



Massachusetts Department of  
**ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY  
EDUCATION**

## **Orange Public Schools Level 3 District Review**

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September 2010

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

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## ***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 assistance<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

## Orange Public Schools

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The site visit to the Orange Public Schools was conducted from March 8 through March 11, 2010. The site visit included visits to all of the district's schools: the Fisher Hill School (kindergarten-grade 2), the Dexter Park School (pre-K and grades 3 and 4) and the Butterfield School (grades 5 and 6). 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 Profile<sup>2</sup>***

The Orange Elementary School District consists of three elementary schools, neatly coordinated into buildings serving grades K-2, grades 3 and 4 (as well as pre-kindergarten), and grades 5 and 6. During the 2009-2010 school year the district reported 309 students in grades K, 1, and 2 at the Fisher Hill School, 307 in pre-K and grades 3 and 4 at the Dexter Park School, and 224 in grades 5 and 6 at the Butterfield School, for a total of 840. The three buildings are clean, well maintained, and secure, with remote visual control of access at all sites. The community of Orange, Massachusetts, is described on the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development website as an "industrial and population center on the eastern boundary of Franklin County." It is on the banks of the Millers River, which explains its historical importance as the site of the first automobile factory in America and the location of the New Home Sewing Machine Company, which, according to the town website, "produced 1,200,000 sewing machines in 1892." More recently, however, the community has undergone a reversal of fortune.

According to the Department of Revenue figures the town of Orange experienced an unemployment rate of 4.1 percent between 2000 and 2008. On March 22, 2010, the Massachusetts Department of Revenue Division of Local Services listed the unemployment rate for 2009 as 11.5 percent, exceeding the statewide rate. Nearly 50 percent of the student population are designated as low-income (please see Table 1 below), and Department of Revenue data confirms a median family income of \$44,128 for residents of the community, compared with a statewide median of \$63,706.

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<sup>2</sup> Massachusetts school financial data and student demographic data derived from ESE's website, ESE's Education Data Warehouse, or other ESE sources. Figures derived from ESE's website may differ slightly from figures derived from its Education Data Warehouse.

**Table 1: Orange Elementary School District Student Enrollment  
by Race/Ethnicity & Selected Populations 2009-10**

Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity	Percent of Total	Selected Populations	Percent of Total
African-American	1.1	First Language not English	0.4
Asian	1.2	Limited English Proficient	0.0
Hispanic or Latino	4.5	Low-income	49.4
Native American	0.0	Special Education	14.6
White	91.0	Free Lunch	43.8
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0.0	Reduced-price lunch	5.6
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	2.3		

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website.

Orange continues to experience financial difficulties, partially attributed by local officials to the slow economy and to reductions in recent years in Title I funds and Chapter 70 state aid. (Chapter 70 aid decreased by 9.2 percent in fiscal year 2004, from \$5,367,303 to \$4,875, 842, then decreased again in fiscal year 2009, and only in fiscal year 2010 has climbed back up past its fiscal year 2003 level, to \$5,406,413.) The financial pressure is reflected in the school district budget. Since the 2002-2003 school year, the annual school budget has decreased by a total of \$1.3 million; there have been decreases in four of the last five years. In 2009 the district's per pupil spending, as calculated by ESE, was \$11,441, or 88 percent of the state average per pupil spending of \$13,006.

The local appropriation to the Orange Elementary School District budget for fiscal year 2010 was \$5,340,828, down slightly from the appropriation for fiscal year 2009 of \$5,481,510. In addition to the appropriation to the district budget, school-related expenditures by the town were estimated at \$5,676,150 for fiscal year 2010, down slightly from the estimate for fiscal year 2009 of \$5,860,637. In fiscal year 2009, the total amount of actual school-related expenditures, including expenditures by the district (\$5,284,770), expenditures by the town (\$5,907,058), and expenditures from other sources such as grants (\$2,411,045), was \$13,602,873. Actual Net School Spending for fiscal year 2009 was \$7,111,288.

### Student Performance<sup>3</sup>

Orange students’ scores on the statewide MCAS assessment in 2009 do not show any substantial improvement over the scores in 2006. With the exception of 2007, when results for several assessments showed a marked increase in the number of students scoring in the proficient range, an increase that mostly did not continue in 2008, there was little improvement visible in scores over the period between 2006 and 2009 inclusive. See Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Gains or Losses from 2006 to 2009 in Percentages of Orange Students Scoring *Advanced* or *Better*, by Assessment**

Assessment	2006	2007	2008	2009	Percentage Points Gained or Lost, 2006-2009
Grade 3 Reading	49	71	57	52	+3
Grade 3 Math	54	70	54	46	-8
Grade 4 ELA	41	45	47	37	-4
Grade 4 Math	51	44	45	46	-5
Grade 5 ELA	50	45	46	50	0
Grade 5 Math	32	32	35	37	+5
Grade 6 ELA	52	65	55	50	-2
Grade 6 Math	33	42	43	42	+9

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

In 2009 the Fisher Hill School was designated for improvement, year 1, in ELA for its performance in the aggregate. Dexter Park was listed for improvement, year 1 in the aggregate for ELA, and improvement, year 2 for subgroups in mathematics. Butterfield School was designated for improvement, year 2, for the performance of its subgroups in ELA and improvement, year 1, for its aggregate performance in mathematics.

The district is described as moderately performing in its NCLB designations, but as of 2009 its student performance falls below statewide performance on every test at every level; see Table 3 below. In 2009, 47 percent of Orange students scored *Proficient* or better on the MCAS ELA test, as opposed to 67 percent of students statewide; 42 percent of Orange students scored *Proficient* or better on the MCAS mathematics test, as opposed to 55 percent statewide.

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<sup>3</sup> Data derived from ESE’s website, ESE’s Education Data Warehouse, or other ESE sources. Figures derived from ESE’s website may differ slightly from figures derived from its Education Data Warehouse.

**Table 3: Percentages of Orange Students Scoring *Proficient* or Better in 2009 as Compared with Students Statewide: ELA and Mathematics**

Assessment	District	State	District Difference in Percentage Points
All Grades - ELA	47	67	-20
All Grades - Math	42	55	-13
Grade 3 Reading	52	57	-5
Grade 3 Math	46	60	-14
Grade 4 ELA	37	53	-16
Grade 4 Math	46	48	-2
Grade 5 ELA	50	63	-13
Grade 5 Math	37	54	-17
Grade 6 ELA	50	66	-16
Grade 6 Math	42	57	-15

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website.

In addition to low student achievement, ESE’s Growth Model, which compares students’ improvement from year to year to that of their peers statewide with similar test histories, shows low student growth for 2009. Student growth in the district was relatively low in both ELA and mathematics in 2009, with median SGPs of 37.0 and 38.0, which is below what is considered the ‘moderate’ range of growth (i.e., median SGPs between 40 and 60). Low student growth means that students with similar test histories in other communities are improving more rapidly than those within the Orange Elementary School District.

## ***Findings***

### **Leadership and Governance**

**The district has never produced a strategic plan. While the district does have a District Improvement Plan and School Improvement Plans in place, they lack action plans showing goals, timelines, responsible personnel, and evidence of completion, and the School Improvement Plans are not aligned with it or with each other.**

Interviews with the school committee and superintendent brought forth the fact that the district has never established a strategic plan. In one of the review team's interviews with school committee members, the members present did acknowledge that such a plan is long overdue. Members noted that the Ralph J. Mahar Regional School District, the middle-senior high school, had gone through the strategic planning process and said that it may be a good time for the elementary district to follow suit; it was noted that school committee members had reviewed the high school's published plan with interest. The cost of such a plan, however, was a matter of concern. One of the newly-elected members expressed the view that this issue is of utmost importance and expressed the intention of bringing to the entire committee a proposal to begin the process of producing a strategic plan.

Interviews with administrators and staff, along with a review of documents, showed that the District Improvement Plan (DIP) and School Improvement Plans (SIPs) have no action plans specifying goals, timelines, responsible personnel, and evidence of completion. The superintendent wrote the initial DIP for the years 2004-2007 when he was hired and had the main role in preparing a new version for the period of 2007-2010. The superintendent stated that he wrote the original document himself and indicated that he sought input from other individuals during the preparation of the second three-year plan. The superintendent prepared a twenty-page document reviewing the accomplishments of the district and current issues in the district and presented it to the school committee in August 2009. The document addresses school climate and culture; the connection of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; technology; and family and community. The document lists the major mission of the district as "all children can and will be successful, all programs must be designed with the best practices, and the district must maintain respect and acceptance of all children." A great deal of the material included in the DIP refers to the social and emotional needs of the students; this theme recurred in the majority of interviews.

The district provided copies of the SIP for each school. The school council in each building prepares an annual SIP that is reviewed by the superintendent and accepted by the school committee. Each principal provides the school committee with a report of the status and accomplishments of his or her individual school. No evidence was provided to show that the SIPs are aligned with the DIP. There is no coordinated effort among the three schools to produce similar documents, and administrators stated that each SIP is developed taking only the needs of the individual school into consideration. Each school has its own mission and vision statement. In one of the school committee interviews a member stated that while he was reviewing materials for the present review he could not readily define the mission of the district, as there are a variety of mission statements published in different documents. It was stated in an

administrators' meeting that "if aliens dropped in they would not be able to find what we are doing or how we've done it, as there are no timelines."

Because the district does not have a strategic plan and its DIP and SIPs have no action plans and are not aligned, it is without the benefit of a vision as to the future needs of the student population and long-term planning. A strategic planning process will produce a defined path for the entire educational community.

**Members of the school committee are aware of their responsibilities as a policy-making board, although the policy manual needs updating. The school committee evaluates the superintendent annually and has a positive relationship with the teachers' association, but does not take an active role in development of the budget.**

The seven-member school committee is made up of both veteran members and two newly-elected (write-in) members. They meet once a month and are in contact with each other and the superintendent regularly. They are aware that they are responsible for setting policy and also for presenting a budget to the town that meets the educational needs of the entire student body. Each veteran member has undergone the mandated Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) training although, with the exception of one year, members of the committee have never attended MASC's two-day annual area conference. The superintendent did state that he meets with all new members to review their responsibilities and go over what to expect at their first meeting. He also shares pertinent information that will aid them to understand the issues that are currently on the table. In addition, he has a member of MASC meet with new members of the board to review their roles and responsibilities. The committee recently adopted a bullying policy. Members acknowledged in interviews, however, that the policy manual needs more attention. The review of the manual showed many gaps and produced evidence that many policies are at least twelve years old; the manual referred to the grade configuration of the district as K-12. Committee members stated that a subcommittee is in place for policy review, the only sub-committee at this time; they also stated, however, that while there was a concerted effort a few years ago to review/update the manual, this initiative has been suspended. A policy manual is of significantly less use to district staff if it needs updating.

The review of personnel files showed that the school committee has evaluated the superintendent annually. The evaluation tool includes areas of strengths and weaknesses, common goals, and areas for growth. It was noted that suggested areas for growth in one evaluation were addressed in the following evaluation. All members of the committee have equal input into the evaluation process.

Representatives of the teachers' association said that they were in contract negotiations, which, as in years gone past, were moving along at a good pace; both sides of the table employ the services of a lawyer. In separate interviews both school committee members and teachers' association officers described positive discussions in a number of areas. Neither party anticipated difficulty in negotiating a mutually agreeable contract despite town budget difficulties. The union representatives stated that class size is the most important issue in what they regard as their quest to advocate for children. Members of the union and the administration

said that the issue of student achievement and merit pay has never been brought to the table. Only one grievance filed by the teachers' association has reached level three, adjudication by the school committee, in the past seven years.

Following a recommendation of the report of the 2006 review of the district by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA), a report by representatives of the teachers' association has been placed on each school committee meeting agenda since then. On occasions when the association representatives wish to speak to the committee, the opportunity is readily available. In an after-school interview, association officers described several joint committees where they worked cooperatively with the administration and a school committee representative. For their part, the school committee members praised members of the teaching staff for their dedication and cooperation during what they described as "trying times."

The fact that both the committee and the teaching staff share the hope of success for students and appreciate the difficulty of each other's position is a positive reflection on both groups. The result is that both groups are willing to work together to maximize the scarce resources with which they are presented in an effort to improve education for their students.

The committee does not take an active part in the development of the budget. However, one member of the committee who has a great interest in the development of the budget has been involved in it for the current budget. The superintendent, principals, and director of pupil personnel services develop the budget, with input from the staff, and present it to the school committee for review and final adoption. One school committee member did note that during the development of the fiscal year 2010 budget the issue of elimination of the art program brought forth much discussion, and in the end the program was reinstated.

Because the school committee has not participated in the development of the annual budget, it is not familiar with the budget line by budget line needs of the district, whether for supplies, new curriculum initiatives, or any other expenditure. Without this familiarity, the committee is unable to explain to the larger community the true needs of the student population or describe in detail why a particular program or other item is necessary.

**The administrative team works cooperatively together and with town officials, the teachers' association, and community members.**

The administrative team, made up of the superintendent, the principals, and the director of pupil personnel services, meets every other week to discuss all issues affecting the district. The entire administrative team is also present at each school committee meeting and reports on the status of each school or program. Administrative team agendas, set by the superintendent, are in place for all meetings; interviewees stated that all members of the team have the opportunity to discuss and give their views on district, school, and program needs. Interviewees were of the opinion that close communication exists among all administrators and that a team approach is used when decisions have to be made. While the superintendent establishes the annual budget, it was noted in interviews that when the final budget has to be submitted the entire team decides what positions or programs will be supported or eliminated. The administrative team stated that they have a two-day workshop during the summer during which they discuss goals, both school and

personal, MCAS improvement, technology, and other pertinent issues for the upcoming school year.

The principals said that they share information among themselves regarding, for instance, students, programs, and issues and regularly communicate with the director of pupil personnel services. Although it was noted that the superintendent regularly visits all of the schools, the principals stated that the superintendent delegates the leadership of each school and program to the assigned administrator. The principals also stated they have the final choice of candidates for positions within their school. The principals work with the school council, teachers, and parents when a new staff member needs to be appointed. They stated that they have the ability to place teachers in open positions who they feel best meet the needs of the student body. They all agreed that micro-management is not an issue in the district on the part of either the school committee or the superintendent. However, in some interviews staff members questioned the superintendent's choice of the Bay State Reading Institute (BSRI) program. Many comments were made to the effect that the program was a free offering to the district and that that was the sole basis for the implementation of the program. It was also noted that the superintendent did not establish committees to work on policies such as the one relating to the teacher mentoring program and the recently adopted bullying policy.

Town officials work hand in hand with school officials with regard to payroll, purchase orders, and the balancing of the budget. Neither the superintendent nor the town administrator knew of a written agreement on municipal expenditures in support of schools, as referred to in 603 CMR 10.05(11), but both town and school administrators stated that there is no disagreement as to the amounts charged back.<sup>4</sup> Most of the charges pertain to school health insurance, with the school district bidding out its energy, maintenance, and snow plowing contracts. No evidence was presented to the review team as to whether combining town and school bidding for these contracts has been considered.

Both the superintendent and members of the teachers' association said that there is regular, open communication among them via telephone calls and face-to-face meetings. Interviewees stated that issues are addressed professionally and immediately and that solutions are reached cooperatively. During the tenure of this superintendent only one grievance has reached the school committee. The union did bring up the issue of the lack of financial support, citing the increase in class size at the kindergarten level as well as the decisions of the administrative team not to replace retiring/resigning educators.

The ability of the district to meet the social and emotional needs of all students is of utmost importance to the entire educational community, town officials, parents, and community members. They all concurred that the strength of the community lies within the school district. School personnel and town officials cited the number of parents from other communities who opt to enroll their children in the Orange district as proof that the district provides an outstanding educational experience. Teachers and administrators interviewed seemed united in their desire to "give students everything that they need to be successful." It was also stated in interviews that

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<sup>4</sup> A signed, written agreement on municipal expenditures in support of schools is, however, recommended.

the revenues generated from school choice are significant and help with class size, which is deemed most important. The amount of grant money attracted by the district is primarily used to employ school counselors, a child psychologist, and a home/school liaison. It was repeatedly stated in interviews that poverty and family issues are a major concern within the community.

The ability of the school district and the community to work cohesively is of great benefit to the student body, as it promotes the provision of meaningful programs for all student groups and the advancement of educational excellence.

## **Curriculum and Instruction**

**The district does not have a full curriculum with measurable objectives, resources, instructional strategies, pacing guides, and assessments, instead using the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks as a curriculum guide.**

A review of documents by the team found that the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks (MCFs) serve as the curriculum guide for the district, supplemented by the Houghton-Mifflin reading program, *Investigations*, and the *Connected Mathematics Program*, and by scope and sequence and objectives. These programs were selected by the administration and have been in place for several years. Additionally, the team review of documents showed curriculum expectations for grades K-2 delineating what students should be able to do in language arts/reading, mathematics, and for kindergarten, self-help and behavior. Beginning at first grade, the expectations also cover science and social studies.

According to interviewees, there is no K-6 curriculum committee and no ongoing vertical review of curriculum. Modification of curriculum happens after analysis of MCAS data each year, usually at staff meetings or grade-level meetings at individual schools. Staff meet in a vertical configuration a limited number of times during the year. The team did not see a document reflecting changes or modifications to the curriculum.

The formal Houghton-Mifflin reading program at grades K-4 contains a sequence of skills and objectives along with lesson and unit plans, and contains formative and summative assessments. During interviews with staff, team members found that at grades K-4, objectives are found within the daily lessons provided by the formal reading program. At grades 5 and 6, however, there is no formal reading program in place, with those grades using studies of novels for their program. Administrators indicated that when the district adopted the Houghton-Mifflin reading program in 2005, financial constraints were the reason for not purchasing the program for grades 5 and 6. The novel studies are guided by teacher-developed or pre-packaged study guides that do not necessarily contain objectives that lead to mastering the standards. There are few common assessments for the novels, and assessments are not necessarily tied to objectives and standards. The MCFs' strand for literature has been used to develop a list of literary terms to be addressed in a curriculum map along with a list of websites and novels for each grade. The grade 6 curriculum map lists literary terms to be addressed each trimester while grade 5 has a timeline showing what should be studied each month for each subject. No specific standards or objectives

to be addressed are included. No alignment between the curriculum for grades K-4 and the curriculum for grades 5 and 6 was found in documentation or presented to the review team.

According to interviewees, the district adopted the mathematics program for K-5 nine years ago. This was the original version of the program, which staff found not to be user-friendly. Over time staff also found, through analysis of MCAS data and data from program benchmark and end-of-unit tests, that not all areas identified in the frameworks were addressed. Staff members have used older materials to supplement and fill gaps to the extent that *Investigations* is now in practice used as a supplement to these older materials; however, no formal document identifies these changes and materials. Fidelity of implementation of *Investigations* is strongest at K-2. The *Connected Mathematics Program* at grade 6 is supplemented with additional algebra, as algebra is addressed in later units in the regional middle school but needed at grade 6 as well. Also in response to analysis of data, instructional time for mathematics was increased from 45 minutes to one hour each day for all grades.

According to interviewees, science and social studies are addressed through connections to the reading program at grades K-4, supplemented by some kits. Grades 5 and 6 purchased science texts three years ago aligned to the MCFs. There is a timeline for addressing topics for grade 5. Social studies at grade 6 is not aligned to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. The district continues to have a traditional unit on immigration that has been taught for at least 20 years, as well as material on westward expansion and the industrial revolution, while the frameworks call for a year of geography or ancient civilizations. Some geography is included in the curriculum.

Administrators and staff reported that there are no expectations that objectives be written for daily lessons in plan books, and observations found a very limited number of objectives posted in classrooms.

Using the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks as the curriculum guide for the district, rather than a full curriculum based on the frameworks, with measurable objectives, resources, instructional strategies, pacing guides, and assessments, means that the implementation and monitoring of curriculum and instruction are inconsistent and lack cohesion. The lack of regular review and revision of the curriculum both vertically and horizontally also impedes the consistent delivery of instruction districtwide.

**A three-year partnership with Bay State Reading Institute provided professional development and tools to help teachers and administrators improve reading achievement.**

Interviews with administrators and the literacy team indicated that when the district implemented the Houghton-Mifflin reading program in 2005-2006, limited professional development for the program was provided by the company. The district wanted to improve MCAS reading achievement for special needs and low-income students and needed professional development in reading comprehension. As a result, the district partnered with the Bay State Reading Institute (BSRI) that same year in an initiative that brought \$30,000 worth of materials to the district along with professional development provided in the system monthly for both teachers and administrators. Additionally, teachers received a week of training at Framingham State College.

Although the partnership was for grades K-4, the Butterfield School, with grades 5 and 6, received some of the same professional development as a cohort school. As mentioned above, the partnership with BSRI came at no cost to the district.

BSRI trained staff in the use of DIBELS to place students and monitor student progress in reading, and in the implementation of the three-tier model for intervention using data to regroup students. At-risk students are monitored weekly using DIBELS with bi-weekly monitoring for those not at risk. Spreadsheets are provided to teachers for regrouping, which occurs mostly within classrooms, occasionally between classrooms.

Administrators received training in and tools for monitoring the classrooms for fidelity of implementation of the program--assistance in what to look for in reading classrooms. Administrators reported that they focused on looking at whether the work is “busy work” or work that moves learning forward; listening carefully to student interactions; observing whether students are focused on what they are doing; and expecting no quiet kindergartens. One principal developed a checklist of activities and strategies expected to be found in classrooms. While its use is informal, feedback is shared orally with the teacher. There is no formal protocol for walkthroughs.

According to administrators and the literacy team, BSRI encouraged the district to move to a two-hour block for literacy, and team meetings were to be devoted solely to literacy. This did not include time for teaching writing, which is not a strength of the Houghton-Mifflin program. The district wanted to build a stronger writing component into the two-hour reading block but was discouraged from doing so by BSRI. After following BSRI guidelines calling for two hours of reading per day and adding 30 minutes for writing, the district examined MCAS data for mathematics and reprioritized instructional time to provide a minimum of one hour per day for mathematics. The partnership with BSRI ended in spring 2009 after three years; the district is still using 80 percent of the tools provided by BSRI, but is now shifting focus to improve writing skills through the Six Traits writing program at grades K-4 and the development this year during grade-level and professional development time of rubrics and benchmarks for writing, to be implemented in 2010-2011. The John Collins Writing Program is used at grades 5 and 6. The literacy block is now 90 minutes per day with an additional 30 minutes per day for writing.

The BSRI partnership brought needed professional development to the district both for teachers and supervisors; however, over time, district leaders felt that BSRI was moving in a different direction from where they wished to go. The impact of the partnership on the district can be seen from the fact that it is still using the materials and 80 percent of the tools and strategies provided by BSRI; use is especially strong at grades K-4.

**Observations in 64 percent of the 33 classrooms visited showed partial or solid evidence of effective instructional design and delivery, with especially low incidence of evidence of instruction that encourages higher-order thinking .**

Classrooms at grades K-4 were engaged in small-group instruction, in the use of learning centers, in some intervention groups, or, during literacy blocks, in the use of Lexia. Most classrooms observed at the upper grade levels were using whole-class instruction, with the exception of

students leaving the classroom in some instances for small-group reading instruction. Mathematics instruction was mainly whole-group, with some small-group or pairs work.

During the site visit, team members observed 33 classrooms and recorded the presence or absence of 15 characteristics grouped into two categories: organization of the classroom and instructional design and delivery. Team members recorded whether evidence related to each characteristic was solid, partial, or not observed during the time they spent in the classroom. Typically, team members observed classroom instruction for approximately 20 minutes at the beginning, middle, or end of class. Results from the observations were represented as percentages calculated by summing, for each characteristic in each category, the number of classrooms receiving a partially observed or solid rating and dividing this number by the total number of classrooms rated for that characteristic.

Organization of the classroom is the category that includes the first three characteristics, classroom climate, the presence of learning objectives, and maximization of the use of classroom time. Team members observed the tone of the classroom as well as the behavior of students and the maintenance of order and structure by the teacher. They also looked for oral or written reference to learning objectives or goals for the class. Team members observed levels of student engagement and the structuring of the class as well as the smoothness of transitions. Classrooms visited included 19 ELA classes, 12 mathematics classes, and 2 in the “other” category. In 100 percent of classrooms visited, there was partial or solid evidence of a classroom climate characterized by respectful behaviors, routines, tone, and discourse. In 85 percent of classrooms visited, there was partial or solid evidence that available classroom time was maximized for learning. In 32 percent of classrooms visited partial or solid evidence was observed of learning objectives for the day’s lesson prominently displayed.

The instructional design and delivery category includes 12 characteristics oriented toward the quality of teaching and learning. Team members observed areas such as levels of teacher content knowledge, instructional techniques, depth of student questioning, pacing of the lesson, differentiation of instruction, in-class assessment, and opportunities for students to apply their knowledge. Partial or solid evidence of the 12 characteristics of instructional design and delivery was observed in 64 percent of classrooms. Examples of evidence of effective instructional practice include teachers implementing instructional strategies that activate prior knowledge, students drawing on existing knowledge to inform their learning, teachers responding to a student’s ability or individual needs, or teachers using varied instructional strategies to target learning objectives. As for specific characteristics, observers found partial or solid evidence in 53 percent of classrooms of questions requiring students to engage in a process of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation and partial or solid evidence in 39 percent that students had the opportunity, embedded in the lesson, to apply new knowledge and content.

Asking questions that require students to use higher-order thinking skills such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation or providing opportunities in the lesson to apply new knowledge and content encourages greater student growth. In the judgment of the review team, the absence in a large proportion of observed classrooms of these characteristics of instruction

has negative implications for the amount students in the district are able to learn and on their ability to develop the habits of mind of critical and creative thinkers and problem-solvers.

## **Assessment**

**Grade level assessments and core subject benchmarks, as well as MCAS tests, are used in all three Orange schools to measure student progress.**

Interviews with administrators, coaches, and teachers as well as a review of documents indicated that grade-level assessments and core subject benchmarks are used at the three schools in the district to measure student progress. MCAS test results, as well as results of mock MCAS tests, are used at the Dexter Park and Butterfield schools. The Fisher Hill School also uses MCAS test results to tailor instruction and assessment at the K-2 level.

At the Fisher Hill School, serving grades K-2 with approximately 300 students, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) is administered in the spring for planning and identification for entrance into grade 1 and the Developmental Indicators for Assessment of Learning-Third Edition (DIAL 3) is used in the fall for planning instruction. The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy (DIBELS) is administered and used to assess children's fluency in reading skills and monitor student progress. The Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) assessment is given twice a year and is used to measure student comprehension skills and vocabulary. The data from these assessments is used at both grade-level meetings and cross-grade-level meetings to coordinate reading instruction and assessment. The Houghton-Mifflin K-2 leveled Reading Passages Assessment kit is also used at this school in the fall and spring to plan instruction, identify gaps in curriculum, and monitor progress. Use of these assessments at benchmark times of the school year (fall, winter, and spring) establishes reading levels for the present and upcoming year. In mathematics, the *Investigations* unit assessments are administered at the end of each unit in grades 1 and 2,

At the Dexter Park School serving grades 3-4, also with approximately 300 students, *Insight Reading* assessments are administered after each unit and the Houghton-Mifflin assessment in the fall and spring for planning instruction and student identification. The MCAS reading test is administered in March and April in grade 3 and the MCAS ELA test in Grade 4 in March and May. The DIBELS is administered in the fall and spring with additional testing for those students falling below grade level expectations. This test helps identify students who are “at risk” or “at some risk” and set goals for these students to attain by the next benchmark period. The GRADE assessment, given at the beginning and end of each school year, is used to measure student comprehension skills and vocabulary in grades 3-4. In mathematics, *Investigations* unit assessments are administered after each chapter in grades 3 and 4. The MCAS mathematics test is administered in grade 4. Standards-based assessment tools and grade-level assessments for core subjects are administered quarterly. Common chapter tests in reading, ELA and mathematics are administered at appropriate intervals.

At the Butterfield School, serving grades 5 and 6 with approximately 225 students, the following assessments are administered: the *Insight Reading* assessment in grades 5 and 6 after each unit, the MCAS ELA test in grade 6, common assessments for novels in grade 5 and 6, DIBELS to assess reading fluency, the *Investigations* unit assessments in grade 5, *Connected Mathematics* chapter tests and benchmarks in grade 6, MCAS mathematics tests in grades 5 and 6, the MCAS science and technology test in grade 5, and common grade level assessment tests for core subjects.

Standardized testing including the MCAS, as well as grade level core subject testing, takes place at regular intervals throughout the school year; the district uses many and varied assessment tools. The test results are analyzed by administration and staff to monitor progress and inform instruction at all three schools; the goal now is to coordinate the results of these assessments to better serve the students and increase their achievement.

**Although the three schools have procedures in place for collecting, analyzing, and using student assessment results, there is no districtwide written policy for their collection, analysis, and use.**

Interviews with administrators, coaches, and teachers, as well a review of documents provided by the district, indicated that each school has policies in place for the collection, analysis, and use of student assessment data. Principals and teachers interviewed stated that grade-level teachers at each of the three schools meet regularly before, during, or after school to collect and analyze test data and plan how to use it in their classrooms. Grade-level meetings take place monthly at K-2, weekly at grades 3 and 4, and bi-weekly at 5 and 6 to review data and work on school and grade-level issues. Principals and teachers also indicated that because of the grade configuration of the schools, with all of each grade housed in just one school, teachers are in constant communication with each other, and modifications and adjustments can be accomplished in a timely manner. The team, however, found no formal documentation of these modifications and adjustments; in particular, it found no evidence of implementation of changes vertically across K-6.

There is, however, no districtwide assessment policy. Interviewees said not only that the literacy team concept has been so successful that the formation of an assessment team is a high priority in the district, but also that they “need an assessment team to keep everyone on board.” A \$7,000 grant was to be used during the summer of 2010 to develop an action plan for an assessment program and an assessment team.

Administrators, teachers, and coaches collect data at each school throughout the year. These include standardized test results, from the MCAS, DIBELS and GRADE tests, results from common grade-level chapter tests in core subjects, unit and quarterly tests from Houghton-Mifflin, information derived from the Bay State Reading Institute (BSRI) initiative, and results of *Investigations* and *Connected Math* testing.

For several years, TestWiz was used to analyze data in the district. This program supplied aggregated and disaggregated data for each grade level and subgroup,. The Education Data Warehouse, a collaborative effort with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and

Secondary Education that makes available to each school centralized performance data, is now being used. Five people have been trained and are currently providing data, although there are different levels of access and not all trained personnel have access to all levels. The district hopes to get additional personnel trained in the near future. EDW is not considered to be user-friendly by district administrators, coaches, and teachers. Interviewees stated that disaggregated data must be obtained manually and it is a time-consuming process that makes it difficult to assess data for subgroups.

Teachers, coaches, and administrators analyze data and use it in many ways. They use data to monitor the progress of all students at a grade level and to inform instruction. The literacy coach and principal work together to share data with staff, and reading intervention teachers work with teachers planning instruction and interventions. Struggling readers are given support with additional time and monitoring using the three-tier model. Additional support programs include Read Naturally, Lexia, and Project Read. Struggling readers in grades 5 and 6 receive additional support in a pull-out model using Read Naturally and Project Read and continue to be monitored with DIBELS. Members of the district literacy team, which is made up of the school administrators, literacy coach, and reading intervention teachers, reported that at lower levels much of the support using the three-tier model happens within the classroom. Students who need additional time are supported at the third tier by the reading specialist.

The MCAS test results in reading, ELA, and math are analyzed by grade and classroom. An item analysis for each grade-level test is reviewed by staff. Released questions, mathematics problems, and open-ended questions are incorporated into weekly lessons. Spring assessment results are used to place students in classrooms for the next school year. Principals stated that time and effort in this endeavor results in very few students being moved from one classroom to another during the school year, although test results are used to move students between groups within a classroom. Administrators and staff also reported using the MCAS long composition and open response materials during grade-level meetings to look at student work and using them as models with students to help them evaluate their writing.

Interviews with administrators, coaches, and teachers revealed that changes have been instituted in curriculum and assessment based on the district's MCAS test results. The John Collins Writing Program has become part of the ELA curriculum in grades 5 and 6 because test data showed students were weak in the open response and long composition portions of the test. Weekly open response questions are answered and scored in grades 3-6 to familiarize students with these questions and the expectations for them; more time is spent on developing and practicing the long composition in anticipation of the test. Writing prompts, test-taking skills, and MCAS vocabulary are a part of the weekly routine. MCAS mathematics data indicated that there were gaps in the *Investigations* and *Connected Math* programs; these were filled with supplementary teacher-developed packets. Fisher Hill uses test data to make schoolwide decisions such as adding a specialist or changing an existing program. Pre- and post-tests have been instituted at Butterfield to create benchmarks in the ELA and math programs in conjunction with the scope and sequence for each core subject.

Administrators stated in interviews that MCAS test scores are the primary resource in measuring the effectiveness of the ELA, reading, and math programs. They said that teachers and support personnel work hard every day to help students succeed and that the expectation is that their hard work, combined with changes in curriculum and in assessment procedures, will result in an increase in MCAS test scores. However, the lack of a districtwide policy for the collection, analysis, and use of assessment data hinders the effectiveness of schools' individual efforts to improve student achievement in general and specifically MCAS test scores in grades 3 to 6. This lack also affects the preparedness of students leaving the district and entering grade 7 at the Mahar Regional School for grades 7-12. Without a centrally-administered, districtwide assessment policy, the district does not have a cohesive systemwide framework for assessment.

## **Human Resources and Professional Development**

### **Reductions in school budgets over the years have resulted in cuts to staff and support personnel.**

Since the 2002-2003 school year, the annual school budget has decreased by a total of \$1.3 million. During that time the licensed school staff has decreased from 93 to 66, and the support staff from 87 to 72. Meanwhile, the number of students has increased from 798 in 2003 to 840 in 2010.

In interviews, administrators, teachers, and counselors described the cutbacks in programs and staffing that the district has experienced as a result of decreases in budget. Some of the cutbacks in programs are described in the second finding under Student Support, below. All across the district, support for learning is provided by fewer people, for fewer hours in fewer days. Professionals and paraprofessionals providing that support are supervised by fewer people who are asked to do more things and are constrained by the amount of time they have to do the things that they are asked to do. Professionals in the district appeared to the review team to be doing the best that they can, but the services they are providing are sufficient only to maintain a level of instruction that leads to unremarkable student progress.

Administrators pointed out that budget cuts have generally resulted in staff reductions, largely accomplished without layoffs by transferring staff from one position to another. These reductions have resulted in a decrease in student participation in support programs during the school day and in after-school and summer academic support initiatives as well. Because of the lack of layoffs, staff reductions may not appear to the town officials or the general public to have been disruptive to the educational process. Town administrators told review team members, "They do all right," and, "The schools are doing okay—nobody has been laid off." But the reductions have doubtless had an impact on student assessment results and on the median Student Growth Percentile of the district's students.

**Evaluations of administrators and teachers are performed in a timely manner, but teachers' evaluations are not aligned with the state's Principles of Effective Teaching and do not generally make recommendations for professional development, while administrators' evaluations are not informative or instructive and also do not include recommendations for professional development.**

The review of the personnel files of the principals and the director of student services proved that the superintendent has evaluated all annually. The evaluations were descriptive in nature and in one case did include an area in need of improvement. For the most part, however, they were not informative about the administrator's practice or instructive about how to improve it and did not include recommendations for professional development.

The review of teacher personnel files provided evidence that teachers are evaluated regularly in accordance with the teacher and union handbooks. A total of 29 files were reviewed onsite. Out of these the majority were timely (25), signed (29), informative about the teacher's pedagogy (24), and instructive about ways to improve that pedagogy (26). None of the evaluations were aligned with the Principles of Effective Teaching, and only one evaluation included any recommendation for particular professional development.

In addition to the formal evaluation program the district is beginning to use walkthroughs as another form of observation of teachers. Union representatives stated that members like the idea of walkthroughs but question how the results of the walkthroughs are used, particularly whether there is feedback that is instructive on improving pedagogy and recommends needed professional development. The staff would like to get the principal's feedback after each walkthrough.

Because of the nature of the district's current evaluation practices for both teachers and administrators, professional staff in the Orange Elementary School District are not being held accountable for improving their practice or student achievement.

**The district discontinued a professional development plan while it was involved with the Bay State Reading Institute (BSRI).**

During the 2006-2007 school year the district adopted the Bay State Reading Institute program, which is supported by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. After adoption of this program there was little involvement of teachers in the development or selection of professional development activities. There was a professional development committee in place, but teachers reported that there were no meetings of the committee during the district's three-year involvement with BSRI. Administrators reported that there seemed to be little need for a written professional development plan since BSRI would be providing professional development as a part of the program. Time usually spent developing a professional development plan and program could be more effectively spent otherwise. As of the time of the review team's site visit, according to interviews, the professional development team had not been reactivated and no plans had been made for a professional development program.

BSRI did indeed supply professional development, supplemented by the district, which continued to provide additional activities as required by statute, including sexual harassment

training, restraint training, school bus evacuation training and other such activities. Teachers participated in all of those activities during two contractually provided half-day professional days and the orientation day before school begins in the fall. In addition, administrators provided a list of professional development offerings made available to special educators, regular educators, and paraprofessionals in both separate and combined groups. Activities ranged from BSRI events and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation meetings to school visits. During the time of the review, a group of teachers participated in a school visit to observe the implementation of the Tools of the Mind program to promote self-regulation in young children, projected for use within the district during the 2010-2011 school year. Administrators reported that paraprofessionals are always invited to the professional development events and that many attend.

During the 2006 review of the Orange Elementary School District by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA), because it had no formal mentoring program, the district received the rating “needs improvement” regarding mentoring and orientation of new staff. The lack of a mentoring program was remedied successfully by the time of the present review. Review of the agreement between the school committee and the teachers’ association showed that it includes the requirement for a mentoring program; teachers, administrators, and teachers’ association officers agreed that this program is working. There are two trained mentors within the district, and new teachers have been assigned to one of those mentors over the past two years. The district does not experience a large turnover in teaching staff despite a salary schedule that shows a lower average salary than statewide.

Administrators reported being assigned a mentor for their first year as well. The Fisher Hill principal, in her second year at the time of the review, was mentored by the superintendent. Her predecessor in the principal’s office was mentored by another, senior principal within the district.

## **Student Support**

**The level of social and emotional support provided to students within the district is commendable.**

The Orange Elementary School District is located in an economically challenged area of the state and as a result has fewer resources to draw on than many districts. Still, the district has been able to secure sufficient grant funds to provide support for programs in a number of areas for its students.

Representatives from each of the schools meet as a group with social service providers from the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and Child and Family Services (CFS) to help families of enrolled students. The goal is to provide support for improved parenting skills that will in turn help stabilize the child’s school environment. Nutritional support is provided by state and federal programs that provide a free breakfast for all students, a 10 a.m. snack of fresh fruit, and free or reduced-price lunches for all students and staff.

The district maintains a full-time home-school liaison through grant funding under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. She is a licensed social worker who makes home visits to families of students and provides connections to local social service agencies that provide rent support, help with transportation issues, homeless services, medications, and food assistance.

In addition, members of the group serve on student support teams within each school that support students who may be in need of intervention. These teams meet weekly to share concerns about students and recommend additional services that may be necessary, whether they be in-school counseling services or more intensive therapy. Students are usually referred to student support teams by parents or faculty members. Sometimes the intervention results in a referral for special education services or other involvement by health or community-based social service agencies.

The district maintains counseling services for students at each school. The Butterfield School has one full-time counselor for its grade 5 and 6 students while Dexter Park has a similar arrangement for its grade 3 and 4 students. The Fisher Hill School has the services of the district's school psychologist, who provides counseling services when necessary but also serves as the deputy principal when not counseling students in grades 1 and 2 or testing students across the district. She is also a licensed social worker and, together with the other counselors, the home-school liaison, and other staff members, participates in the student support teams.

The importance of counseling services in a region of chronically low employment and relatively high poverty cannot be understated, and it is a credit to the district that it has recognized this need and continued to provide it to students despite the economic pressures of consistently lowered budgets. It is support such as this that has facilitated the district's provision of basic education to its students and allowed them to maintain the level of academic skills they demonstrate.

In general, the degree of student and family support is a source of strength within the district. While the superintendent rightly points out that such services are provided by grant funds and not district monies, the impact upon student morale is the same. In the view of the staff whom the review team interviewed, students feel safe and supported within the Orange Elementary School District, and the teachers, support staff, administrators, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, and custodians whom the review team encountered all share the same vision of the importance of keeping the students safe and supported.

**The district has instituted appropriate academic support programs, but the support they provide has been diminished as budget pressures have decreased district resources and personnel.**

As described above, interviewees reported to the review team that budget reductions have been reflected in lower staffing, accomplished by transferring personnel throughout the district rather than filling vacated positions, and in cutbacks to programs.

Teachers reported that support programs such as Read Naturally, math support, and after-school academic and enrichment programs remain in place at all three schools, but are not of the same

scale that they were four years ago. One teacher said, “Every student that needs the support is getting it,” yet the inability of students to match the improvement rates of most other students who scored similarly in the past suggests that the decrease in supplementary supports is a contributing factor. Principals reported that cuts in funding have resulted in a lowering of support programs’ staffing levels, of the number of days that support programs are offered, and of the number of students who are able to participate. Title I programs have experienced staff cuts as Title I grant funds have been reduced. The Orange After-School Investigations and Support (OASIS), which once provided after-school and summer tutoring, declined in size and in the amount of time tutoring was offered until it ceased operations entirely in 2008. Another summer tutoring program that once served 124 students has also been discontinued. Both were replaced by smaller summer programs, funded by the special education grant.

Teachers reported that the current after-school program is offered at the Butterfield School 5 days per week from 3 to 5 p.m.. While it is available to all students, administrators reported that 94 students currently participate, citing competing family activities and lack of student transportation as issues that prevent greater student involvement. Teachers said that the program provides academic support in the form of homework assistance from 3 to 4 p.m., followed by enrichment activities from 4 to 5, with only the enrichment activities offered from 3 to 5 on Friday. Enrichment activities include a photography club, a girls’ support group, cooking classes, and similar programs. The program is open to all students, as stated previously, and a sliding scale is used to fix tuition charges, with scholarships available for those parents who would otherwise be financially unable to participate.

Other support programs offered during the school day are included as a part of the Response to Intervention (RTI) initiative. The basic level across the district includes the Houghton-Mifflin ELA series in the lower grades and a novel-based approach to reading and writing at grades 5 and 6, as well as traditional mathematics instruction at all levels, with the *Investigations* program used as a supplement, in varying degrees, throughout the district. The second level of intervention may include Read Naturally, Project Read, Lexia, or other reading programs. Mathematics support is also available at Level 2. The third level is essentially individualized and is primarily a special education service, normally delivered by the reading interventionist. It may consist of a number of options, including Wilson reading. There are criteria in place to move students from a higher to a lower placement when the higher placement is no longer necessary, or from lower to higher when called for. A transition room is located in the Dexter School to provide support for students changing from one program to another, or from one level of support to another.

Teachers and administrators described the instruction provided to special education inclusion students as using the “single model,” with one teacher and one aide. They described the instructional model in previous years as a “dual model,” consisting of one general education teacher, one special education teacher, and three aides. Administrators reported that as budgets were cut, in order to maintain a manageable class size, teachers and aides were transferred to other assignments within the district. This resulted in classrooms that deliver basic services, but with the loss both of academic support and some individual attention to students’ needs.

The impact of lowering the level of staff working directly with students has been to reduce the speed and efficiency of the learning process within the district. Students in Orange still learn the basics of the curriculum, but their 2009 median Student Growth Percentiles show that they have not been improving as quickly as students with similar scoring patterns on the MCAS tests statewide. In addition, the percentages of students in the Orange Elementary School District who score *Proficient* or better on the MCAS are significantly lower than the percentages of students statewide who do so.

## **Financial and Asset Management**

### **The Orange school department's budget has decreased in four of the last five years.**

The Orange school department has been operating under severe financial stress, with budget decreases in four of the last five years. As of the time of the review, the budget for fiscal year 2010 was \$397,668 below that of fiscal year 2009 and \$531,588 below the figure that was voted by the school committee as a level, maintenance-of-service budget for fiscal year 2010. (The amounts cited include only those monies spent to maintain the delivery of education and the school district administrative cost, not maintenance costs except for janitorial services.) In 2009 the district's per pupil spending, as calculated by ESE, was \$11,441, or 88 percent of the state average per pupil spending of \$13,006.

The town of Orange also is assessed by the Ralph C. Mahar Regional School District (\$3,031,487 in fiscal year 2010) and the Franklin County Regional Technical School District (\$368,205 in fiscal year 2010).

Town officials said that the steady decline of resources has hampered their ability to engage in long-range planning at both the district and community level. When interviewed during the site visit, they stated that there was currently \$3300 in free cash and \$700 in the stabilization fund. School committee members and the administrative team stated that the financial woes of the district do not allow for the creation of a capital budget and that most issues, such as the recent failure of a furnace, are dealt with through an after-the-fact reaction rather than long-term planning, and they have to "rob Peter to pay Paul."

The result of the educational budget reductions has been a diminishing of classroom support services along with a reduction of music and art programs in the grades. The two teachers and three aides in inclusion classes, a dual model, have been reduced to one teacher and one aide, a single model. This while 2009 MCAS scores for special education students in the district show 12 percent and 13 percent achieving proficiency or better in ELA and mathematics, respectively, as opposed to 28 percent and 20 percent of special education students statewide. Meanwhile, no formal fiscal assessments of programs were presented to or found by the review team.

Because of the district's difficult financial situation, regionalization was brought up and discussed in many of the interview sessions. School committee members, the administrative team, teachers, support staff, and town officials all stated that while this issue has been discussed regularly for many years, there has been no concerted effort to do an in-depth analysis of the

possible benefits to the community. Some school committee members indicated in interviews that the community at large believes that the district “is a gem, and the educational system is the heart of the town” and that it opposes efforts to regionalize. Some school committee members themselves cited the fact that they attract a substantial number of school choice students from surrounding communities, taking it as an indication that regionalization would not be good for the district.

During interviews with the district principals, when they were asked if the budget allowed them to provide an excellent education to the children of Orange, their answer was, “We do the best with what we have.” Town officials also said, “They do the best with what they have,” meaning this statement as praise for the district.

**Education, including assessments for the Mahar Regional and Franklin County Technical schools, accounts for 54 percent of the town of Orange’s total yearly budget; the necessity of paying these assessments has resulted in reductions in the local school budget.**

When the assessments to Orange for the Mahar Regional and Franklin County Technical schools are included, education accounts for 54 percent of Orange’s total town revenue. .Because of the Commonwealth’s laws pertaining to regional school districts (when two-thirds of a region approves a regional district’s budget, the town must appropriate the assessed amount), Orange has no control over the size of the regional school districts’ budgets, even though contributing the largest share of both of them.

The effect has been reductions in the local school budget, the only education budget the town has control over. No tax overrides have ever been passed by the electorate in Orange, and according to the town manager there has been no attempt at an override for at least the last five years.

**The school committee generally accepts the funding recommended by the town administrator, resulting in cuts in services.**

The budget development starts in November with a meeting of the superintendent, the principals, and the director of pupil personnel services. The principals and the director stated in interviews that they receive a “wish list” from their respective staff members before this meeting. In interviews of the administrative staff it was stated that priorities are set according to students’ weaknesses as perceived by the staff, and that the administrative team works cooperatively to include those items and positions that will have the greatest impact on the total school community.

A meeting is held between the superintendent and the town administrator during which requests are discussed and town revenues are estimated. As revenue estimates become more accurate, adjustments are made to the amounts the town administrator will recommend to the finance committee and to the Town Meeting.

Because of decreased state aid over recent years the amount recommended by the town administrator has been reduced, and that recommendation has become the school district’s budget. Committee members indicated that they generally accept the final figure that comes from the town and that while on occasion they have petitioned the Town Meeting for additional

funding, this is not a common occurrence. The school administration then has to cut services to the town's children. Most cuts of personnel have been through positions vacated by retirement not being filled. The budget reductions have therefore resulted in a movement of teaching staff to cover vacancies, thus avoiding the layoffs of teachers that would have been necessary if new staff had been hired. The feeling in the town, as determined by review team interviews, is that as there have been few if any layoffs of teachers, the schools must be getting along well, and do not need increased financing. It is the judgment of the review team that because the school committee generally accepts the budget figure given them by the town and does not make a concerted effort with the school administration to inform town officials and the community at large of the harmful effects of budget cuts, town administrators and residents have an inaccurate perception of fiscal conditions in the school district and the state of education in the district's schools.

**The Orange school department received \$1,136,000 in federal and state grants in fiscal year 2010.**

The Orange Public Schools have been active in soliciting and receiving state and federal grants to supplement services to their students, and as a result have had the benefit of a large amount of grant funding, given the size of the district. The superintendent has stated that he looks for and writes most of the grants received; the district does not have a grant writer. Grants received for fiscal year 2010 include:

- A Community Partnership Grant of \$32,199;
- A Focus Grant of \$264,939;
- A McKinney Homeless Grant of \$30,000;
- A Quality Kindergarten Grant of \$46,060;
- A Title IV Safe and Drug Free Schools Grant of \$3,494;
- A Special Education-Early Childhood Grant for \$13,709;
- A Title II Improving Educator Quality Grant for \$59,939; and
- A Title II-PART D-Enhancing Education through Technology Grant for \$1,838.

Additionally, there were seven more grants totaling over \$456,000.

## ***Recommendations***

**The school committee and the administrative team should involve the district in both short- and long-range planning through the establishment of:**

- **A districtwide planning process including the creation of teacher committees in such areas as curriculum, assessment, and professional development (see recommendation below)**
- **Districtwide mission and vision statements**
- **A strategic plan**
- **A District Improvement Plan (DIP) and School Improvement Plans (SIPs) that are aligned**
- **A process for the timely review and revision of the school committee policy manual**

The district lacks a strategic plan. The district should establish a strategic planning committee to move forward and create a plan for the district in accordance with districtwide mission and vision statements that promote high quality instruction and high expectations for students. In one of the review team's meetings with school committee members, the members present did acknowledge that a plan of this nature is long overdue. It was noted that the Mahar Regional School District recently completed a strategic plan and that school committee members had reviewed the published plan with interest. As with many items discussed during the onsite visit, the cost of such a plan was a matter of concern.

There are various ways of approaching the creation of such a document. The cost of such a venture would be minimal if all members of the Orange educational community came together to create it in-house. A strategic plan would enable the community to keep focused on the needs of the student body and have a solid approach to the future direction of the district.

No evidence was provided during the review to show that SIPs in the district are aligned with the DIP. There is no coordinated effort among the three schools to produce similar documents, and administrators stated that each SIP is developed taking only the needs of the individual school into consideration. Each school has its own mission and vision statement. In one of the school committee interviews a member stated that while he was reviewing materials for the present review he could not readily define the mission of the district, as there are a variety of mission statements published in different documents. The district planning process should be used to establish guidelines relative to the creation of a standards-based DIP and SIPs that include achievable goals, objectives, action plans, and timelines that are in alignment. All plans created in the district should include the common, districtwide mission and vision statements.

By setting and prioritizing goals for the district and aligned goals for the schools, along with action plans for achieving them, the district will ensure that all district staff are working in a coordinated fashion toward the same ends, ends which accord with the district mission and vision statements. This will in turn accelerate student achievement.

The school committee policy manual, which should guide the operation of the school district, has many gaps and there are a number of policies that are at least 12 years old. Updating and expanding the policy manual will encourage its use by district staff.

**The district should develop an action plan to create a cohesive K-6 reading curriculum with consistent strategies and assessments.**

Administrators indicated that when the district adopted the Houghton-Mifflin reading program in 2005, financial constraints were the reason for not purchasing the program for grades 5 and 6. No curriculum alignment between the formal reading program in grades K-4 and the grade 5 and 6 program was found in documentation or was presented to the review team. Grade 5 and 6 reading remains a study of novels with a focus on the literature strand of the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

The formal reading program at grades K-4 contains a sequence of skills and objectives along with lesson and unit plans and contains formative and summative assessments. A formal, documented program with these features is lacking at grades 5 and 6. The grade 6 curriculum map lists literary terms to be addressed each trimester while grade 5 has a timeline showing what should be studied each month for each subject. Some assessments for novels were seen, but not necessarily tied to objectives and standards; consistent formal assessment of mastery of concepts and skills is limited. Instituting a formal grade 5 and 6 reading program—one that is aligned with the K-4 program, includes a sequence of skills and objectives to guide teaching, and has formative and summative assessments to inform teachers and administrators about student learning—will ensure that what students are taught in reading in grades 5 and 6 builds on what they learned earlier and will improve teaching and learning in this area, thus increasing student achievement.

**To develop and advance a common, districtwide vision of continuous improvement for the students, the district should establish formal ongoing committees for curriculum, assessment, and professional development that include representation from all grade levels. The committees should**

- **plan and implement a written curriculum specific to Orange and modify it as necessary;**
- **develop a districtwide assessment policy and coordinate assessment and data analysis responsibilities; and**
- **develop and carry out a professional development plan aligned with district priorities.**

All schools, all administrators, and all staff need to share in a common, districtwide vision of continuous improvement for the students: a common understanding of the indicators of student success. To do that, they need common experiences and effective supervision. Teachers and administrators seemed united in their desire to “give students everything that they need to be successful,” but it is difficult to do so without a common understanding of what it means to be successful and of how to achieve that success. The district should adopt a common instructional

initiative that is reflected in its strategic plan, DIP, and SIPs, support it with effective professional development that is coordinated at the district level across all of the schools and supervised in a consistent manner by principals who all agree on what successful implementation looks like. To guide this endeavor, the Orange Elementary School District needs committees for curriculum, assessment, and professional development with districtwide representation from all grade levels.

At the time of the site visit the district had no curriculum, assessment, or professional development committees, although a grant was to be used during the summer of 2010 to develop an action plan for an assessment program and an assessment team. There are few vertical meetings during the year, and each school examines curriculum, assessments, and data as they affect its grades only. Administrators and staff pointed to the configuration of the schools, with two or three grades housed at each site, as providing the ability to address data and curriculum issues informally at grade-level and staff meetings. As a result, there is little articulation of these issues between levels and little documentation of curriculum revision and modification or program changes. In addition, at the time of the site visit the district had not had a professional development program since its association with BSRI ended.

Curriculum: The district uses the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks as its curriculum guide. The district has no formal, written document to refine the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, giving it specificity as to concepts, skills, and objectives to be mastered by Orange students within specific timeframes. Administrators and staff reported that there are no expectations that objectives be written for daily lessons in plan books, and observation found a very limited number of objectives posted in classrooms, as well as little reference to what students should know and be able to do at the end of the day's lesson. Daily lesson plans and unit plans should contain standards and objectives that are prominent in the classroom and referred to during the lesson: students need to know the standards and objectives they are working toward in daily lessons and units. Implementation of a written curriculum specific to the needs of Orange students, with pacing guides, would provide for stronger monitoring and supervision of instruction and learning in the classroom. A curriculum committee can develop such a curriculum and oversee its implementation and any needed modification, ensuring coordination among the three schools.

Assessment: While work is done to analyze data, primarily MCAS data, resulting in modifications to classroom teaching and learning, the review team found no formal documentation of these changes, especially of refinement and implementation vertically across K-6. There is no districtwide policy for the collection, analysis, and use of assessment results. The district should follow through on its plans for an assessment program and an assessment team; the team should formulate such a districtwide policy to guide the assessment program. The implementation of a districtwide policy administered by a centralized assessment committee, as planned for the 2010-2011 school year, will provide a cohesive systemwide framework for assessment.

Professional development: Bay State Reading Institute (BSRI) was the provider and directed professional development for literacy for three years, from 2006-2007 to 2008-2009. During this time, the district discontinued use of a professional development plan, and its professional development committee did not meet. Now that the district's connection with BSRI has ended, it should again organize a professional development committee and implement a program of professional development, one aligned with the priorities formulated during the districtwide planning process and incorporated into the coordinated strategic plan, DIP, and SIPs recommended above. Professional development should include activities to support other instructional programs in addition to reading instruction, and these activities should be coordinated among the three schools.

Professional development aligned with district priorities, in combination with the implementation of a written curriculum specific to the needs of Orange students and with coordinated districtwide use of assessments, will help to boost student achievement in the district. And these three committees would provide a useful method of involvement and a rich source of ideas for the district.

**The district should revise its evaluation practices for administrators and teachers so that they comply with state regulation, so that all evaluations of administrators are informative and instructive, and so that evaluations of both administrators and teachers include recommendations for professional development.**

The superintendent has evaluated the principals and the director of pupil personnel services annually. For the most part, the evaluations were not informative about the administrator's practice or instructive about how to improve it, and did not include recommendations for professional development. The majority of teacher evaluations reviewed by the team were timely, informative, and instructive, but only one evaluation included any recommendation for professional development.

The district should make sure that all evaluations are informative, instructive, and include recommendations for needed or desirable professional development; it should ensure that they fulfill all of the requirements of state regulation, including compliance with state principles of effective teaching and administrative leadership. Improved evaluation practices will allow the district to improve teachers' and administrators' performance and hold them accountable for student achievement.

**The Orange school district and school committee should increase communication with town officials and voters for the purpose of increasing the funds available for education.**

The Orange school department has been operating under severe financial stress, with budget decreases in four of the last five years. The town is expending 54 per cent of its revenue on education. This is still not enough money to provide an excellent education to the children of Orange. Since the 2002-2003 school year, the annual school budget has decreased by a total of \$1.3 million. During that time the licensed school staff has decreased from 93 to 66, and the support staff from 87 to 72. Meanwhile, the number of students has increased from 798 in 2003

to 840 in 2010. Instruction for students with disabilities has gone from a dual-teacher to a single-teacher model, and support programs have been scaled back or eliminated.

The town and the school district should investigate methods to raise additional funds for education, including the possibility of obtaining an override. This means that there must be intense communication with the voters of the town to inform them that the schools are in grave financial distress. The loss of student supports, the lack of improvement in student achievement in recent years, and the gaps in proficiency between the students in Orange and students statewide should be communicated to the parents and voters of the town. The school committee should take a prominent role in this communication, and in order to be able to assume this role all of its members should begin to participate in the development of the annual budget, thus familiarizing themselves with the line by line needs of the district.

In interviews with town administrators the review team members were told, “They do all right,” and, “The schools are doing okay--nobody has been laid off.” This impression seems to have led to a belief that the schools do not need more money. Communication of the support services that have been lost should be a prime goal for all school personnel and school committee members. General knowledge of the harmful effect budget decreases have had on the school system will assist the school district in obtaining the increased funding it needs.

**The district should establish a formal method of assessing the fiscal efficiency as well as the effectiveness of its programs.**

No formal fiscal assessments of programs were found by or presented to the review team, though a change in even a successful program can bring better results, by reducing costs without sacrificing effectiveness.

As an example, the school system bids out its energy, maintenance, and snowplowing contracts separately from the town. The reviewers were not presented with any evidence that officials in Orange have considered whether combined town and school bidding could be advantageous.

With the cost of education at 54 percent of the town’s revenue, the district should carefully investigate possible cost-saving methods, constantly assuring that all programs are running efficiently. Such ongoing fiscal assessment will allow the maximum possible benefit to the students of Orange from the education funds expended.

**The school committee and the community at large should continue to investigate elementary regionalization and should conduct an in-depth analysis of the issues surrounding it.**

Budget decreases in the Orange Elementary School District in four of the last five years have resulted in staffing cuts and reductions of support services, and the town would find it difficult to allocate additional monies to the district. In view of these circumstances, regionalization was brought up and discussed in many interviews. School committee members, the administrative team, teachers, support staff, and town officials all stated that while this issue has been discussed regularly for many years, there has been no concerted effort to do an in-depth analysis of the possible benefits to the community. Some school committee members indicated that the

community at large opposes efforts to regionalize, and some school committee members themselves cited the fact that they attract a substantial number of school choice students from surrounding communities, taking it as an indication that regionalization would not be good for the district.

Especially given that the school for Orange's grade 7-12 students is already regionalized, it may be time for a study group to be established to look seriously and without preconceived notions into the possible educational, financial, and transportation benefits from the expansion of regionalization. With the decline of financial resources in all communities, especially in this geographical area, communities surrounding Orange might now be interested in joining forces. Working with other area communities through regionalization—or, possibly, through individual cooperative initiatives instead of regionalization— would allow the district the opportunity of sharing facilities and programs, thereby providing more services to students. In addition, the district could experience savings in purchasing as the result of group buying and bidding, as well as savings in the area of medical insurance as the result of a larger pool of participants.

## **Appendix A: Review Team Members**

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The review of the Orange Elementary School District was conducted from March 8 – March 11, 2010, by the following team of educators, independent consultants to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Rena G. Shea, Leadership and Governance

Joanne Grenier, Curriculum and Instruction

Josephine Napolitano, Assessment

John Roper, Student Support and Professional Development (Review Team Coordinator)

Charles Valera, Human Resources and Financial and Asset Management

## Appendix B: Review Activities and Site Visit Schedule

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### Level 3 Review Activities

The following activities were conducted as part of the review of the Orange Elementary School District.

- The review team conducted interviews with the following Orange town financial personnel: the town administrator, town treasurer and town accountant.
- The review team conducted interviews with the following members of the Orange Elementary School Committee: chairperson and four members.
- The review team conducted interviews with the following representatives of the Orange Elementary Teachers Association: the president and vice-president.
- The review team conducted interviews and focus groups with the following representatives from the Orange Elementary School District's central office administration: superintendent, pupil personnel services director, human resources administrative assistant.
- The review team visited the following schools in the Orange Elementary School District: Fisher Hill (K-2), Dexter Park (pre-K and 3-4) and Butterfield (5-6).
  - During school visits, the review team conducted interviews with school principals, teachers, and others, including the superintendent and other central office personnel, teachers' union officers, and school adjustment counselors.
  - The review team conducted 33 classroom visits for different grade levels and subjects across the three schools visited.
- The review team reviewed the following documents provided by ESE:
  - District profile data.
  - The District Analysis and Review Tool (DART), formerly referred to as the Comprehensive Annual District and School Data Review.
  - Latest Coordinated Program Review Report dated August 21, 2008.
  - The school district accountability report produced by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) and approved on January 12, 2007.
  - Staff contracts.
  - Reports on licensure and highly qualified status.
  - Long-term enrollment trends.
  - End-of-year financial report for the district for 2009.
  - List of the district's federal and state grants.

- Municipal profile.
- 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
  - Copies of data analyses/reports used in schools
  - Descriptions of student support programs
  - Program evaluations
  - Student and Family Handbooks
  - Faculty Handbook
  - Professional development program / schedule / courses
  - 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 Orange Elementary School District, conducted from March 8 - 11, 2010.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
<p>March 8</p> <p>Introductory meeting with district leaders; interviews with district staff and principals; review of documents</p>	<p>March 9</p> <p>Interviews with district staff and principals; school visits at Fisher Hill and Dexter Park Schools, classroom observations; interview with union and focus group with parents; review of personnel files</p>	<p>March 10</p> <p>School visits to Fisher Hill, Dexter Park and Butterfield schools; interviews with school leaders; classroom observations; teacher team meetings; school committee interviews</p>	<p>March 11</p> <p>School visit to Fisher Hill School: interviews with school leaders; classroom observations; interview with school adjustment counselors; follow-up interviews; team meeting; closing meeting with district leaders</p>