are administered in mathematics and ELA, and progress monitoring and special education reports are used in a timely manner. The three mathematics teachers at each grade identify students' needs through daily assessments and address them in a supplementary support mathematics class. The principal performs an item analysis of MCAS test data and distributes it to teachers. Common planning time allows teachers to meet, discuss test data, determine mastery, and work on identified areas of need. The middle school principal worked with the assistant superintendent to put the balanced literacy approach being instituted at the elementary level in place in grades 6 through grade 8 as well.

Preliminary evidence suggests that the introduction of Galileo, Study Island, and Lexia has helped teachers to improve student achievement at certain grade levels, especially in mathematics.

Human Resources and Professional Development

The teacher evaluation process lacks uniformity and often does not abide by the contractual agreement.

The teachers' contract specifies that teachers with professional status must be evaluated every other year, as required by the state regulations at 603 CMR 35.06(1). The process consists of a single observation preceded and followed by a meeting and a summative evaluation based, as required for all teacher evaluations by state regulations, on the Principles of Effective Teaching contained in those regulations. A similar process is provided for teachers with non-professional status, to be carried out annually, as required by regulations. This process consists of two observations preceded and followed by a meeting and a summative evaluation at the end of the year based on the Principles of Effective Teaching. The evaluation forms are appended to the teachers' contract. In reviewing a random sample of 36 personnel folders, however, the review team found that summative evaluation forms vary from school to school, and that several of the elementary schools do not use the Principles of Effective Teaching as the basis for summative evaluations. In many cases, write-ups of the observations that are required to precede the summative evaluations were not included in the folders.

The summative evaluations the team reviewed were often, particularly at the elementary level, narratives consisting of a compilation of what the evaluator had observed. The middle and secondary schools generally used the summative evaluation form included in the contract. While the teachers' contract identifies a timeline for staff evaluations, it was not followed in many instances. For example, in one teacher's case, a single observation was made during 2008, and the summative evaluation was not completed until the next year. Additionally, individual teacher and administrator files did not in some cases contain up-to-date evaluations, although such evaluations were provided to review team upon request. Two-thirds of the evaluations had been completed in a timely manner, and both administrators and staff members had endorsed and dated them.

The district is not making effective use of evaluation as a tool to monitor, assess, and ensure the implementation of both district and school-based instructional goals, and to ensure staff accountability for reaching these goals. The district's personnel decisions are jeopardized when the evaluation process lacks uniformity and does not conform to contractual and regulatory requirements.

Teacher evaluations are not instructive and do not promote professional growth.

In their review of 36 randomly selected teacher evaluations, review team members determined that the majority were merely descriptive, rather than informative or instructive. In a typical example, one evaluation consisted only of a recounting of the teacher's actions from the beginning to the end of the class. Few evaluations identified needs for improvement or provided specific recommendations intended to promote professional growth.

In seven instances, the summative evaluations were not based upon the Principles of Effective Teaching. No evaluators made reference to previous evaluations, or to the effects of either district or teacher-selected professional development activities. In some instances there were confirmations encouraging teachers to continue to do what they were doing.

As currently implemented, the district's teacher evaluation process is not highly correlated with the Principles of Effective Teaching and does not identify areas for improvement and provide teachers with explicit guidance and direction for improving their instruction. Thus the process is not in the service of improving teaching and learning and has limited value in informing personnel decisions.

A formal mentoring program exists for teachers new to the district, and some administrators receive informal mentoring.

In interviews with school and district administrators and with teachers, the review team learned that the district has implemented a formal mentoring program for all teachers new to the district. Mentors are selected through an application process at each school. The program includes meetings of mentees and mentors with the assistant superintendent multiple times per year on a variety of topics, including positive classroom discipline and legal issues. In addition, a district steering committee provides a one-day training at the beginning of the year, offering topics designed for first year teachers such as cognition, based on Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, and materials. Participants maintain a log and develop portfolios.

Through a review of mentoring documents and in interviews with members of the professional development committee, the review team determined that the mentoring program has changed recently, due in part to the availability of funds. The meetings of the mentors and mentees with the assistant superintendent now focus on general topics, such as how the laws impact teaching, rather than on the quality of instruction. The district lacks funds either to engage external presenters of seminars and workshops or to expand the mentoring program to include certain second and third year teachers. Lack of district funds also limits opportunities for staff to participate in out-of-district programs that would benefit new teachers.

In interviews with the review team, new teachers stated that the mentoring program had been very helpful and useful, especially the opportunities to meet and share their experiences with their mentors. Many said that they would have benefited from another year of mentoring.

The review team learned in interviews with administrators that the district does not have a formal mentoring program for new administrators, and not all new administrators have a mentor. The superintendent and principals determine collaboratively whether a new administrator needs a mentor. When a mentor is warranted, the district usually engages a retired administrator. This happens only occasionally. According to interviews, the assistant superintendent also mentors informally and unofficially. Although principals told the review team that they had good collegial relationships and often called upon each other informally for advice, they added that a formal mentoring program would have been more dependable. One stated that unless the roles are defined there is reluctance to burden a more experienced administrator with questions and concerns.

Though it has been cut back recently because of financial constraints, Gardner has a helpful teacher mentoring program that meets the requirements of state regulations at 603 CMR 7.12. This program helps teachers learn about the larger community, district routines and procedures, and the expectations for planning and delivering instruction, among other topics. The mentoring program also helps the district to attract and retain beginning and new teachers. The mentoring program for administrators is less formal and well developed, and not all administrators have the benefit of it. Administrators told the review team that the learning curve was steep when they were new to their positions and when responsibilities were added to their existing roles. The fact that mentoring for administrators in the district is limited prevents most of them from having the assistance they need in negotiating that steep learning curve.

The district's professional development program lacks the clear focus, direction, and consistent financial support necessary to lead to improved student achievement.

The district's professional development plan consists of a list of topics planned for four full days and four half-days of release time for professional development. According to teachers and administrators, this largely uncoordinated list of activities is developed through recommendations and discussions among professional development committee members. Through interviews with teachers and administrators and a review of the documents, the review team determined that staff other than staff on the professional development committee do not participate directly in professional development planning, except by completing evaluations at the conclusion of each professional development day. The team found no defined process for planning the professional development programs in Gardner based upon district instructional needs. In a review of the district's listing of planned professional development activities, as well as in discussions with teachers and administrators, there was no indication that the professional development committee sought annual input from stakeholders regarding ongoing or future needs. Furthermore, individual school improvement plans and the DIP address professional development needs and training topics only minimally.

The district is in the elementary stages of using professional development to enhance data analysis and instruction. The elementary and middle schools are using assessment to inform instruction, but according to focus groups with teachers and a review of district documentation, there has been little emphasis in the district professional development program on the use of assessment to diagnose student difficulties and prescribe appropriate instructional interventions. Nevertheless, administrators reported and financial documents showed that the district implemented a variety of high quality professional development programs during 2009-2010, including Understanding by Design, Galileo, Lexia, mathematics literacy, and the Tufts literacy initiatives. Multiple general topic programs have been offered as well, including harassment and bullying prevention, credit recovery, and Powerpoint.

The review team learned from district documentation as well as interviews with teachers and union representatives that much professional development time has centered on curriculum mapping and literacy. Little subject-area professional development has been made available at the secondary level, with most programming identified for the elementary. According to the

district's End of Year Report to ESE, very few district funds are spent on professional development. The district relies almost exclusively on grant funding to drive the district's professional development, and there is no evident plan for sustaining professional development in high priority areas once grants expire.

Since few or no district funds are budgeted for professional development, teachers and administrators reported, teachers are allowed to attend only free and grant-funded out-of-district conferences and workshops. Similarly, graduate courses are not subsidized with district funds. Gardner lacks a coordinated, purposeful, fiscally dependable professional development program designed to support instructional improvement. The district program is fragmented, lacking goal-direction, and without the capacity that would come from allocating funds in the local budget for professional development. The program does not meet district needs for teacher training, such as training in the use of assessment data or secondary subject-area professional development, does not provide sufficient assistance to teachers to fulfill their individual professional development plans, and is not designed to accomplish the instructional goals in the DIP and SIPs.

Student Support

The academic support services offered to Gardner students are mostly funded by grants. While the programs are necessary, the funding is uncertain, and largely dependent upon securing federal and state support.

From an examination of financial reports and interviews with teachers and administrators, it was clear to the review team that Gardner has few resources, yet the district offers many academic support programs in all of its schools. The district is able to do so by making extensive use of grants from external sources to fund academic support programs and services.

Most support programs are funded or, in the case of certain technology programs such as Galileo and Study Island, were acquired through state or federal grants. Title I support, for example, is common to four of the district's five schools. In several interviews, both teachers and administrators said that a change in status for Title I assistance from targeted to schoolwide has helped the district offer services to a larger number of students. In the past, Title I has funded MCAS tutoring, after-school programs, tutors, and other programs. Title I support has diminished over the years as less federal aid is distributed annually. In general, the district's heavy dependence on uncertain federal and state financial assistance jeopardizes the continuity of its academic support programs and services.

There are some locally-funded support programs in place, according to district documents and interviews with district and school administrators. Teachers are contractually obligated to provide academic support services after school for at least an hour per week, but during the site visit review team members observed teachers exceeding the contractual minimum. In documents such as curriculum accommodation plans and handbooks, parent volunteers and interns from the high school and the local state college were listed as academic support tutors in several of the schools, especially the Waterford and Elm Street schools.

According to interviewees, and from a review of student achievement results, some of the district's academic support programs and instructional initiatives have resulted in positive results over the past three years. For example, student proficiency is increasing in the district in mathematics, especially at the middle school level. Such results are achieved by concentrating resources where they can be most valuable. Heavy dependence on unreliable revenue sources puts the district in a weakened position at precisely the time when it needs the financial flexibility to make the best decisions it can for its students, decisions based on needs and goals rather than dictated by fiscal necessity.

The district maintains productive and worthwhile partnerships with local community organizations, leading to effective support for the social and emotional needs of the students.

While there are many programs offered by the Gardner Public Schools to support the social and emotional needs of its student population, many are provided by community agencies working in partnership with the school district. These partnerships have been encouraged and developed by a district that recognizes its responsibility to provide these services, but also their costs and its own financial limitations.

According to data supplied by ESE, 45.5 percent of the students attending the Gardner Public Schools in 2009-2010 were low-income, defined as meeting the federal guidelines for eligibility for a free or reduced-price lunch. The district eligibility rate exceeds the statewide eligibility rate of 33.0 percent. With such a significant percentage of its students in this category, Gardner has more students who depend on school-based services than more affluent communities. As reported in interviews with district administrators and principals, the district has sought out and embraced community programs that provide services to students and families experiencing economic difficulties. Programs such as the Multi-Service Center in Leominster are regular providers of services to the district.

Some of those programs provide resources that may be recommended by district professional staff as supplements or alternatives to regular school offerings. The Lipton Center and the Youth Opportunities Upheld, Inc. (Y.O.U., Inc.) programs provide home counseling or other targeted services, often funded by medical insurance such as Medicare or Mass Health. Other types of assistance are available through several collaboratives to which the district belongs, such as the CAPS collaborative, and the FLLAC collaborative.

CAPS and FLLAC offer different but complementary services that are appropriate for some students in the district. CAPS sponsors the Odyssey program, an adolescent day treatment program for students with mental health challenges, and Gateway, a program designed to assist in short-term counseling and assessment services. The FLLAC collaborative offers a 45-day interim alternative educational setting, used for evaluation, and an alternative school placement for some students.

NAWWG-MT, a group of collaborating districts whose acronym derives from the names of the five member districts⁴, provides a vehicle for sharing resources, particularly in professional development, and referring administrators to beneficial programs for students within the districts.

Gardner also provides a range of in-school support services, as was evident in documents provided by the district and confirmed by interviews with principals and counselors. For example, the Second Step program at the elementary and middle school levels helps students improve their ability to make good choices. School nursing services are in place at all schools. Each school has had at least one counselor, and three were assigned to the high school for the 2009-2010 school year; however, the fiscal year 2011 budget approved during the district review in June 2010 required a reduction in the number of counselors. Unless other funding arrangements unanticipated at the time of the review make it unnecessary, this reduction will result in a loss of services to students. When asked about other student support programs or services that had been lost due to fiscal constraints, interviewees told the review team that the local budget had not underwritten many programs, and there were few to reduce or eliminate. They added, however, that the district had eliminated a large number of paraprofessional positions over the previous five years.

Gardner has sought, formed, and maintained productive partnerships with community and regional providers. This has helped the district to offer a range of support programs and services to students and their families—not only those described above, but also other programs with community partners, described in the next finding, that help students pursue academic credits in various alternative ways. During times of economic stress in an area of the state experiencing declining employment, partnerships between the school district and its community agencies are prudent and invaluable.

In spite of its student support programs, the district is facing a substantial dropout problem at the high school, along with high rates of out-of-school suspension, ninth grade retention, and chronic absenteeism.

As the Gardner High School administration stated in its 2009-2010 Report to the School Council, attendance is often an indicator of student success. As the report said, attendance is critical because classroom instruction cannot be replicated outside the classroom and because teachers cannot accurately assess students and make adjustments to ensure their learning when students are not in school.

Table 6 below shows that although improving, Gardner’s attendance rates have been consistently below the state rates since 2005. The attendance rates for the high school are the lowest in the district, as is the case in many districts, and only in 2009 did the high school’s attendance rate improve past its 2005 rate, to 92.9 percent.

⁴ The members are Narragansett, Ashburnham-Westminster, Winchendon, Gardner, and Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School (“Monty Tech”).

Table 6: Gardner, Gardner High School, and State Attendance Rates: 2005 - 2009

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
State (all grades)	94.4	94.5	94.6	94.6	94.6
Gardner (all grades)	92.8	93.1	93.4	93.6	93.9
Gardner HS	92.4	91.4	92.3	92.1	92.9
Difference Gardner/State	- 1.6	-1.4	-1.2	-1.0	-0.7

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

The 2009 attendance rate for 9th grade students of 91.7 percent was the lowest of the high school grades and was more than a percentage point lower than the 92.8 percent attendance rate for 9th grade students statewide.

Other indicators of student need at Gardner High School that are also concerning include dropout rates of nearly double the state rates (see Table 7 below) and substantial rates of chronic absenteeism, especially in the 9th grade. As shown in Table 7, the 9th grade chronic absence rate (defined as the percentage of students absent more than 10 percent of their days in membership, equivalent to 18 days if they are enrolled for a full 180-day year) increased from 22.2 percent in 2005 to 32.3 percent in 2009. This is considerably higher than the chronic absence rate for 9th graders statewide in 2009 of 20.7 percent. Such a high rate has significant implications for learning; in 2009 approximately one in three 9th grade students in Gardner was chronically absent from school and as a result without sufficient access to the curriculum and instruction that the school provides.

Table 7 shows that the 9th grade out-of-school suspension rate (percentage of students suspended out of school one or more times during the year) was 17.3 percent in 2009 and 22.5 percent in 2008, compared to state out-of-school suspension rates of 11.7 percent in 2009 and 12.5 percent in 2008. The 9th grade retention rate (not shown in table) was 18.5 percent in 2009, 18.9 percent in 2008, and 17.1 percent in 2007. Although it did improve to 10.3 percent in 2010, this was still considerably above the statewide 9th grade retention rate for that year of 6.9 percent. These figures mean that in 2006-2007 through 2008-2009 more than one of every six of the previous year's 9th grade students was retained in the 9th grade for at least one additional year; the high retention rate for 2006-2007 is partially responsible for the fact that the district's four-year graduation rate for 2009, shown in Table 7, was approximately 15 percentage points below the state rate.

Table 7: Selected Student Indicators (in Percentages) for Gardner, Gardner High School, and Gardner 9th Graders: 2005-2009, with State Comparisons

		2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Chronically Absent	GHS	21.1	23.9	23.5	26.2	21.3
	GHS, Grade 9	22.2	28.0	27.3	28.8	32.3
	State, Grade 9	22.6	22.2	21.8	20.6	20.7
Out-of-School Suspensions	GHS	7.7	13.1	15.2	13.1	13.4
	GHS, Grade 9	10.5	18.7	22.6	22.5	17.3
	State, Grade 9	13.1	12.9	13.3	12.5	11.7
4-Year Graduation Rate	Gardner	---	72.5	59.3	63.8	66.7
	State	---	79.9	80.9	81.2	81.5
Annual Grade 9-12 Dropout Rate	Gardner	7.7	6.4	6.0	9.3	5.1
	State	3.8	3.3	3.8	3.4	2.9
<p>Note 1: Chronic absence is defined as absence more than 10% of a student's days in membership.</p> <p>Note 2: Out-of-school suspension rates represent the percentage of students suspended out of school one or more times during the school year.</p> <p>Note 3: Graduation and dropout rates reflect students from other districts enrolled in the Gateway program, who were counted as entering school choice students.</p> <p>---Data not available</p> <p>Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website and ESE's Education Data Warehouse</p>						

The district has a number of programs related to student attendance. An attendance policy is included in all of the student handbooks. The high school policy states that a student is required to be in attendance for 90 percent of the class sessions for each course in order to receive full credit. The policy goes on to state that failure to attend 90 percent of the class sessions, without documented excuses, will result in loss of credit. This policy allows a student to miss up to 18 classes in a year-long course without documented excuses. Additional, documented absences

could increase the number of allowable student absences beyond 18, removing the student from regular classroom instruction for even more class sessions.

In order to increase accountability for attendance, parents or guardians are required, according to the student handbook, to report an anticipated absence. When the school has not received this notice, an automated call is made to a telephone number where the parent or guardian can be reached. A student reaching 18 absences from a particular course may be denied course credit following a due process procedure. Principals told the review team that the school sends letters home to parents following a student's eighth class absence. In addition to the automated calls, counselors reported making telephone calls to certain students' parents or guardians to check on absences. When warranted, the district makes use of the legal system and files a Child in Need of Services (CHINS) petition with the Department of Children and Families.

According to interviews with principals, discipline, attendance, and academic questions may also result in a referral to the Teachers Assisting Students in the Classroom (TASC) process. TASC committees are common to all of the Gardner Public Schools and may include a teacher, administrator, school nurse, and counselor. The meetings are chaired by the counselor. The team includes the student's parent or guardian early in the process. The team administers assessments, makes classroom observations, develops behavioral modification plans, makes accommodations in the student's program, or proposes other interventions. The team re-convenes in six weeks to determine progress. When the progress is insufficient, the student may be referred for a Section 504 evaluation or an evaluation under the special education law. If the student is not found eligible for either a Section 504 accommodation plan or an Individualized Education Program, the student can be placed on a regular education alternative plan (REAP), detailing accommodations intended to help the student progress.

According to interviews with administrators, Gardner instituted a freshman academy program during the 2008-2009 school year. This program was essentially a continuation of the teamed model that the entering 9th grade students were accustomed to in middle school. The review team found no evidence of a written formal evaluation of this program, but it was discontinued after only one year. Interviewees explained that it had been too costly to dedicate a full team of teachers to the 9th grade class, although they acknowledged that entering 9th grade students need more supervision and structure than the high school model provides.

Principals and teachers reported that the district offers a number of programs to allow students to recover credit and progress to the next grade level. The traditional summer school program offered at the high school is the most familiar program in this category. The summer school course cost was described by interviewees as a barrier for some students, and there are no scholarships to assist economically disadvantaged students, because the program is required to be self-supporting. Interviewees reported that these credit recovery programs have been modified or scaled back to reflect the changing requirements of grant programs funding them or reduction in the numbers of staff members who served as the faculty for such programs.

The district participates in other programs as well, including the Gateway program operated in conjunction with Mount Wachusett Community College and Ralph C. Mahar Regional High

School. This program allows students to complete high school graduation requirements in an alternative program. Credits earned there are transferable to the high school. The semester tuition for this program is low, but the cost of books is additional. In interviews, some administrators expressed reservations about the appropriateness of the Gateway program. One said that the students who most need the alternative site offered by the program often lack the self-discipline and self-regulation needed to benefit from it. Project GO is another program cosponsored with Mount Wachusett Community College to target high-risk students. It allows some students to pursue high school credits in the community college setting.

There is also a dual enrollment option through the college for eligible students. Transfer credits are accepted from the nearby Fitchburg alternative school, and to a lesser extent through some approved on-line academic sources. Interviewees also reported attempts by the district to address Gardner's low attendance and high dropout rates through various collaborative initiatives. They were in agreement that there is no single solution to these issues, and a variety of approaches is more likely to produce a successful outcome.

The review team learned during the course of interviews that students considering leaving high school meet with the principal, when possible. Often, these students do not return to school for the meeting, but attempts are made to offer alternatives when the final meeting does occur. The alternatives include the Job Corps, a GED program at the community college, or another alternative school program. Students are given a written assurance of the right to return to school in the future, and a similar follow-up letter is sent after the student leaves school. The district does not have a formal dropout recovery program. This was attributed to insufficient staff. Specifically, there are too few counselors, and district and building administrators are burdened with many competing duties.

In the view of district and school administrators, the new alternative school in Gardner, opened in January of 2010, is a potentially more powerful tool for intervention than any of the approaches described above. Funded by an ARRA grant, this program has a staff of teachers, a school adjustment counselor, and two paraprofessionals. As explained to the review team, the program was designed to help students recover credit in an alternative setting on a temporary basis. The program practices are suited to an at-risk population of students likely to drop out of school. Administrators told the review team that one student would graduate from the program in June of 2010. This student applied credits accumulated in other alternative school settings offered by the district and completed the requirements for graduation in the new program.

High 9th grade retention rates in combination with high rates of out-of-school suspension and chronic absenteeism have created the conditions for dropping out at Gardner High School. While it is too early to gauge its effectiveness in reversing these conditions, the new alternative school appears to be a promising approach worthy of the cost. If the program is successful, the district will need to assume the funding once the supporting grant is depleted.

Financial and Asset Management

The Gardner school department's budget has been funded at below minimum required net school spending during the last few years and its per-pupil spending has been considerably below the state's, resulting in continuing reductions in staffing and programs and delays in addressing many immediate building needs.

The Gardner school department has been operating under severe financial limitations. ESE data shows that net school spending for the district over the last few years has been less than required net school spending. Similarly, its per-pupil spending during this period has lagged per-pupil spending in the state. During fiscal year 2007 the district was 2.8 percent below required net school spending and its per-pupil spending was \$2,326 below the state per-pupil spending. During fiscal year 2008 the district was 2.7 percent below the required net school spending and it was \$2,300 below the state in per-pupil spending. In fiscal year 2009 Gardner's actual net school spending was only 0.1 percent below required net school spending but its per-pupil spending was still \$1,756 (14 percent) below the state average.

According to interviews and staffing reports for 2005-2006 to 2007-2008, there were staff reductions and loss by attrition of the positions of retired personnel amounting to 23 positions. The reductions in the educational budget have also diminished classroom support services provided by paraprofessionals. According to central office administrators, in school years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008, 27 paraprofessionals and tutors were eliminated. The district has also delayed implementation of a capital improvement plan addressing many immediate needs. For example, according to the plan, Gardner High School needs a roof replacement, exhaust fan replacements, upgrading of the fire alarm system, and repair and renovation of the first floor bathrooms. In addition, the Elm Street School needs a new roof.

The budget for fiscal year 2010 was \$531,588 below the amount voted by the school committee as a level maintenance-of-service budget. The fiscal year 2011 budget, passed by the school committee during the site visit, constituted a 10 percent reduction from the fiscal year 2010 budget. It eliminated all sports programs at the middle school level. The superintendent and business manager told the review team that 37 staff positions would also be eliminated, including 17 teachers. In addition to the staff reductions, a number of positions were left unfilled because of budget shortfalls. For example, two special education teacher openings were not filled for the 2010-2011 school year.

The city of Gardner is also assessed by the Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School District. This assessment amounted to \$3,031,487 in fiscal year 2010. The assessment is mandated if two-thirds of the member districts approve the regional vocational school district budget.

Because of the severe financial limitations under which it operates, the district has reduced personnel, cut programs, and deferred action on capital improvements. The funds available to Gardner are steadily falling behind increases in the costs of materials, salaries, and maintenance

and repairs to school facilities. Under these limitations, the infrastructure is deteriorating, leading ultimately to more costly emergency repairs and replacements. In addition, administrators are serving in multiple roles, compromising their effectiveness, and services to students have been lost or jeopardized. District administrators and municipal leaders told the review team that in austerity the district had succeeded in preserving enough teaching positions to maintain class sizes, but that they were anticipating a more significant loss of teaching positions in fiscal year 2011.

The superintendent develops a preliminary budget with input from the principals and other members of the administrative staff. The final budget is determined by the mayor's recommendation to the finance subcommittee of the city council and their recommendation to the full council.

The superintendent meets with the mayor to discuss school requests and estimated city revenues. As revenue estimates become more accurate adjustments are made to the amount the mayor will ultimately recommend to the finance committee and to the city council. This amount is accepted by the school committee and the district then reduces programs, services, and staff as necessary to stay within the limits.

Following the initial meeting between the mayor and superintendent, budget development begins in the district in November with a meeting of the superintendent, assistant superintendent, principals, finance director, and other members of the administrative team. In interviews, the principals stated that they had received a needs list from their respective staff members before the meeting. Once a budget proposal has been arrived at through administrative council meetings, central office meetings, and individual meetings of principals with central office staff, the proposal is presented to the school committee finance subcommittee, which votes to recommend a budget to the full school committee.

Administrators told the review team that three budgets were prepared for fiscal year 2011: level service, level spending, and a 10 percent reduction to the 2009-2010 budget. The 10 percent reduction version was approved by the school committee during the site visit. This budget results in a 1.8 million dollar reduction for the school district from the previous year, and necessitates the loss of 37 staff, including 17 teachers.

According to school and municipal officials, the allocation to the schools recommended by the city has diminished over the years because state aid is a decreasing proportion of overall school revenue, and health insurance and other costs are rapidly escalating. As a result, the school administration has been required to make reductions in services to the city's children. At least in the past, most personnel reductions have been through attrition, e.g., by not replacing retirees, and the elimination of the positions of a large number of support personnel. While this has avoided layoffs of teachers, teachers have had to fill the service gaps. The review team determined from interviews that the avoidance of layoffs created an impression in the city that all was well.

In reviewing the Gardner end-of-year report for eight state and federal grants in 2009 it was found that eight percent of the total funds were unexpended and returned to the Commonwealth, a loss of funds for the district that could have been prevented by monitoring grant expenditures and amending grants as necessary.

Gardner did not fully expend eight grants. The grants not fully expended were as follows: a Special Needs Program Improvement Grant of \$9,475 of which \$4,534 was unexpended and returned to the Commonwealth; a Kindergarten Curriculum Development Grant of \$10,000 of which \$1,259 was returned; a Kindergarten Transportation Grant of \$21,350 of which \$184 was returned; a Special Support/High Need Grant of \$20,000 of which \$960 was returned; two Summer Support Grants totaling \$35,200 of which \$5,693 was returned; a Kindergarten Enhancement Program Grant of \$79,790 of which \$1,078 was returned; and an Essential Health Grant of \$103,000 of which \$2,489 was returned. A total of \$16,194 was unexpended and returned to the Commonwealth.

The review team did not find evidence of any requests to amend these grants in the grant final reports to ESE. It is uncommon for school districts to return grant funds to the Commonwealth. The amendment process is intended to permit school districts to make changes in the grant budgets because of emerging needs or changed circumstances. This process allows districts to make use of all of the funds to meet the needs in the district.

In 2009, the city school department received \$2,012,418 in Federal stimulus funds. These funds were used to start an alternative high school program in an effort to reduce the high dropout rate at Gardner High School. Some of the funds were held back to continue the alternative program in the 2010-2011 school year. The exact amount of the carry-over funds was unavailable to the review team during its site visit.

It is important to monitor grant expenditures continuously and to amend grants periodically when needs and priorities change. A district with limited resources should not be in the position of returning unexpended funds that might have been used to improve education in the district.

Recommendations

Leadership and Governance

The school committee should meet its legal and contractual obligations with respect to evaluating the superintendent annually. Also, the superintendent should meet her legal and contractual obligations to evaluate each central office administrator and principal annually.

Since administrators have not been evaluated each year, the district has failed to meet its legal and contractual obligations with respect to evaluations. The agreement between the school committee and the superintendent provides for an annual evaluation, as recommended by ESE. The evaluation of the superintendent should focus on improving student achievement, progress made towards attaining the goals in the DIP, and any other mutually agreed upon goals based on the Principles of Effective Administrative Leadership. It is suggested that the evaluation include both commendations and recommendations. Also, the evaluation should be signed and dated by the parties.

There are provisions in Massachusetts law (G.L. c. 71, s. 38, and 603 CMR 35.06(1)) and in the individual administration contracts which stipulate that central office administrators and principals be evaluated annually by the superintendent or the superintendent's designee. The evaluations should be written, formal, and timely. Evaluation criteria should include ESE's Principles of Effective Administrative Leadership, improving student achievement, and mutually agreed upon goals. It is recommended that the evaluations of the central office administrators also include contributions made toward achieving the DIP goals and that the evaluations of the principals include progress in attaining the SIP goals. In addition, the evaluations should be informative about the administrator's practice and instructive on how to improve it. The evaluations should be signed and dated and placed in the personnel files of the administrators.

With the establishment of a system of evaluation of the superintendent, central office administrators, and principals that meets legal requirements, holds these administrators accountable for reaching district and school goals, and assists them in becoming more effective, Gardner will be advancing the improvement of the administration of the district, a necessary step in improving teaching and learning.

The school committee and the superintendent should examine the multiple roles assigned to central office administrators and establish priorities for each of the roles. They should also review and prioritize the responsibilities of the principals, especially at the high school.

All but one of the central office administrators currently serve in multiple roles. As a result of budget reductions, administrative positions have been eliminated, but the responsibilities in these eliminated positions have been added to the duties of the remaining central office administrators. It is recommended that the school committee consider adding a central office administrator, if possible, in order to redistribute the role assignments, lighten the responsibilities of the central office administrators and improve their efficiency and effectiveness. In the meantime, it is recommended that the school committee and the superintendent examine the job descriptions of

each of the central office administrator roles and prioritize the specific responsibilities associated with each.

The assistant superintendent, who serves as curriculum director, also serves in a number of other roles including professional development coordinator and Section 504 coordinator. The principals identified themselves as the curriculum leaders in their schools, but went on say that they had too many other responsibilities to fulfill this role. If the district cannot continue to fund the grade 6-12 core curriculum leaders, reinstated in December 2009, once the ARRA funds used to reinstate them are depleted, both the high school principal and the middle school principal will once again have full responsibility for staff supervision and curriculum development and revision.

If possible, the addition of a central office administrator might provide the central office with greater capacity in the area of curriculum, to some extent easing the responsibilities of the principals. In any event, it is recommended that the school committee and the superintendent review the job descriptions of the principals and prioritize their duties and responsibilities so that they can clearly understand what is expected of them and what they will be accountable for.

District or school leaders who have the responsibilities of multiple roles are unable to devote themselves fully to each. Prioritizing the responsibilities of the central office administrators and the principals will allow them to spend their time and energy in the areas most important to the district, will increase their morale along with their effectiveness, and will facilitate accountability.

Curriculum and Instruction

Curriculum development and renewal are currently ad hoc rather than according to a plan in Gardner, and the district's curricular, assessment, and professional development functions are loosely rather than tightly connected. Gardner should develop and institute a formal process for continuous curriculum development and renewal that is informed by data and highly correlated with the district's professional development program. The district should also allocate time for collaborative curriculum planning and management.

Gardner has completed curriculum maps in each core subject area at every grade level, but still lacks a process for continuous curriculum development and renewal. The district appoints ad hoc committees to address curricular needs in order of urgency, rather than according to a systematic plan. Gardner's assessment, curricular, and professional development functions are not formally integrated, and often operate separately. The time for curriculum leaders and teachers to meet for curriculum planning and management is extremely limited in Gardner, amounting to no more than one or two subject or grade level planning meetings each week for horizontal curriculum alignment, and four full-day and four half-day professional development days each year for vertical curriculum alignment, among other uses.

Gardner should develop a procedure for structuring and phasing curriculum development and renewal. There are many models to consider, but most have common features, beginning with

the formation of a curriculum steering committee. In Gardner, the steering committee might be composed of the assistant superintendent, an elementary and a secondary level principal, the four grade 6 through 12 Core Curriculum Leaders, and four elementary teacher representatives, one for each core discipline. The steering committee could establish a continuous multi-year cycle for curriculum development and renewal. For example, it might decide to implement a five-year repeating cycle consisting of an analysis year, followed by two design and development years and two implementation years.

The steering committee might then appoint a subcommittee for each discipline, consisting of kindergarten through grade 12 teachers. In the analysis year, the subcommittee could review student performance data and other data to determine curricular strengths and weaknesses, and report its findings to the steering committee. In the first design year, the subcommittee could revise the curriculum to correct deficiencies, circulating preliminary drafts to the steering committee and faculty for comment. In the second design year, the subcommittee could finalize the revisions for the approval of the steering committee. In the first implementation year, teachers might be introduced to the approved curriculum, and receive professional development on the new instructional and assessment practices. In the second implementation year, the steering committee might begin to assess the effectiveness of the curricular changes. Gardner should adopt this or a similar model for curriculum development and renewal.

Gardner's curriculum and professional development functions are not at present formally linked. No matter what model the district chooses for curriculum development and renewal, Gardner's professional development committee should be linked to the curriculum steering committee to ensure that the district's curricular and instructional needs are given highest priority in the professional development program.

Gardner's curriculum and data analysis functions are also not now formally linked. Central office administrators told the review team that they intended to establish a data team in each school. The review team recommends that the district proceed with this plan. The review team further recommends that the district data team analyze relevant data for the curriculum steering committee, to inform curriculum renewal.

Gardner should also allocate more time for curriculum planning and management. Time might be allotted before and after school and during the summer to augment the district's grade level and subject area meetings and professional days. Teachers might be paid a stipend for curriculum work, or accumulate professional development points to move up on the salary scale.

With sufficient infrastructure and a continuous process for curriculum development and renewal, Gardner can ensure that curricular content is current, research-based, and aligned with national and state standards. Closer integration of the district's curricular, assessment, and professional development functions will result in more systematic identification of student, curricular, and instructional strengths and needs, and relevant topics for professional development. Integration will help increase the effectiveness of the district's limited resources for improving educational results.

Gardner should consider increasing the number of instructional coaches to help teachers implement the instructional practices of the balanced literacy program as designed.

Gardner is in the early stages of adopting a balanced literacy program at the elementary and middle school levels. This program has many components, and teachers are transitioning to it from a more traditional approach. The district recently used external funding to create a part-time literacy coach position at the elementary level to help teachers learn and practice the new techniques. The review team observed a demonstration lesson conducted by the literacy coach in one teacher's classroom, containing many of the relevant strategies and techniques. In interviews, principals told the review team that coaching helps ensure fidelity of implementation of the district's instructional practices. Teachers told the review team that they appreciate the immediate feedback from the coach, and that the coach's modeling shortens their learning curve in mastering new practices. The review team encourages Gardner to consider expanding instructional coaching as a form of embedded professional development. Ideally, there would be a part-time literacy coach in each of the elementary and middle schools.

By providing all elementary and middle school teachers consistent coaching support, Gardner will ensure a more uniform implementation of its balanced literacy program, so that students receive consistent benefit from it. Uniformity of implementation will also provide a standard basis for evaluating the effectiveness of the program in order to inform decisions about program content and methodology intended to enhance student learning.

Assessment

The district should develop a comprehensive districtwide assessment policy and accompanying procedures for the collection, analysis, and use of student assessment data.

Although the Gardner public school district lacks a comprehensive assessment policy, each school to varying degrees has procedures in place for the collection, analysis, and use of student assessment data. The district, recognizing the need to form a data team, brought together school personnel from all levels who at the time of the site visit were working on a mission and vision statement. The district data coordinator has created a Galileo, Study Island, and Lexia technical database to help school administrators correlate data. The coordinator is also working with the regional DSAC to triangulate data for district use. This is a first step in organizing and codifying all policies and procedures in a single policy manual. The next step could be to appoint appropriate staff, preferably school-based, to form data and assessment teams, following through on the district goal to appoint data teams in each school for the 2010-2011 school year. These teams would meet on a regular basis to formalize, coordinate, oversee, and monitor assessment practices in each school in the district.

The collection of assessment data would continue at the school level. This data already includes, but would not be limited to, aggregated and disaggregated data compiled from the MCAS tests in core subjects, Lexia, Galileo, GRADE, DIBELS, common grade level and subject area assessments developed from the reading series and trade books, ELA and mathematics textbook

series unit tests, and midterm and final examinations at the high school. Data would be analyzed by the school-based committees and disseminated to appropriate staff members. Staff members, under the direction of the principals, could use this data to implement and refine curriculum and assessment practices.

The data could be centralized and made easily accessible to all personnel, possibly through the district website. Each school could access the information and use it to update existing assessment instruments as well as to develop new assessments based on documented evidence. Additional personnel could be given access to the Education Data Warehouse. Staff need to be trained to make appropriate use of available data and to take advantage of ways to generate district-specific assessment information.

It is essential that the district develop and implement a comprehensive kindergarten through grade 12 assessment policy encompassing and expanding upon individual school procedures. Many exemplary assessment practices are in place in the schools, but they should be made uniform and codified, plans for school-based data and assessment teams carried out, and all district and school administrators and the teaching staff given access to the assessment results. In addition, given the scope of the assistant superintendent's responsibilities, a specific person should be designated to help him oversee, coordinate, and guide the district in improving student achievement through the use of assessment procedures at all levels.

The policy and procedures will enable Gardner to use data purposefully to improve curriculum, instruction, programs, and services, and to inform stakeholders about educational results.

The district should develop benchmark documents in the core subject areas at the high school level to enable the formation and implementation of a comprehensive assessment system to improve student achievement.

The Core Curriculum Leaders (CCLs) appointed in December 2009 for the core subject areas at the high school have taken a first step in the formation and implementation of a comprehensive assessment system to improve student achievement. Preliminary subject area benchmarks were written to provide an outline of what is being taught in each subject and grade level. The next step is to develop a common template which needs to include, at a minimum, the benchmark, essential questions, power standards, a timeline, instructional strategies, and course-specific and common assessments. To accomplish this task and develop a comprehensive document expeditiously, the CCLs will need time before, during, or after school and a summer workshop in addition to the additional planning and duty-free periods they have now.

The CCLs' goal to write common assessments based on existing documents in 2010-2011 may be too ambitious, and not conducive to producing a comprehensive core subject benchmark document for all grades and core subjects. It is suggested that a more deliberate timeline be developed to ensure a quality document. When a common template is designed and has been approved by the district administration, the CCLs could collect existing pacing guides, essential questions, assessments, and other pertinent documentation from subject area teachers and develop a comprehensive document that ensures fidelity to the goals and curriculum of the high school.

This living document might be maintained and regularly amended by the CCLs, serving as a blueprint for assessments, while encouraging an environment of collegiality among departments and teachers at the high school level. Common assessments and specific subject assessments derived from these core, subject area documents will standardize the assessment system at the high school.

Benchmarks and common benchmark assessments will enable the district to monitor student progress, identify and provide for accelerated and struggling students, and make adjustments in curricular content, sequence, and emphasis. Benchmarks and common benchmark assessments also ensure that although their individual approaches may vary, teachers of the same course are striving for student mastery of the same standards.

Human Resources and Professional Development

The district should create a process that will ensure that all evaluations are carried out as mandated by contract, contain specific recommendations based upon the Principles of Effective Teaching, and promote professional growth of teachers leading to classroom instruction that is geared toward improving student achievement. Appropriate district personnel should assume the responsibility for monitoring the process districtwide.

A review of the 36 randomly selected teacher evaluations revealed that most were timely, but many did not follow the teachers' contract. The majority of summative evaluations were not instructive, nor did they contain specific recommendations leading to professional growth for the teacher and therefore enhancement of student achievement. In many cases written observations were not included with the summative evaluations in the evaluation files. Also, several of the elementary schools do not use the Principles of Effective Teaching as the basis for summative evaluations. The district should provide both time and professional development opportunities for administrators to improve their evaluation skills as well as their skills in writing recommendations for professional growth. And it should ensure that the Principles of Effective Teaching are the basis for improving instruction at all grade levels.

As a means of further support for teachers and administrators, the district should develop a process whereby the superintendent, or the superintendent's designee, reviews professional teacher evaluations to ensure the quality of the recommendations. At the same time, this review should ascertain that descriptions of observations, which are required by contract, are included with the summative evaluations.

By improving its evaluation practices and monitoring them to ensure that improvement is maintained over time, the district will be holding teachers accountable, helping them to improve their practice, and assisting students to perform at high levels.

The district should review its mentoring program and expand it to focus on providing new teachers with training in support of district curricular efforts and to include formal mentoring for administrators.

Through a review of mentoring documents and in interviews with members of the professional development committee, the review team determined that the mentoring program had changed recently, due in part to the availability of funds. The regular meetings of the mentors and mentees with the assistant superintendent now focus on general topics, such as how the laws impact teaching, rather than on the quality of instruction. Good instruction is one of the most powerful forces leading to student achievement. The district should ensure that the mentoring program facilitates high quality instruction and instructional improvement in accordance with the rest of the district's efforts in the area of curriculum and instruction. By doing so, the district will be ensuring that its mentoring program for new teachers is having an impact on the most important area such a program can influence, their classroom practice.

The district does not have a formal mentoring program for new administrators, and not all new administrators have a mentor. Formal mentoring for administrators provides the mechanism to ensure that evaluations include recommendations for improvement, are aligned with the Principles of Effective Teaching, and are accomplished in a timely manner. A stronger, formal mentoring program for administrators would increase their morale, confidence, and effectiveness. One possibility the district is encouraged to consider is a partnership with its District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) to involve principals in National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) training and support.

The district should develop, coordinate, and closely monitor a comprehensive, purposeful pre-K through grade 12 professional development program.

Professional development should be fully aligned with the goals of the DIP and SIPs. There is no defined process for planning the professional development programs in Gardner based upon district instructional needs. The evaluations conducted at the conclusion of each activity only indicate the success or failure of the day's program. In a review of the professional development folder, as well as in discussions with teachers and administrators, there was no indication that the professional development committee has sought annual input from stakeholders regarding ongoing or future needs. Individual school improvement plans and the DIP minimally address professional development needs and training topics.

The district has begun many outstanding initiatives, particularly at the elementary level. However, the availability of grant funds serves as the basis for professional development opportunities in Gardner. There exists no substantive plan to maintain these improvements once the grants have come to an end. The charge to the district's professional development committee should be to determine and prioritize needs related to curriculum and instruction, using the DIP and the SIPs to inform its work, and to create an internal capacity for professional development based on district needs when external funding is depleted or unavailable. The focus of professional development should be on meeting teacher needs in order to improve student achievement. Once that focus is achieved and the district closely monitors the implementation of

the professional development it provides, improvement to teaching, and in turn learning, will be accelerated.

Student Support

In order to address low graduation rates at the high school, along with associated factors such as low student attendance and high rates of chronic absenteeism, 9th grade retention, and out-of-school suspensions, the district should examine the effectiveness of each of its support programs and put its efforts and resources into those that are most successful, discontinuing the others. As a first step in addressing attendance problems, the high school attendance policy should be revised.

Gardner's four-year graduation rate in 2009 was 66.7 percent. The statewide rate was 81.5 percent for the same year. In 2008, the graduation rate in Gardner was 63.8 percent compared with the state rate of 81.2 percent. The annual grade 9-12 dropout rate was 5.1 percent in 2009, as opposed to 2.9 percent statewide.

The out-of-school suspension rate at Gardner High School was 13.4 percent in 2009, 17.3 percent for 9th graders. The chronic absence rate at Gardner High School was 21.3 percent in 2009, 32.3 percent for 9th graders. And students in the 9th grade at Gardner High School were retained at the rate of 18.5 percent in 2009.

The data for 9th graders brings up the issue of the transition from the middle to high school in Gardner. During the 2008-2009 school year, Gardner instituted a freshman academy program, essentially a continuation of the teamed model that the entering 9th grade students were accustomed to in middle school. The review team found no evidence of a written formal evaluation of this program, but it was discontinued after only one year. Interviewees explained that it had been too costly to dedicate a full team of teachers to the 9th grade class, although they acknowledged that entering 9th grade students need more supervision and structure than the high school model provides.

Although Gardner has many academic and social/emotional support programs for students, the data shows that these programs have not done enough to combat discipline, attendance, and dropout problems at the high school. The district has recognized these problems, as shown for instance by the high school Report to the School Council, and tried, thus far unsuccessfully, to address them, for instance by the discontinued freshman academy.

The attendance policy at the high school allows a student to miss 10 percent of class sessions without documented excuses. Additional documented absences could increase the number of allowable student absences, removing the student still longer from regular classroom instruction. As a first step in addressing low student attendance, the high school attendance policy should be revised to reduce the number of allowable unexcused absences. At the same time, the district should examine its system for monitoring absences and consider whether interventions to prevent low attendance and chronic absenteeism can be strengthened.

A promising program in the district is its newly opened alternative school. The team encourages the district to follow up with this initiative. As it does so, it should monitor its effectiveness, as well as the effectiveness of its other support programs. Programs that are less successful should be modified, replaced, or discontinued, and the district's resources and efforts concentrated in its most successful programs. The district should consider transferring resources from discontinued programs into new efforts to support 9th graders; it may be helpful to consult the DSAC for advice on these efforts.

Tightening its high school attendance policy, fostering its most successful support programs while ending its less successful ones, and renewing its efforts to give 9th graders the structure, supervision, and support they need will allow the district, even in difficult economic times, to begin to reduce the discipline, attendance, and dropout problems at the high school and increase the graduation rate.

Financial and Asset Management

Budget development should focus on students' needs and be based on an analysis of the effectiveness of the district's educational programs and services. The district should explain to the citizens of Gardner the impact on educational quality of five or more of years of minimum and below net school spending.

The review team was not provided with evidence that Gardner consistently evaluates its initiatives and programs. As mentioned in the previous recommendation, the district should develop procedures for evaluating programs and services in order to inform budget development and decision-making. Grants support many district programs. These programs end when the funding sources are no longer available. The district should have a valid means of determining which programs enhance students' education and should be supported and continued. Gardner would be able to preserve at least some effective grant-funded and other programs by transferring funds from ineffective to more effective programs and services, based on evidence.

The impact of the loss of teachers, paraprofessionals, and support programs such as the 9th grade academy; deferred action on capital improvements; cuts to sports programs; and the overburdening of central office leaders with the responsibilities of multiple positions has not been clearly communicated to the parents and other citizens of Gardner. The ability of the district in the past to preserve enough teaching positions to maintain class sizes may have prevented widespread understanding in the community of the effects cuts have had on education in Gardner. In addition to developing systems and procedures for evaluating programs and services in order to ensure the educational value of district expenditures, the district should convey complete and accurate information to the citizens of Gardner about the adequacy of the budget and the impact of budget reductions. Providing better information on the effect of budget reductions to the community at large will help citizens understand that the schools need more funding. As well as allowing the district to serve its students better, continuing evaluation of programs and services will give citizens confidence that monies provided to the schools are being well spent.

Appendix A: Review Team Members

The review of the Gardner Public Schools was conducted from June 1-4, 2010, by the following team of educators, independent consultants to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Dr. John Kulevich, Leadership and Governance

Dr. James McAuliffe, Curriculum and Instruction

Jo Napolitano, Assessment

Dr. Coral Grout, Human Resources and Professional Development

Dr. John Roper, Student Support

Dr. Charles Valera, Financial and Asset Management

James McAuliffe also served as the review team coordinator.

Appendix B: Review Activities and Site Visit Schedule

Level 3 Review Activities

The following activities were conducted as part of the review of the Gardner Public Schools.

The review team conducted interviews with the following Gardner financial personnel: school business manager, city auditor

The review team conducted interviews with the following members of the Gardner School Committee: one school committee member, and the school committee chairperson

The review team conducted interviews with the following representatives of the Gardner Teachers' Association: President

The review team conducted interviews and focus groups with the following representatives from the Gardner Public Schools central office administration, all of whom have multiple roles: superintendent/human resources director; assistant superintendent/curriculum director/professional development director; ELL director/grants coordinator/Title I director; special education director/homeless liaison

The review team visited the following schools in the Gardner Public Schools: Westford Street (pre-K-2), Helen Mae Sauter (1-3), Elm Street (3-5), Gardner Middle School (6-8), and Gardner High School (9-12)

During school visits, the review team conducted interviews with school principals, teachers, and school council members

- The review team conducted 27 classroom visits for different grade levels and subjects across the five schools visited.

The review team reviewed the following documents provided by ESE:

- District profile data
- District Analysis and Review Tool (DART)
- Latest Coordinated Program Review Report or follow-up Mid-cycle Report
- Gardner Accountability Report produced by Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA)
- Staff contracts
- AYP data and NCLB report cards
- District achievement and growth by school reports
- Reports on licensure and highly qualified status
- Long-term enrollment trends

- Municipal profiles
- Division of Local Services Financial Management Report
- End-of-year financial report for the district for 2009
- List of the district's federal and state grants
- 2008 Division of Local Services Financial Management Report

The review team reviewed the following documents at the district and school levels (provided by the district or schools):

- Organization chart
- District Improvement Plan
- School Improvement Plans
- School committee policy manual
- Curriculum guides and maps
- High school course syllabi
- High school program of studies
- Report to the School Council, Gardner High School
- Calendar of formative and summative assessments
- Copies of data analyses/reports used in schools
- Descriptions of student support programs
- Program evaluations
- Student and Family Handbooks
- Faculty Handbook
- Professional Development Plan and program/schedule/courses
- Mentor program descriptions and protocol
- Teacher planning time/meeting schedules
- Teacher evaluation tool
- Classroom observation tools/Learning walk tools
- Job descriptions (for central office and school administrators and instructional staff)
- Principal evaluations
- Randomly selected personnel files

Site Visit Schedule

The following is the schedule for the onsite portion of the Level 3 review of the Gardner Public Schools, conducted from June 1-4, 2010.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
May 31 HOLIDAY	June 1 Introductory meeting with district leaders; interviews with district staff and principals; review of documents Interviews with district staff and principals; school visits (Gardner High School); classroom observations; review of personnel files	June 2 Interviews with district staff and principals; review of documents; school visits: Waterford Street School, Gardner Middle School, Elm Street School; classroom observations; interviews with union and focus group with parents; review of personnel files	June 3 School visits: Helen Mae Sauter School, Waterford Street School interviews with school leaders; classroom observations; teacher team meetings; follow-up interviews; team meeting; teacher focus groups;	June 4 school committee interviews School visits: Gardner High School; Findings development team meeting; closing meeting with district leaders