Massachusetts Department of
ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY
EDUCATION

Agawam Public Schools
REVIEW OF
DISTRICT SYSTEMS AND PRACTICES
ADDRESSING THE DIFFERENTIATED NEEDS
OF ALL STUDENTS

October 2009

Overview of the Reviews of District Systems and Practices Addressing the Differentiated Needs of All Students

Purpose:

The Center for School and District Accountability (SDA) in the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) is undertaking a series of reviews of school districts to determine how well district systems and practices support groups of students for whom an achievement gap exists. The reviews will focus in turn on how district systems and practices affect each of four groups of students: students with disabilities, English language learners, low-income students, and students who are members of racial minorities. The first set of districts reviewed, in May and June 2009, are Agawam, Chelsea, Lexington, Quincy, Taunton, and Westwood, districts where data pointed to responsive and flexible school systems that are effective in supporting all learners, particularly students with disabilities, or where there was an interest in making these systems more effective.

Key Questions:

Three overarching key questions guide the work of the review team.

▪**How do district and school leaders assume, communicate, and share responsibility for the achievement of all learners, especially those with disabilities?**

▪**How does the district create greater capacity to support all learners?**

▪**What technical assistance and monitoring activities from ESE are most useful to districts?**

Methodology:

To focus the analysis, the reviews collect evidence in three critical domains: **(I) Leadership, (II) Curriculum Delivery, and (III) Human Resource Management and Professional Development.** The reviews seek to identify those systems and practices that are most likely to be contributing to positive results, as well as those that may be impeding rapid improvement. Practices that are a part of these systems were identified from three sources: Educational Quality and Accountability indicators, Program Quality Assurance Comprehensive Program Review criteria, and the 10 "essential conditions" in 603 CMR 2.03(6)(e). The three domains, organized by system with component practices, are detailed in Appendix F of the review protocol. Four team members previewed selected district documents and ESE data and reports before conducting a four-day site visit in the district. The four-member teams consist of independent consultants with expertise in district and school leadership, governance, and financial management (to respond to domain I); curriculum, instruction, and assessment (to respond to domain II); human resource management and professional development (to respond to domain III); and special education (to collect evidence across all three domains; see italicized indicators under each domain in Appendix F of the review protocol).

The review to the Agawam Public Schools was conducted from June 8-June 11, 2009. The review included visits to the following district schools: Agawam Early Childhood Center (ECC) (PK), Clifford M. Granger (K-04), Benjamin J. Phelps (K-04), Robinson Park (K-04), James Clark (K-04), Agawam Middle School (05-06), Agawam Junior High School (07-08), Agawam High School (09-12). Further information about the review and its schedule can be found in Appendix B; information about the members of the review team can be found in Appendix A.

Agawam Public Schools

District Profile

In the 2008-2009 school year, the Agawam school district had an enrollment of 4,347 students. 94.3 percent of these students were white. 19.3 percent of the total school population was low-income, and 13.7 percent of the students were in special education programs. The district has four elementary schools (grades PK-04), one middle school (grades 5-6), one junior high (grades 7-8), and one high school (grades 9-12).

Student Performance

In 2008, MCAS achievement levels in Agawam tracked state achievement levels with some variations. Overall, a consistently larger percentage of students in the state scored at the Advanced level than in Agawam. But a larger percentage of Agawam students scored at the Proficient level than in the state. Then, with one exception, a lower percentage of Agawam students were in the Warning/Failing category than in the state. The exception was that in Grade 10 English language arts the same percentage (4) of students failed in Agawam as did in the state.

Individual schools' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status in 2008 varied. The high school made AYP for students in the aggregate and for all subgroups in both English language arts and mathematics. Both the junior high and the middle school made AYP in the aggregate in both ELA and mathematics, but in both areas subgroups did not.

With regard to the elementary schools, the Granger made AYP in the aggregate and for all subgroups in both English language arts and mathematics. In ELA, the Phelps, the Clark, and the Robinson Park schools did not make AYP in either the aggregate or for subgroups. However, the Phelps and Robinson Park did make AYP in mathematics both in the aggregate and for all subgroups. The Clark made AYP in the aggregate in mathematics, but not for all subgroups.

Findings

Student Achievement

The district is beginning to have success holding all students to higher standards.

The district is determined to move beyond the status quo regarding student achievement. The vision for the system in the district's "Vision 2010" strategic plan states, "Student achievement will exceed state and national accountability measures."

The Agawam Public Schools have a demonstrated commitment to raise the achievement of all students. To this end the district has established specialized programming and safety nets throughout the system. The district also has professional learning communities designed to improve classroom instruction.

The district recognizes the need for formative assessments to determine expectations for student performance. It has recently moved from using the Directed Reading Assessment (DRA) to using the Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) at the elementary level as one source of information with which to improve early reading instruction. The intent is to extend the use of the BAS through the secondary level. There are also district benchmarks across the elementary level. The Group Reading Assessment & Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) is used in grades 1– 6. The Group Mathematics Assessment Diagnosis Evaluation (GMADE) is used in grades 5 and 6. In addition, the high school is implementing common exams. These efforts form the core of an incipient districtwide assessment system. In preparation for this system of assessments, the Agawam school district has invested in the development of its own data warehouse.

The district has some experience and success in holding all students accountable to higher levels of achievement. Overall, student performance on MCAS in grades 5-10 was above performance at the state level. More specifically, special needs students' performance in grades 5-8 tracked higher than that of their peers statewide. Also, in both mathematics and English language arts, a smaller percentage of students with disabilities at all levels in Agawam scored in the warning category.

During the 2008-2009 school year, the Preparatory Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) was administered, at district expense, to all grade 10 and 11 students during the school day. The results were examined with the assistance of a consultant from the Educational Testing Service (ETS). As a result the enrollment in Advance Placement (AP) courses for 2009-2010 has nearly doubled. Identifying students who are capable of studying at an advanced level raised the expectations for student performance in the district. The system of supports and safety nets already in place should be able to address any gaps in student progress.

The district has begun to hold higher expectations for student achievement. There have been some early successes upon which the district can build expanded opportunities for students.

As a result of the district's endeavors to date in improving curriculum and instruction, the Agawam Public Schools is well-positioned to move its students to a higher level of achievement.

Leadership

The district implements a shared vision that all children can learn.

The district's Vision 2010 document calls for district leadership to continue and expand upon existing programs that promote the understanding of diversity. School committee policy IHB demonstrates a commitment to the belief that most students can learn in a regular classroom setting. In order to share this vision with all stakeholders, the district is beginning the process of placing the school committee's policy manual on the district's website.

The superintendent indicated that she and her director of special education and assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction have a shared vision of inclusiveness, and that this has helped her establish the culture of acceptance across the district. Also, she noted that she has had the opportunity to hire all but one member of her administrative team, something that has been key in the development of a shared purpose and vision of inclusion across the district. The superintendent told the review team that, given her belief that inclusion is the strength of the district, she is committed to educating all district children in their home district. Towards that end the district offers a range of support programs.

The superintendent also indicated her intent to further the vision by focusing leadership team meetings on instruction and the use of data. At each team meeting, one of the principals makes a data-supported presentation on a leadership initiative. In interviews, the superintendent shared her confidence that, given the extent of administrator buy-in to her vision, when she delegates a task, it will be completed to her expectations.

In addition, the superintendent ensures a consistent sharing of her vision through monthly meetings with the teachers' union and through a superintendent/teacher advisory council with representatives from each of the district's schools. The meeting moves from school to school and is facilitated by the superintendent and the teacher who represents the school being visited. The superintendent has also implemented a district-wide support team composed of a school committee member, a principal, a member of the clergy, the school department's resource officer, and a school adjustment counselor. The council meets once a month to discuss common concerns.

District hiring practices for teachers focus on how much connection exists between the district's shared vision and candidates' philosophical beliefs. Furthermore, as designated curriculum leaders in all schools, principals work with curriculum specialists to ensure the maintenance of a culture among teachers of acceptance of all students. The superintendent indicated that she, assistant superintendents, and curriculum specialists are in classrooms to verify the implementation of the district's vision that all children can learn.

The vision that all students can learn extends beyond students with disabilities. The district has a rigorous enrollment process for English language learners (ELL) although they represent a small percent of the population. The Bilingual Verbal Ability Test (BVAT) is used to determine first language proficiency. Then in kindergarten the curriculum promotes multi-culturalism to support ELL students. During the process of moving an ELL student into regular education the ELL staff maintains close contact with regular education teachers.

In addition, school committee policy refers to the McKinney-Vento Act as a statement of entitlement for all students. The district works with the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to arrange schooling for homeless children. The Title I staff then coordinates school services for these students with support from local agencies. The district also uses Reading Recovery to support students struggling to read in the early grades. On some occasions students move from Reading Recovery into special education; however interviewees reported that this occurs in only a small percentage of instances.

Principals reported that through excellent communication and a collaborative leadership style, the superintendent has enabled them to develop respect for one another. They reported a shared awareness and appreciation of the positions and functions of others within the district. The district leadership has made decisions and taken action to ensure that all stakeholders in the Agawam Public Schools are aware of and share in the district's vision that all children can learn.

District leadership at the central office is collaborative, distributive, and empowering of district administrators.

According to interviews with administrators, Vision 2010 and the District Improvement Plan (DIP) were developed collaboratively by the leadership team. The result was alignment across the two documents with specific goals in five core areas: leadership and governance, curriculum and instruction, business, professional development, and programs for students and staff. Then district principals developed their School Improvement Plans (SIPs) and teacher professional development plans, aligning them to the DIP.

The leadership team extended its collaborative mode by seeking input from the community at large in the development of its goals. Community stakeholders such as school committee members, principals, parents, and community members responded to a survey to determine community priorities and to suggest perceptions of district strengths and needs. The district incorporated these inputs into the documents.

Interviewees throughout the district indicated that the superintendent distributes to all administrators responsibility for implementation of the goals. Principals reported that this fosters in all administrators a sense of responsibility and empowerment for achievement of the shared goal of improving the education of all children.

Principals indicated that the superintendent delegates with confidence, thus empowering them to carry on the work under their shared vision. She expects to be kept informed of progress made toward goals. And she also expects her collaborative leadership style to be replicated at the school level, by principals collaborating with teachers and building problem-solving teams. One principal stated that he held voluntary staff roundtables twice a month to address issues brought forward by the staff. While replication of this leadership style is a goal for principals, it has not yet been fully accomplished.

District leadership at the central office is collaborative, distributive, and empowering. Administrators accept and share responsibility for the improved achievement of all students in the district.

The district uses a thoughtful, deliberate process to address curricular issues.

Over the course of the last two years the district has addressed several challenging curricular problems, in some cases with the thoroughness of an action research process, but in all cases with careful planning. The two instances of action research are the "study group" which redesigned the 7th grade reading course and the professional learning community (PLC) looking at the writing curriculum in the district.

Those 6th grade students determined to have reading problems are regularly assigned to a remedial reading course in 7th grade. However, the two teachers, one of whom is the assistant secondary ELA coordinator, were not satisfied with the reading course they were offering students. They convened a "study group" to revise the curriculum for the course. They began by asking the question "What is reading?" and undertook a review of the research to answer the question. After extensive reading and discussion, the teachers arrived at an answer to the question, one unlike the answer any of the participants had when they started the research. Only at this point did the teachers begin to build the curriculum for the new 7th grade critical literacy course. The course was taught for the first time in the 2008-2009 school year.

Another instance of action research, this one in its initial stages, is the PLC seeking to improve the writing curriculum and instruction. The idea that student achievement would not continue to improve without a writing curriculum and writing instruction that were more intensive seems to have originated in the special education office. The assistant director of special education brought the concern to the leadership team, where principals agreed. They formed a PLC to investigate improving writing instruction in the district. Their work is in progress, but prospects are good, given their open-ended research-based approach, that the result will add significantly to learning opportunities for students in the district.

The district faced an additional curricular problem in mathematics. By the end of school year 2008-2009 students K–4 would have learned mathematics through a program new to the district, *Investigations*. Unfortunately, budgetary constraints made it impossible to purchase the resources necessary to continue the program by bringing *Investigations* to the 5th grade. Instead the decision was made to continue to use Scott Foresman in 5th grade. The problem this posed was that students arriving in 5th grade in the 2009-2010 school year would have used *Investigations* all their preceding years in elementary school. Fifth grade teachers were justifiably concerned about what this meant if they were to teach them using Scott Foresman materials. In a move that involved the key players, the elementary mathematics coordinator met with a group of principals and assistant principals K-6, advised by the superintendent, to formulate a plan for addressing the issue. The committee decided to plan and hold a transition meeting with the 5th grade teachers involved. A key presenter at this meeting was a 4th grade teacher who introduced the teachers to *Investigations* by showing them how rising 5th graders had been learning mathematics. Then teachers learned how Scott Foresman would work for students with a background in *Investigations*. The meeting accomplished a great deal to allay teachers' fears by providing them with concrete information and practical strategies. The district

successfully addressed a curricular problem by addressing the real challenges ahead for 5th grade mathematics teachers.

Another curricular challenge faced by the district in the same thoughtful way was the replacement of the Directed Reading Assessment (DRA) with the Benchmark Assessment System (BAS) in the elementary schools. The DRA yielded only a single designation as to each student's level, while the BAS provides rich, detailed information regarding each student's level of achievement. However, administration of the DRA was simple when compared with that of the BAS. So the teacher training became in part a persuasive effort. The first meeting was about the richness of the formative assessment data yielded by the BAS. Having been more or less persuaded of the benefits of moving to the BAS, teachers were trained in a later meeting in the decidedly more complex matter of administering the assessment.

In each of these cases, the change began not top-down from the superintendent but rather at the locus of need, whether teachers, curriculum coordinators, or special education administrators. Discussion by those affected followed the recognition of need; the result was that they assumed ownership of the problem, considering such questions as: "What are the issues that bring us to consider a change?" "What research should be examined?" "What are the implications for students and teachers of making a change?" "What do we need to communicate to those affected by the change?" "How shall we plan the introduction of the change?" And, finally, "How do we measure the effects of the change?" This is a powerful model that one Agawam educator described as "distributing the leadership by empowering educators to collaborate and problem solve."

 Classroom observations indicated varying degrees of successful practice.

Review team members visited 64 classrooms and rated classroom activity on 8 characteristics by indicating whether there was no evidence of the characteristic, partial evidence, or solid evidence. Two positive results in Agawam involved classroom climate and time on learning. In 81 percent of the classrooms visited, there was solid evidence of a "classroom climate … characterized by respectful behavior, routines, tone, and discourse." And in 67 percent of the classrooms visited, there was solid evidence that "available class time [was] maximized for learning"; 19 percent of the classrooms showed partial evidence of this characteristic.

In 52 percent of the classrooms visited there was solid evidence of instructional rigor ("questions require students to engage in a process of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation") and in 16 percent partial evidence. In the matter of student engagement ("the teacher paces the lesson to ensure all students are actively engaged"), in 58 percent of the classrooms there was solid evidence, and in 16 percent partial evidence. However, in 27 percent of the classrooms there was no evidence of this characteristic. At approximately the same rate, there was solid evidence of "on-the-spot formative assessments [to] check for understanding to inform instruction" in 50 percent of the classrooms visited.

At somewhat lower rates, observers indicated solid evidence that instruction "included a range of techniques" in 38 percent of the classrooms visited; however, in 44 percent of them there was no evidence of this characteristic. At a similar rate, there was solid evidence that "students

articulate their thinking and reasoning" in 36 percent of them, partial evidence in 23 percent, but no evidence in 41 percent. And finally, in only 19 percent of the classrooms were students "inquiring, exploring, or problem solving together, in pairs, or in small groups." In 56 percent there was no evidence of this.

When a focus is placed on secondary classrooms by combining observations for high school and junior high school and comparing those results to the overall results presented above, the data are compelling. For example, while, as indicated above, 38 percent of classrooms visited in the district showed solid evidence of a range of instructional techniques, at the secondary level the figure was 7 percent, with 80 percent of secondary classrooms visited showing no evidence of a range of instructional techniques.

At the secondary level, only 20 percent of classrooms visited showed solid evidence that the teacher paced the lesson so that students were actively engaged. In 50 percent of these secondary classrooms there was no evidence of this characteristic. In only 17 percent of these secondary classrooms was there solid evidence that students articulate their thinking and reasoning, and in 67 percent of them there was no such evidence. Most dramatically, in only 3 percent of secondary classrooms observed was there solid evidence of students inquiring, exploring, or problem-solving together in pairs or in small groups. Eighty percent of secondary classrooms visited showed no evidence of this characteristic.

The characteristics being rated in this survey are indicators of strong classroom instruction. Agawam's data at all levels reveal mixed evidence of the presence of these characteristics. Instruction is an area in need of district attention, and, as the contrasting results for the secondary classrooms observed show, this need is particularly strong at the secondary level. With regard to high school instruction, these classroom observations corroborate the findings in the recent report by the New England Association of Secondary Schools (NEASC). Continued improvement in student achievement in the district will hinge on improved classroom instruction.

The district is expanding its system of assessments because it understands the importance of data in improving student performance.

Until the end of the 2007-2008 school year, in addition to MCAS, the district had been administering a limited number of assessments to students to determine their progress against the curriculum frameworks. Those assessments included the Aimsweb for all kindergarteners, the GRADE for all students in grades 1-6, the GMADE for all 5th and 6th graders, district benchmark assessments in grades 1-6, and the DRA for K-4.

Beginning with the 2008-2009 school year, the district decided to expand periodic assessments at the elementary level to substantially increase the amount of data available to teachers regarding student progress in reading and language arts. Rather than using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Learning Skills (DIBELS) only for at-risk students, teachers began administering it to all students K-2. This provided teachers with solid information about the particulars of their students' phonics mastery. Also for all elementary students, the district replaced the DRA with the BAS since the DRA provided only a single number to indicate a student's level of

performance. The BAS yields a much richer array of information. The administration of the DIBELS and the BAS has considerably enhanced the amount of student data available at the elementary level. And this information has enabled teachers to adjust their instruction to address the continuing learning needs the assessments reveal.

At the secondary level, the same expansion of formative information concerning student progress is not underway. Benchmark assessments do not reach into the secondary grades. The district does plan to expand the BAS through high school, but not in the immediate future. One important assessment initiative at the high school was the administration of the PSAT to all sophomores and juniors, paid for by the district. Following the PSAT administration, the high school brought in a consultant from the Educational Testing Service who helped examine individual student scores and determine which students had the ability to achieve in Advanced Placement courses. This led to an 88 percent increase in AP registration.

While the district is gradually increasing the amount of formative data available to teachers, it had also made considerable progress as far as housing the available data in district and making it easily and comprehensively available to teachers and administrators. At the time of the team's visit to the district, the data system was nearly up and running. The district is gradually adding the data that will make its data warehouse a powerful tool.

Special education programs and services have multiple strands and are well articulated K-12.

The district has strands of special education programming that form a continuum from kindergarten through grade 12. Inclusion, language-based, resource room, learning center, functional academic, and autism programs all accommodate students throughout their school careers. The district reported that 62.9 percent of its special needs students are fully included.

The school committee's policy IHB states, "The School Committee believes that most children with special needs can be educated in the regular classroom." This commitment to inclusion is reflected in the Vision 2010 plan. The district's vision is that "student achievement will exceed state and national accountability measures." A corresponding value is "instruction that is responsive to needs of diverse learners."

Since 2005 the district's planning documents have reflected a commitment to inclusion of special needs students within the regular classroom. At that time one of its goals was to communicate information about inclusion through participation in National Inclusive Schools Week. By 2009 the goals are clearly to increase achievement of the district's subgroups, specifically students with disabilities. MCAS scores of students with disabilities track higher than state scores for students with disabilities in grades five through eight in both mathematics and English language arts.

The programs create a seamless educational continuum throughout the district. Most students, regardless of their disability, are educated within the district for all of their schooling. Students in the inclusion and language-based programs are fully accommodated within the regular classroom. Students with more severe disabilities are taught in substantially separate classes for mathematics and English language arts, but are included in other classes such as science, social

studies, physical education, and performing arts. Many of the substantially separate programs, such as the functional academic and autism programs, routinely practice "reverse integration" in which non-disabled students work with students with disabilities within the setting.

The superintendent credited the district's success in meeting the needs of diverse learners with a clear, resounding philosophy—shared ownership, shared accountability, and shared responsibility. This philosophy was mirrored in classroom visits, staff interviews, and district practices. Forty-one classroom teachers hold dual licenses in special education. This greatly facilitates the inclusion of students with special needs.

As a result of the district's commitment to meeting the needs of diverse learners in the regular classroom the students in Agawam enjoy success in a wide variety of programming to support their learning.

The district's special education programs meet the needs of most of its students Pre-K through grade 12 within the district through a carefully constructed and coordinated series of programs spanning the range from full inclusion to substantially separate.

Agawam's language-based instructional model is exemplary.

Unlike many school districts' language-based programs, which are substantially separate, the language-based program in Agawam is conducted within the regular classroom at all levels K-12. Students are assigned to regular education classes, and the program is staffed with both regular and special educators and instructional aides. Special educators work collaboratively in a co-teaching model for mathematics and English language arts instruction. Instructional aides are assigned as required to the classrooms.

In the co-teaching model, both teachers teach lessons and supervise group work and other classroom activities. Students at all levels study the grade level curriculum. Modifications are made in such a manner that only the student for whom they are made is aware of them. So seamless is the interaction between the regular and special educators that disabled students cannot be distinguished by an observer from their non-disabled peers.

Although modifications have had to be made to the staffing pattern due to fiscal constraints, the program remains robust. Students with language-based disabilities benefit greatly from this program. They are universally included in all grade-level curricula and thus have full access to the curriculum based on the state frameworks. Without doubt this approach to language-disabled students and to inclusionary practices in general contributes to the higher than average achievement of special needs students in the district.

The language-based program is an exemplary program. It is a model that ensures language-disabled students full access to the curriculum.

The Agawam school district has an intricate system of safety nets for all its students.

The district has many programs and services for all students to promote their success. Academic supports for mathematics and literacy abound at the elementary level. Reading Recovery is located at the elementary schools. This one-to-one program for emerging readers has been successful in the Agawam district. Teachers reported that most students receiving this

instruction are successfully reintegrated into classroom literacy instruction. In 2008-2009 the district was piloting Response to Intervention (RTI) in elementary mathematics. In addition to these programmatic supports the district has established primary preventionists who provide direct instruction to students in early elementary in both reading and mathematics. The district has also established guidelines for appropriate allotments for instructional time, calling for a minimum of one hour per day for mathematics and two hours for literacy.

Across the elementary grades the district has implemented a behavior management program called Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS). This program emphasizes appropriate behavior in different school settings such as hallways, large instructional areas, and the cafeteria, as well as classrooms. Consequences are tiered and designed to change the offending behavior rather than mete out punishment.

The middle school has an intervention/enrichment block built into the schedule. During this time all students have the opportunity for extension and/or re-teaching with their classroom teachers.

The junior high school spent 2008-2009 studying and preparing to establish academic teaming in the 2009-2010 school year. Teaming is an effective organization to add a layer of support for students: evidence suggests that organizing students into smaller units that have common teachers is advantageous for students.

At Agawam High School students who score below 238 on the eighth-grade English language arts MCAS and below 224 in mathematics are scheduled into MCAS prep classes every other day. Students who do not pass both English and mathematics in ninth grade are not passed into the next grade. They are scheduled into the MCAS Development Program, which meets every day for a semester.

The high school has also begun a credit recovery program, NovaNet. In 2008-2009 12 students took a total of 20 courses. One of these students was a special needs student. Because of this opportunity students who were not eligible for graduation were able to complete their studies. As a result, the dropout rate dropped precipitously to less than 1.5 percent.

Other district programs to aid students include a pilot program with Springfield to support homeless students funded through Title I. The district's programs for behaviorally and emotionally disabled students, namely the District Learning Center and the Alternative Learning Program, have a behavior intervention policy.

As a result of this intricate web of programs the students in the Agawam Public Schools are assured support as well as universal access to the general curriculum. Aggregate student performance on the MCAS tracks above state performance.

The review team concludes that the Agawam school district provides its students with an impressive array of safety nets and supports to maximize student learning.

Human resources and professional development

The human resources support team works in concert to create a smooth flow of information that helps teachers with certification and entry into the professional work of the community, and then provides continued support for their professional growth.

The district does not have one person in charge of human resources (HR). Instead, it delegates responsibility to several members of the support staff, including the assistant to the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction; the assistant to the assistant superintendent for business and human resources; the executive assistant to the superintendent; and the information technology (IT) specialist. Each of these individuals understands her responsibilities and the responsibilities of the rest of the team. Together they create and maintain a network of information that is designed to serve the professional needs of all district personnel. In interviews, each person shared with the team what she does and how and when a task is handed off to a different support staff member. This oral flowchart demonstrated the depth of understanding each member has of the whole picture, not just her own piece.

There is an HR orientation in place for each new hire. New hires are not just handed documents and forms to sign. They spend at least an hour with the designated support staff person, who goes over pertinent information that covers everything from contractual and handbook policy highlights to health care choices. This same person maintains the database for personnel.

The IT specialist trains teachers in the use of technology and tries to make the process as easy as she can. When interviewed she reported that she had created a mini-manual for teachers that would help them trouble-shoot the new grading technology by anticipating problem areas.

The assistant to the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction maintains an extensive database for professional development and for certification purposes. This database keeps track of professional development for each employee and can be used to track what that individual needs for recertification. It can also track professional development by school. This office also helps employees with concerns or questions regarding their certification.

The "welcome back to school" letter sent to each employee before school opens in the fall contains a wealth of information for the employee. Included in this letter is information on salary, accrued sick time, extracurricular stipend if indicated, longevity, and the date on which the employee's certification is due to expire. This information is put together from the various databases created and kept by the HR team.

In order to develop consistency in hiring procedures, a small team of administrators is working to create a professional staff hiring policy. The draft document shared with the review team includes policies that, once institutionalized, will govern all steps of the hiring process, such as recruiting, screening, and interviewing. This team of administrators is also developing a bank of possible interview questions appropriate to job type.

In the judgment of the team, the HR needs of the district are met through a supportive network of information and resources created to assist district employees with all their professional questions. This systemized approach works to ensure consistency in HR practices.

The district has developed a new evaluation system focused on giving teachers more quality feedback through continuous conversation designed to improve instruction.

The Agawam Education Association (AEA) agreed during negotiations for the 2007-2010 contract that a new evaluation tool be developed. A committee of four AEA representatives and four administrators was formed to do this work. The Guide for the Evaluation of Teaching, the document that resulted from the committee work, is based on five major sources:

Council for Exceptional Children. 5th edition, 2003. *What Every Special Educator Must Know: Ethics, Standards, and Guidelines for Special Educators.* Arlington, VA: CEC Publications.

Marshall, Kim. 2005. It's Time to Rethink Teacher Supervision and Evaluation. *Phi Delta Kappan* 86: 727-35.

Marshall, Kim. "Teacher Evaluation Rubrics: The How and the Why" (January 2009)

MassPartners for Public Schools. "Teaching Matters: Strengthening Teacher Evaluation in Massachusetts." (Position paper, February 2002)
http://www.mespa.org/news/Teaching_Matters.pdf

Ribas, William B. 2002. *Teacher Evaluation that Works!!* Westwood, MA: Ribas Publications.

According to the superintendent, the old evaluation tool did not focus on instruction. The new document states that the purpose of evaluation is the improvement of the teaching and learning process. One principal interviewed said that the old evaluation tool gave no feedback, was very subjective, and did not push a teacher to work harder. The new procedures require that administrators "provide specific evidence of practices, behaviors and conditions that define the quality of teaching and professionalism." The new tool looks at four standards: planning and preparation; classroom management; delivery of instruction; and monitoring assessment and follow-up. Each standard is assessed on a rubric, with 4 indicating "highly effective," 3 indicating "effective," 2 indicating "needs improvement," and a rating of 1 indicating "does not meet standards." Each level of the rubric has 10 different evidence descriptors.

During interviews, administrators said that the process requires them to conduct shorter, more frequent walkthroughs, which offer opportunities to give more oral feedback to teachers. These opportunities for dialogue about classroom instruction are a strength of the new model. There is also a self-assessment for teachers to use to reflect on their own practice, although it is not a part of the summative evaluation.

The 2008-2009 school year served as the pilot year for the new process. During the year, feedback on the process was ongoing and changes made with the approval of the superintendent. The new tool has now been adopted, though in interviews administrators stated that it is a tool in progress. They also stated that the tool allows conversations to be about best practices: how students are learning and what they are learning.

The new evaluation tool was developed by a collaboration between the administration and the Agawam Education Association. It is based on research that includes research on special

education and has undergone a pilot year before its adoption. Both the AEA and the administrative team had the opportunity to use the tool and make changes for improvement. The administrative team feels confident that the focus on teaching and learning will improve classroom practice. The review team shares this confidence.

The district professional development is not a "one size fits all" model.

The district mission statement for professional development in its Professional Development Handbook reads: "The mission of professional development in the Agawam Public School System is to improve student learning by creating an environment that values, supports and nurtures continuous professional growth for all staff and administrators." The professional development is driven by district and school goals. There is a professional development committee in place, and the district provides professional development opportunities throughout the year. The district has three full professional development days, two days before school opens and one in November. In addition there are four half-days scheduled throughout the year. There is formal feedback after every professional development offering. According to central office and administrative interviews, the district encourages staff to initiate opportunities for professional growth. For approval to be given for teachers to attend conferences they need to give a rationale for attending, but they are also asked what they plan to do with their knowledge when they return. How can they share it?

The strength of the Agawam professional development program is the district recognition that all teachers are not in the same place professionally and that individual schools have individual professional development needs. This recognition has empowered both teachers and administrators to use professional development opportunities to solve problems. Professional learning communities and study groups have been used by staff to develop the expertise they need to improve student achievement. The junior high school teachers formed a study group to look into teaming, with the result that the school will be using a teaming model in 2009-2010. Administrators formed a PLC when they recognized that students needed to strengthen their writing skills. This same approach was used for redesign of a reading course.

Administrators interviewed stated that teachers are developing expertise by doing action research, interpreting the data, and deciding how district practices need to be modified. Principals have their own PLC that focuses on reviewing student work and assessments and analyzing test scores. They have also used the book *Results Now* by Mike Schmoker to help them increase teacher collaboration and use the expertise in their buildings. The high school and junior high school do not currently have PLCs.

When appropriate, the entire district is involved in training. The Second Step program is aimed at creating and maintaining a violence-free school culture, and so everyone was trained including parents. For the Second Step program, the district also uses the train-the-trainer model that has proven successful in other areas of professional development. Disability awareness and cultural competence training were provided systemwide and included bus drivers, cafeteria workers, crossing guards, and lunch monitors.

In interviews the team learned that the district approach is one of "baby steps," so that teachers can learn what they need and practice it. When they own the new knowledge they move onto the next step. This approach was used in training the staff on the new grading system.

The district has in place a professional development plan that focuses on district and school goals and is designed to improve instruction and meet the diverse needs of its staff.

Recommendations

Leadership

Continue to embed the superintendent's collaborative style of leadership at the school level to assist principals in collaborating with their teachers and building problem-solving teams.

The superintendent's collaborative style and her practice of delegating responsibility to administrators have fostered a sense of ownership and empowerment on the part of all administrators with respect to the shared goal of improving the education of all children. The review team recommends that the district continue to replicate this leadership style in schools.

Embedding this leadership model at the school level will increase the likelihood of a similar sense of ownership and empowerment on the part of teachers. Principals will benefit from collaborating with their teachers and building problem-solving teams. This can only lead toward further improving the learning experiences of all students.

Curriculum Delivery

Maintain the network of programs and supports in place for all students.

The Agawam school district has created an intricate system of programs and support services for its students. The district has dedicated special education programs K-12. Among the systemwide programs for special needs students are inclusion, language-based, functional academic, autism spectrum, and behaviorally/emotionally disabled programs. Because these programs are coordinated K-12, special needs students are provided a seamless educational experience in their home district.

In addition, the district has established multiple safety nets and supports for all students. Among these programs are Reading Recovery, RTI, primary preventionists, the enrichment/intervention block and MCAS prep classes.

These programs and services support all students in access to and success in the regular curriculum. As the district moves forward to increase student achievement it will be of paramount importance to maintain these programs and services.

As part of the district's continuing improvement of student achievement, raise the level of instructional rigor for all students.

The review team during its classroom observations frequently found, particularly at the secondary level, limited or no evidence of student engagement, a range of instructional techniques, students articulating their thinking and reasoning, and students working in groups. The presence of these activities is characteristic of classrooms with high levels of instructional rigor. In its commitment to the continuing improvement of student achievement, the district needs to improve the current quality of classroom instruction so that its students can reach higher achievement levels. This will involve professional development for teachers as well as raising the level of principal expectations for teacher performance. This is particularly true at the secondary level.

Consider expanding professional learning communities (PLCs) at the secondary level.

Professional learning communities have been successfully used to solve curriculum and instruction problems in the Agawam schools. Teachers have teamed to do action research and develop further expertise in reading and writing instruction. They have applied the knowledge gained to improving student achievement in both these areas. Principals have used the PLC model to enhance their professional skill. The previous success of PLCs should encourage the district to expand this model at the secondary level, where it might prove particularly helpful to address some of the instructional issues raised in this report.

Appendix A: Differentiated Needs Review Team Members

The review of the Agawam Public Schools was conducted from June 8-June 11, 2009, by the following team of educators, independent consultants to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Dr. William Contreras, Leadership

Melanie Gallo, Human Resources and Professional Development

Dr. Magdalene Giffune, Special Education

Patricia Williams, Curriculum Delivery, Site Coordinator

Appendix B: Differentiated Needs Review Activities and Schedule

Differentiated Needs Review Activities

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

- o The review team conducted interviews and focus groups with the following representatives from the Agawam Public Schools central office administration: superintendent, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, assistant superintendent for business/human resources, supervisor of special services, business staff, secretarial staff.
    - o The review team visited the following schools in the Agawam Public Schools: Agawam ECC (PK), Clifford M. Granger (K-04), Benjamin J. Phelps (K-04), Robinson Park (K-04), James Clark (K-04), Agawam Middle School (05-06), Agawam Junior High School (07-08), Agawam High School (09-12).
    - o During school visits, the review team conducted interviews with school principals, teachers, curriculum specialists for ELA and mathematics, primary preventionists, and high school/junior high department chairs. The review team conducted 64 classroom visits for different grade levels and subjects across the 8 schools visited.
- o The review team reviewed the following documents provided by the Department
    - o District profile data
    - o Latest Coordinated Program Review Report
    - o Staff contracts
    - o Reports on licensure and highly qualified status
    - o Long-term enrollment trends
    - o End-of-year financial report for the district for 2008
    - o List of the district's federal and state grants
    - o Municipal profile
- o The review team reviewed the following documents at the district and school levels:
    - o Organization chart
    - o "Vision 2010" strategic plan
    - o District Improvement Plan
    - o School Improvement Plans
    - o School Committee Policy Manual
    - o Curriculum Guides
    - o High School Program of Studies
    - o Calendar of Formative and Summative Assessments

- o Copies of data analyses/reports used in schools
- o Descriptions of Student Support Programs
- o Program Evaluations
- o Student and Family Handbooks
- o Faculty Handbook
- o Professional Development Program/Schedule/Courses
- o Teacher Planning Time/Meeting Schedules
- o Teacher Evaluation Tool
- o Classroom Observation Tools/Learning Walk Tools
- o Job Descriptions (for central office and school administrators and instructional staff)
- o Principal Evaluations
- o Description of Pre-Referral Process
- o School Schedules
- o Sample Faculty Improvement Plan
- o Special Education Parent Survey
- o EQA Report
- o NEASC Report
- o Site Visit Schedule

Review Schedule

On this page and the next is the schedule for the onsite portion of the differentiated needs review of the Agawam Public Schools, conducted from June 8-June 11, 2009.

Site Visit Calendar			Sun Jun 7 – Wed Jun 10, 2009 (Eastern Time)
Sunday 6/7	**Monday 6/8**	**Tuesday 6/9**	**Wednesday 6/10**

Time	Sunday 6/7	Monday 6/8	Tuesday 6/9	Wednesday 6/10
6am				
7am				
8am		Team Arrival @ Superintendent's / Introductory Meeting with District Leaders @	Team Meeting and Document Review @ Superintendent's Conference Room	School Visits Agawam High School @
9am		Interview with Assistant Superintendent for C&I @ Assistant / Interview with Superintendent @ Superintendent's Office 8:30am - 9:45am	Interview with Superindent @ Superintendent's Office 8:30am - 9:45am / Interview with K-8 Curriculum Team @ Assistant Superintendent for C&I's Office	Agawam High School 7:30am - 2pm / School Visit Clark @ Clark School 8:30am - 11:30am / School Visit Granger @ Granger School 8:30am - 11:30am
10am		Interview with Special Education Director @ Special Education / Interview with CFO and key team members @ Assistant	Interview with Human Resources Director and key team members and Document Review @ Central Office and Superintendent's Conference Room 10am - 11:15am	
11am				
12pm		Lunch @ Superintendent's Conference Room 11:30am - 12:30pm	Lunch @ Superintendent's Conference Room 11:30am - 12:30pm	School Visit Phelps @ Phelps School 11:45am - 2:45pm / School Visit Robinson Park @ Robinson Park School 11:45am - 2:45pm
1pm		Interview with Professional Development Director and key team members and Document Review @	Interview with Title I, McKinney Vento, Student Support, ELL Directors and Document Review @ Central Office 12:30pm - 1:30pm	
2pm		Interview with Elementary and Secondary / Interview with Middle School / Interview with ECC Director @ Central	Interview with 9-12 Department Heads @ / Interview with Jr. High Principal @ / Interview with High School Principal @	
3pm		Team Meeting @ Superintendent's Conference Room 3pm - 4pm	Team Meeting @ Superintendent's Conference Room 3pm - 4pm	Teacher Focus Group and Parent Focus Group @ Teacher focus Group–Jr. High Cafeteria/Parent Focus Group– Robinson Park Library
4pm				
5pm				

	Thursday 6/11	Friday 6/12	Saturday 6/13
7am			
8am			
9am	**School Visit Jr.High School @ Agawam Jr. High School** 8:15am - 11:15am **School Visit Middle School @ Agawam Middle School** 8:15am - 11:15am		
10am			
11am			
12pm	**Lunch @ Superintendent's Conference Room** 11:30am - 12:30pm		
1pm	**Team Meeting @ Superintendent's Conference Room** 12:30pm - 1:15pm		
2pm	**Team Meeting @ Superintendent's Conference Room** 1:30pm - 3:45pm		
3pm			
4pm	**Final Meeting with District Leaders @ Superintendent's Office** 4pm - 5pm		
5pm			
6pm			