# How Is Your School District Performing?





A look at Amherst Regional Public Schools

2005-2007

E D U C A T I O N A L M A N A G E M E N T A U D I T C O U N C I L Office of Educational Quality and Accountability

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

The Office of Educational Quality and Accountability would like to acknowledge the professional cooperation extended to the audit team by the Massachusetts Department of Education; the superintendent of the Amherst Regional Public Schools, Dr. Edward Costa; the school department staff; and the town officials of Amherst Regional.

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#### Putting the Data in Perspective

# INTRODUCTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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

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

In October 2007, the EQA conducted an independent examination of the Amherst Regional Public Schools for the period of 2005-2007. The EQA analyzed Amherst Regional students' performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests and identified how students in general and in subgroups were performing. The EQA then examined critical factors that affected student performance in six major areas: lead-ership, governance, and communication; curriculum and instruction; assessment and program evaluation; human resource management and professional development; access, participation, and student academic support; and financial and asset management effectiveness and efficiency.

The review was based on documents supplied by the Amherst Regional Public Schools and the Massachusetts Department of Education; correspondence sent prior to the EOA team's site visit; interviews with representatives from the school committee, the district leadership team, school administrators, and teachers; numerous classroom observations; and additional documents submitted while the EOA team visited the district. The report does not take into account documents, revised data, or events that may have occurred after June 2007. However, district leaders were invited to provide more current information.

The Amherst Regional Public Schools have three school committees, and consist of the four elementary schools located in Amherst, another elementary school located in Pelham, and middle and high schools located in Amherst. The superintendent in office at the time of the EQA review completed four years in the district as of June 2007. Prior to his arrival, no districtwide curriculum documents existed, and each school functioned as a separate entity rather than as part of a unified system. Since FY 2006, the district has developed and implemented K-12 curriculum documents. While the superintendent supports standards-based teaching and learning, he does not believe that "all [teachers] must be on the same page everyday" and believes teachers should be able to maintain autonomy.



# DISTRICT

Population: 39,750 Median family income: Amherst - \$61,237, Pelham - \$71,667 Shutesbury - \$65,521, Leverett - \$73,333 Largest sources of employment: educational, health, and social services Local government: Amherst - Select Board/Town Manager/Representative Town Meeting; Pelham - Select Board/Open Town Meeting; Leverett and Shutesbury -Select Board/Administrative Assistant/Open Town Meeting

# SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

School committee members: Amherst - 5, Pelham - 3, Regional - 9 Number of schools: 7 Student-teacher ratio: 11.5 to 1 Per Pupil Expenditures: \$14,470 Student enrollment: Total enrollment 3,430 White 62.6% Hispanic 12.1% Asian 10.6% African-American 7.7% Native American 0.3% Multi-race non Hispanic 10.0% Limited English proficient (LEP) 7.0% Low income 21.0% Special education 18.0%

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

#### EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT AUDIT COUNCIL ACTION

After reviewing this report, the Educational Management Audit Council voted to accept its findings at its meeting on March 7, 2008.

The district's mission, as expressed in the District Improvement Plan (DIP) and other documents, is "Becoming a Multicultural School System (BAMSS)." The district's slogan, referred to in many interviews, is "Every Student. Every Day." The district leadership expected that every child would graduate and have the option to attend college. In order to achieve this goal, the district acknowledged the need to narrow the performance gap between its student subgroups and its regular education students. School Improvement Plans (SIPs) generally aligned with the District Improvement Plan, and the superintendent affirmed that all principals were "invested in the goals of the DIP," which principals affirmed in interviews.

The district recognized that reducing the achievement gap required analysis of data, and the district continued to improve in this area during the review period. The district paid more attention to individual student data and the development of Individual Student Success Plans (ISSPs). The Massachusetts Department of Education selected the district to pilot its Educational Data Warehouse project, through which districts will be able to more efficiently manage and analyze student information. In FY 2004, the reduction in Chapter 70 aid had caused the district to cut programs, decrease funding for professional development, eliminate positions, increase class size, and reduce supplies and textbooks. In FY 2007, the district was able to provide additional supports and resources to the specific schools that were responsible for the district's identification as 'in need of improvement' under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law to more effectively meet the needs of those schools' student subgroups.

Some school committee members acknowledged that not until they hired the current superintendent did they realize that they "didn't know much about schools" and that they were "stuck in the 70s." They even cited the fact that there was resistance to the MCAS tests by the staff, the community, and the school committee, but this has changed with the recognition that the students in Amherst Regional must meet the state's standards, and they welcome that the district now has goals in a District Improvement Plan.

The superintendent believes that much of what is happening in the district is "all new territory" but that it is "all about kids" and that the district will realize its goal of "Every Student. Every Day." by closing the achievement gap between students in subgroups and regular education students.

# Recommendations

As a result of its examination, the EQA arrived at recommendations for the district, which were presented to the superintendent subsequent to the examination. They are as follows.

- Include the district's mission statement, which is a stand-alone document, in the District Improvement Plan and the School Improvement Plans (SIPs), and standardize the format of the SIPs.
- Address the issues noted in the long-range facilities planning study of the Amherst elementary schools completed by the New England School Development Council (NESDEC) in September 2007.
- Develop and implement a long-range capital plan that clearly and accurately reflects the district's future capital development and improvement needs.
- Adopt and implement a district policy on the budget process.

#### MCAS Performance at a Glance, 2007

#### HOW DID STUDENTS PERFORM?

# **Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment** System (MCAS) Test Results

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

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

			DISTRICT		STATE	
English Language Arts Proficiency Index			93		86	
Math Proficiency Index			86		76	
Performance Rating						
Very High	High	Moderate	Low	Very Low	Critically Low	

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

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

On the 2007 MCAS tests in ELA, math, and STE, eligible students in Amherst Regional participated at levels that met or exceeded the state's 95 percent requirement.

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

On average, over four-fifths of the students in Amherst Regional Public Schools attained proficiency in English language arts (ELA) on the 2007 MCAS tests, over two-thirds of Amherst Regional students attained proficiency in math, and slightly more than three-fifths attained proficiency in science and technology/engineering (STE). Ninety-six percent of the Class of 2007 attained a Competency Determination.

- Amherst Regional's ELA proficiency index on the 2007 MCAS tests was 93 proficiency index (PI) points. This result-ed in a proficiency gap, the difference between its proficiency index and the target of 100, of seven PI points, seven points narrower than the state's average proficiency gap in ELA. This gap would require an average improvement in performance of one PI point annually to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP).
- In 2007, Amherst Regional's math proficiency index on the MCAS tests was 86 PI points, resulting in a proficiency gap of 14 Pl points, 10 points narrower than the state's average proficiency gap in math. This gap would require an average improvement of two PI points per year to achieve AYP.
- Amherst Regional's STE proficiency index in 2007 was 83 PI points, resulting in a proficiency gap of 17 PI points, 11 points narrower than that statewide.



#### AMHERST REGIONAL SCORES COMPARED TO STATE AVERAGES, 2007

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

Between 2004 and 2007, Amherst Regional's MCAS performance showed improvement in English language arts, in math, and in science and technology/engineering.

- Over the three-year period 2004-2007, ELA performance in Amherst Regional improved at an average of one PI point annually. This resulted in an improvement rate, or a closing of the proficiency gap, of 29 percent, a rate equal to that required to achieve AYP. The percentage of students attaining proficiency in ELA increased from 74 percent in 2004 to 79 percent in 2007.
- Math performance in Amherst Regional showed more improvement over this period, at an average of two PI points annually. This resulted in an improvement rate of 32 percent, a rate greater than that required to achieve AYP. The percentage of students attaining proficiency in math rose from 63 percent in 2004 to 72 percent in 2007.
- Between 2004 and 2007, STE performance in Amherst Regional also improved at an average of two PI points annually, resulting in a narrowing of the proficiency gap by 24 percent. The percentage of students attaining proficiency in STE increased from 54 percent in 2004 to 61 percent in 2007.



# AMHERST REGIONAL ELA SCORES COMPARED TO MATH SCORES

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

MCAS performance in 2007 varied considerably among subgroups of Amherst Regional students. Of the nine measurable subgroups in Amherst Regional, the gap in performance between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups was 21 PI points in ELA and 28 PI points in math (regular education students, students with disabilities, respectively).

- The proficiency gaps in Amherst Regional in 2007 in both ELA and math were wider than the district average for students with disabilities, limited English proficient (LEP) students, Hispanic students, African-American students, and low-income students (those participating in the free or reduced-cost lunch program).
- The proficiency gaps in ELA and math were narrower than the district average for regular education students, White students, and non low-income students.
- Asian students performed below the district average in ELA and above the district average in math in 2007.

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

In Amherst Regional, the performance gap between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups in ELA narrowed from 30 PI points in 2004 to 23 PI points in 2007, and the performance gap between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups in math narrowed from 33 to 28 PI points over this period.

- All student subgroups had improved performance in ELA between 2004 and 2007. The most improved subgroups in ELA were limited English proficient students and Hispanic students.
- In math, the performance of all student subgroups in Amherst Regional with the exception of Asian students improved between 2004 and 2007. The most improved subgroups in math were Hispanic students and students with disabilities.



#### AMHERST REGIONAL STUDENTS' IMPROVEMENT OVER TIME, COMPARED TO STATE AVERAGES

# Performance at a Glance

Management Quality Index

# WHAT FACTORS DRIVE STUDENT PER-FORMANCE?

# **Overall District Management**

To understand better the factors affecting student scores on the MCAS tests, the EQA analyzes district performance on 72 indicators in six areas: leadership, governance, and communication; curriculum and instruction; assessment and program evaluation; human resource management and professional development; access, participation, and student academic support; and financial and asset management effectiveness and efficiency. Taken together, these factors are a measure of the effectiveness – or quality – of a district's management system. A score of 100 percent on the Management

The Management Quality Index is a weighted average of the district's performance on 72 indicators that measure the effectiveness of a district's management system. Amherst Regional received the following rating:

# Performance Rating:



Quality Index (MQI) means that the district meets the standard and performed at a satisfactory level on all indicators. However, it does not mean the district was perfect.

In 2007, Amherst Regional received an overall MQI score of 'Strong' (80.6 percent). The district performed best on the Access, Participation, and Student Academic Support standard, scoring 'Strong'. It was rated 'Poor' on the Human Resource Management and Professional Development standard. Given these ratings, the district is performing better than expected on the MCAS tests. During the review period, student performance improved slightly in ELA and showed greater improvement in math. On the following pages, we take a closer look at the district's performance in each of the six standards, as well as the fidelity of implementation of the district's goals, plans, and expectations.

# **Fidelity of Implementation**

A characteristic of effective educational organizations (schools and districts) is the strong alignment of goals, plans, processes, and actions—from the policy makers to the classroom. Therefore, the EQA has developed a protocol for assessing the alignment of these elements. The *fidelity of implementation* is an indicator of the consistency of execution of a district's expectations: its stated goals, plans, curricula, and various processes, down to the level of instruction. When these various components are consistent and highly aligned, a high level of fidelity of implementation exists. When these are inconsistent and poorly aligned, a low or poor level of fidelity of implementation exists. The classroom observation protocol is designed to collect evidence of district and school goals, plans, and expectations in the instructional setting.

Amherst Regional district and school leaders had a clearly understood mission of providing "all students with a high quality education that enables them to be contributing members of a multiethnic, multicultural pluralistic society," expressed as the mantra "Every Student. Every Day." The District Improvement Plan defined this goal through specific objectives, such as: addressing the fundamental teaching and learning needs of the schools that caused the district to be identified as in need of improvement; analyzing a variety of aggregated and disaggregated data in order to fully assess student learning needs; continuing the development of curriculum guides in ELA, math, and science aligned to the state frameworks; and providing the professional development needed to implement the district's improvement objectives.



The district ensured fidelity of implementation by encouraging the examination of disaggregated student achievement data, training all principals in TestWiz, and providing opportunities for teachers to become more adept at analyzing student data. Furthermore, walk-throughs by principals were instrumental in providing informal information regarding the quality of instruction in the schools.

The EQA team interviewed the superintendent, principals, and teachers representing all levels to determine whether the district aligned curriculum development, mandatory professional development, and student assessment to ensure a joint focus on the accomplishment of district priorities. Interviewees across all levels responded with frequent references to the district's mantra. Principals elaborated that the means to implement this was having high expectations for students and student achievement, and using inclusion classrooms and differentiated learning strategies to close the achievement gaps among subgroups. They said that teachers needed to continue aligning the curriculum with the state frameworks.

All teachers interviewed were aware that the district's priority was to close the gap in student achievement among the subgroups. They expressed their belief that every child has the potential to become a successful student. Most teachers said that principals monitored fidelity of implementation using walk-throughs, but this was not the case for all teachers, and some teachers expressed their belief that the district's evaluation system was a "big weakness."

In its observations of 42 randomly selected classrooms in all the district schools, the EQA team observed that the fidelity of implementation of district and school goals varied from level to level, and was generally strongest at the elementary level and weakest at the high school level. Examiners found that "[t]he teacher implements instructional strategies that reflect school and/or district priorities" in 94 percent of the classrooms observed at the elementary level, 70 percent at the middle school level, and 53 percent at the high school level. Regarding the district's goal of closing the achievement gaps among all subgroups, especially between the English language learner (ELL) students and regular education students, the examiners found that "[t]he teacher incorporates ELA language acquisition and ELA language development in subject area instruction" in 88 percent of the classrooms observed at the elementary level, 70 percent at the middle school level, and just 13 percent at the high school level. Furthermore, examiners found evidence of high expectations in 85 percent of the classrooms observed at the middle school level, and 52 percent at the high school level.

#### Performance at a Glance

# Leadership, Governance, and Communication

Ultimately, the success or failure of district leadership was determined by how well all students performed. Amherst Regional Pubic Schools is marked by student achievement that was 'Very High' in English language arts (ELA) and 'High' in math, based on 2007 MCAS test results.

# Leadership and Communication

During the examination period, the Amherst Regional Public Schools were served by three separate school committees and a superintendent who had completed four years in the district as of June 2007. School committee members acknowledged that prior to the arrival of current superintendent, schools in the district were managed at the building level, with curricula that were not standardized and aligned across grades K-12.

A new direction emerged in the district during the review period, in response to national and state standards, particularly those related to the Massachusetts Education Reform Act. A district plan was developed that highlighted goals regarding the improvement of achievement for all student subgroup populations, equity for all district students, data analysis and decision-making, and development of curriculum guides in ELA, math, and science/technology aligned with the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks. The district provided leadership in the standardization of district curricula, which resulted in the adoption of a newly aligned K-6 math program and partial completion of an aligned K-6 ELA curriculum guide.

The district's policy manual indicated that the three school committees governing the district have the dual responsibilities of meeting statutory requirements pertaining to public education and fulfilling citizens' expectations for the education of the community's youth. School committee members expressed full knowledge of their responsibilities under the Education Reform Act of 1993.

The district worked with a number of agencies and programs to provide support services to at-risk students and economically disadvantaged families. The district consolidated the student services office to coordinate services centrally for English language learning, special education, discipline, health, and safety.

# **Ratings on Performance Indicators**

In this area, districts are rated on 14 indicators. Amherst Regional received the following ratings:



#### Area of Strength

- To address national and state standards for teaching and learning, Amherst Regional Public Schools evolved from offering building-based curricula to developing standardized, aligned curricula across grades K-12.
- Under the direction of the current superintendent, the district created and disseminated standardized procedures for safety and security for all district schools.
- The district implemented data analysis and data warehouse training for its administrators to become more proficient in data-driven decision making.
- The goals in the aligned DIP and SIPs were presented and discussed at open school committee meetings twice annually.
- Stakeholders in the district participated as search committee members in the screening process to fill administrative vacancies.
- In addition to striving to meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the district established a goal to prepare all students for college whether or not they planned to attend.

#### Area for Improvement

Not all administrators and principals were evaluated on an annual basis to assess their job performance. Only 46 percent of the administrative personnel files reviewed contained evaluations, and most of the evaluations that did exist were not timely.

HOW IS YOUR SCHOOL DISTRICT PERFORMING?

The District Improvement Plan (DIP) and School Improvement Plans (SIPs) were presented and discussed at school committee meetings twice annually, which were aired on local cable access television for public viewing. The district's website, open school committee meetings, coverage by local cable television and newspapers, annual reports, and school council meetings were cited as examples of ways in which the district communicated with its stakeholders.

# Planning and Governance

Effective planning to address student achievement was evident in the district. School Improvement Plans were developed for all schools, with school goals aligned with district goals and priorities. The district established numerous district goals with accompanying narrative and statements that prioritized efforts to improve student achievement for the aggregate student population and all student subgroups. These goals promoted quality instruction, raised academic expectations for all students, and were intended to meet NCLB proficiency requirements by 2014. District planning efforts also targeted the goal of making AYP in all schools.

District administrators and school committee members described the budget process developed by the superintendent as comprehensive and transparent. Since the arrival of the present superintendent, allocations for instructional materials, supplies, and teaching resources were made on a per pupil basis, while other funding was allocated based on student needs. School committee members indicated that budget discussions and deliberations frequently focused on the academic preparation of all students for college, equity for all students, making adequate yearly progress (AYP), and having aligned K-12 curricula. Cost-effective in-district programs for special needs students were developed as an alternative to out-of-district placements.

The district's commitment to implementing data analysis practices to become more data-driven in its decisionmaking was central to its governance and planning processes. School principals and teachers indicated that over the past two years the schools have become more data conscious. The administration presented a model to assist district administrators and teachers in helping all students achieve proficiency and in gathering and interpreting data. The model suggested that teachers and instructional support staff members working together should be able to state: 1) we know our students and how each learns; 2) we know what to teach and how to teach it; 3) we know if each student is learning it; and 4) we know what to do if s/he did not learn it.

The superintendent delegated program and management leadership to district and school administrators. Principals were the designated instructional leaders for their respective schools, assisted by district curriculum directors and department heads. A stated district priority was to hire the most capable administrators and hold them responsible.

# **Curriculum and Instruction**

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

# Aligned Curricula

Developing and aligning curricula became a priority in the Amherst Regional Public Schools under the direction of the current superintendent. Middle and high school teachers who taught courses in common used professional development time to review and revise their curricula. The elementary schools, previously guided by curriculum guidelines written in 1995, produced a revised elementary English language arts curriculum that listed the content and skills to be addressed, but allowed teachers some autonomy in its implementation.

The district had few common expectations for the required components of a curriculum. The result was that within and across content areas and grade levels, the curriculum content varied widely. The recent curriculum development did lead to some increased horizontal alignment across grade levels and courses. At the same time, however, much of this curriculum development was so recent that some curricula were being implemented for the first time in 2007-2008, after the period under review. Therefore, the district did not yet have an established process for the regular and timely review and revision of its curricula. The elementary math curriculum, however, had been in place for several years and was scheduled for revision at the close of 2007-2008, after a full year of implementation of the new Investigations program.

Assessments were the curriculum component yet to be developed. At the time of the site visit, the math curriculum had beginning and end of year summative assessments. The ELA curriculum included writing prompts and other standardized assessments at the elementary level only. Neither math nor ELA curriculum documentation contained formative assessments. The result was that teachers and principals did not have either periodic or final data as to the extent of students' mastery of the curriculum objectives.

# Performance at a Glance

# **Ratings on Performance Indicators**

In this area, districts are rated on 11 indicators. Amherst Regional received the following ratings:



# Area of Strength

- Curriculum writers in the district sought to strike a balance between specifying the required objectives and allowing teachers freedom in the implementation of the curriculum.
- In FY 2007, the district developed curriculum overviews for all grades and courses in the tested content areas.
- Principals and teachers provided additional instructional time to support students who were unsuccessful on MCAS tests.

# Areas for Improvement

- With few common curriculum assessments, teachers across grades, schools, and courses lacked the diagnostic information that might drive instructional adjustments and measure the extent to which they had successfully addressed the written curriculum.
- Although the superintendent and principals had effectively communicated the district's vision, due to the district's lack of focus on supervision, administrators did not necessarily equip teachers with instructional strategies to realize this vision.
- Few middle and high school classrooms had computers available for student use within the classroom. Instead, teachers could bring whole classes to the schools' computer labs.

Principals agreed they were the curriculum leaders in their buildings, and several also reported that they delegated some of that leadership authority. At the elementary level, principals delegated authority to schoolbased reading teachers in ELA. At the middle school, the principal delegated responsibility to departmental curriculum leaders. At the high school, the principal delegated authority to content area department heads. However, with little assessment information, principals were unable to monitor either students' achievement of the curriculum objectives or teachers' effectiveness in delivery of the curriculum. They tended instead to rely generally upon the overall skill of the teachers.

# **Effective Instruction**

During the review period, the district trained a large percentage of its teachers in instructional strategies appropriate for English language learners. At the same time, the district did little to provide teachers with strategies for teaching in an inclusive classroom or for differentiating instruction.

Principals and teachers in the district had internalized the concept of holding high expectations for students. However, these high expectations did not appear to be the result of active monitoring of classroom instruction by administrators but rather from repeated reminders from the superintendent to attend to "Every Student. Every Day." The need to hold high expectations for all students became clear to administrators and teachers during the period under review as they began to analyze MCAS scores and recognized the achievement gap between students in the aggregate and those in subgroups. EQA examiners, however, found little evidence that administrators played an active supervisory role in promoting specific, effective instructional strategies in classrooms.

Each of the district's schools met the state time on learning requirements as long as the middle and high schools counted time students spent in directed study. The elementary schools did not have a prescribed amount of time for ELA and math instruction, but each school allocated sufficient time to these areas. At the middle school, each student took one period each of ELA and math. Those in need of remediation, as indicated by MCAS test scores, were scheduled into an additional period of ELA known as Reading/Writing Workshop, or an additional period of math known as Math Plus. The high school offered study centers during the directed study period in which students struggling on MCAS tests were tutored by paraprofessionals with an academic background.

While each math class had a set of graphing calculators and examiners found new LCD projectors in use in some classrooms, based on observations of 42 randomly selected classrooms, EQA examiners found that classrooms had a relatively small number of computers available for student use (an average of 9.3 students per computer). For the most part, teachers brought students to computer labs when they wanted to use technology as a tool for instruction.

# Performance at a Glance

# Assessment and Program Evaluation

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

# Student Assessment

Although the Amherst Regional Public Schools had no formal policy regarding student assessment, the district remained committed to improving its analysis of student assessment data. Interviewees said that the schools had become more "data conscious" during the past two years, and in order to close the achievement gap among student subgroups the superintendent included in the District Improvement Plan for 2006-2007 the following statement: "We need to understand how to 'dig down' into available data, mining MCAS down to specific item analysis as well as patterns of performance measured according to state standards." Interviewees acknowledged that data analysis had improved since the superintendent arrived five years prior to the EQA examination.

The district had no specific person assigned to review data, but district leadership and principals reviewed the MCAS data at administrator meetings. Principals and support staff members then presented the data at staff meetings. Further analysis occurred during grade-level meetings as well as at department meetings. There were no data analysis teams at the building level but this remains a district goal. Special education and ELL staff members examined individual student data in an effort to improve achievement of students in these subgroups. Most principals had already received training in the use of TestWiz, and interviewees added that many staff members had an affinity for

# **Ratings on Performance Indicators**

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



#### Areas of Strength

- The Department of Education chose the district to pilot the Educational Data Warehouse project, and the district is optimistic regarding its potential to improve management and analysis of a variety of data.
- The district used many methods to inform the community regarding student achievement.
- During the review period, the district developed a comprehensive plan for evaluating its math program.

# Areas for Improvement

- The district did not have a formal policy regarding the assessment of student achievement, although the District Improvement Plan for 2006-2007 included references to the need for improvement in analyzing the performance of the district's student subgroups.
- Although the district had developed local benchmarks they were not effective in measuring student achievement as they did not contain measurable outcomes.

data analysis and helped others at the building level. The Department of Education chose the district to pilot its Educational Data Warehouse project, and the district is enthusiastic regarding this program's ability to help it organize and analyze a variety of data.

The district's MCAS test participation rates were high for regular education students, but lower for the population of international students, who enter and leave the district with more frequency. Early in the year, schools were proactive in providing parents with the MCAS test dates as well as providing Hispanic parents information in Spanish. The district has not prepared a comprehensive annual report since 2003-2004, which the University of Massachusetts at Amherst had done, but the superintendent said it was too expensive to produce on a yearly basis. However, the superintendent provided the MCAS test results to the school committees and posted them on the district's website. Additionally, schools sent home reports of individual students' MCAS test performance.

The district mandated the use of two benchmarking assessments for its students. A math assessment was administered at the beginning and end of the year. Teachers said the information gained from the first administration provided them with diagnostic information, and the end of year assessment was beneficial for determining growth. A writing prompt was also administered, but there were no requirements that receiving teachers view student writing folders. The only formal summative assessment used in the district was the MCAS tests, and the district used the results to judge the effectiveness of some of its programs. Benchmarks were in place for each of the curriculum guides that the district developed, but a review of them showed that they had limited measurable outcomes. Some of the assessments that the district's schools used included the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI), the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), and the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS). The district assessed ELL students with the Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral (MELA-O) as well as the Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA). The district did not use student assessment results to assign staff or determine staffing allocations.

# **Program Evaluation**

The district used MCAS test results to measure the effectiveness of some district programs. One result of this practice was that MCAS test data of ELL students were used as the basis for determining the need to provide training for classroom teachers in the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP). In addition, a review of the district's MCAS data resulted in a change in its Title I program. During the 2005-2006 school year, the district provided Title I services at both the middle and high schools. A review of the data showed a need for Title I services at the elementary level. Funding was then directed toward the Crocker Farm and Mark's Meadow elementary schools and was discontinued at the middle and high schools.

The district developed a comprehensive evaluation document with a detailed agenda for evaluating its math program. The evaluation was carried out during the 2006-2007 school year, and committees involved in reporting the results of the evaluation were meeting at the time of the EQA visit. In addition, prior to the review period, Amherst College students undertook extensive and comprehensive evaluations of two of the district's programs, the MCAS remediation program and the school to work program.

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# Human Resource Management and Professional Development

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

# Hiring, Certification, and Staff Deployment

District recruitment practices were extensive and included the use of an online recruiting service, SchoolSpring, that made the recruitment process more efficient and accessible for administrators, allowed for a greater geographical recruitment effort, and, at a fee of two dollars per student, was perceived as cost effective. Applicants were required to complete a multicultural essay component that was consistent with the district's focus on inclusion, appreciation of diversity, and multiculturalism. Extensive minority staff recruiting efforts included presence at job fairs in New York City and Atlanta, and advertising efforts in Denver and Cleveland. Other efforts included advertising in the Asian publication Sampam, the Amsterdam News, and The Boston-Bay State Banner. Online recruitment efforts also included advertising through the National Association of Secondary Schools Principals (NASSP), the National Employment Minority Network (NEMNET), and the Massachusetts Association of School Personnel Administrators (MASPA).

Twenty-six of the district's 337 teachers and eight of the district's 25 administrators did not hold appropriate Massachusetts certification for their positions, although some were working toward appropriate licensure. The superintendent did not hold Massachusetts certification as superintendent of schools but had

## Performance at a Glance

# **Ratings on Performance Indicators**

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



#### Areas of Strength

- The district's focus on inclusion and its appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism were supported by its widespread recruitment efforts to secure minority staffing.
- Trainings in lockdown procedures were conducted at the high school, and bomb threat protocols were in place in all schools.

#### Areas for Improvement

- The superintendent, two principals, and six of the 25 district administrators were not licensed for the positions that they held at the time of the examination.
- The professional development budget decreased during the review period, overly relied on grants, and was perceived as focused primarily on literacy training.
- Of the 26 administrator personnel folders reviewed, only three contained timely evaluations and 12 contained no evaluations. Of the 74 teacher files reviewed, only 18 contained timely evaluations and 13 contained no evaluations.

scheduled an appointment to take the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL). The district did not initiate strict enforcement of the need for its entire professional staff to hold appropriate certification until June 2007. At that point, staff members were notified by the superintendent that if appropriate certification was not in place by August 2008, they would be terminated from employment in the district.

Professional development needs were identified in generating the SIPs, and districtwide trainings were offered in multiculturalism, sexual harassment, anti-bias behavior, and equity. While tuition reimbursements were not offered for college courses taken, overall expenditures for professional development were perceived as adequate. The district's professional development program was described as "ad hoc" by interviewees rather than a formalized process, one that reflected the community and the individuality of the districts' schools. Mandatory professional development in K-8 mathematics, ELA, and social justice occurred on the day before school started and during the two curriculum days scheduled annually. Ten building-based, secondary, two-hour late start and 10 elementary school release days were provided under the direction of the district's principals.

Evaluation of professional development offerings was largely qualitative, with much of the evaluation coming from teachers' ratings of professional development trainings. Quantitative results, such as improved student reading scores and attendance at professional development offerings, were cited as other means of evaluation of professional development trainings. Teachers' association representatives indicated that while pedagogy appeared to be sufficiently covered, content offerings were minimal, particularly for those teachers not in major content areas (e.g., French, physical education). Teacher evaluations largely informed their individual professional development plans (IPDPs).

# **Evaluation**

Only 12 percent of administrator and 24 percent of teacher evaluations reviewed by EQA examiners were timely. Contrary to statute, which requires annual evaluations for administrators, the principals' contract document indicated that the principals were to be evaluated annually by the superintendent during the first three years of employment, and at least every other year thereafter. Prior to the examiners' visit, the superintendent and human resources director had arranged for legal review of all non-unit administrator contract language. Administrator compensation and continued employment were not linked to improved student performance. The superintendent's evaluations were timely, met the components of education reform, and were instructive in that they contained specific recommendations for improvement. A review of the superintendent's contract and evaluation did not, however, reveal a link between his compensation and continued employment to effectiveness or improvement in student performance.

Of the 74 teacher files reviewed, only 18 contained timely evaluations and 13 did not contain any evaluations at all. Supervision strategies that had been implemented included grade-level meetings, timeline checks, walk-throughs (with written or verbal feedback), and staff and department meetings.

# Access, Participation, and Student Academic Support

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

# Services

The Amherst Regional Public Schools had no common assessments to measure student achievement of the standards-based skills and content taught by classroom, special education, and English Language Education (ELE) teachers. Without common formative curriculum assessments, classroom, special education, and ELE teachers had incomplete information about the remediation that students needed at the end of each unit of instruction. Notwithstanding formative assessment issues, the district provided quality support services with the use of the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) practices for ELL students in regular and ELE classrooms and with the provision of direct and systematic reading instruction for special education students using the Wilson Reading program.

The district also provided other academic and tutoring support services for students to improve their ELA and math achievement, and offered numerous support services to low-income, minority, and special needs students and their families. For example, the district continued the Reading Recovery program for grade 1, with additional "getting ready" support in kindergarten and "follow up" support in grade 2. The middle school offered Reading/Writing Workshop support for at-risk students in ELA, with additional phonetics support for special education students. In the spring of 2007, the district piloted a program for at-risk grade 6-9 students called the Pipeline Project, in which students attended after-school tutoring in ELA and math provided by Amherst College students once a week for five weeks. The district offered summer school to all grade 7-12 students who needed remediation in ELA and math. The high school maintained its Prep Academy for grade 9 students who needed help with ELA, math, and study skills.

# Performance at a Glance

# **Ratings on Performance Indicators**

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



#### Areas of Strength

- The district provided and coordinated effective outreach services for transient, low-income, and homeless students and their families and operated a quality English Language Education program, all of which supported minority student achievement.
- High school students in the district performed extremely well on Advanced Placement exams, with almost all students scoring a '3' or higher. Project Challenge intended to increase the number of students in underrepresented subgroups in honors classes.
- The district saw an increase in the average attendance rate and a decrease in the chronic absenteeism rate for students between 2004 and 2006.
- The district's 2006 out-of-school suspension rate was lower than the state average, but its 2006 inschool suspension rate was higher than the state average; the district's 2006 dropout rate was less than half the state average.

# Area for Improvement

Teachers in Amherst Regional had few assessment tools to provide them with timely information about student remediation and service needs based on recent instruction.

Over the last two years of the review period, the district increased its use of summative assessments, including the MCAS tests, to improve curriculum and to identify students in need of services. In addition, the district purchased Study Island, an elementary and middle school formative assessment

and student practice software program, and trained teachers in grades 3-8 in its application. Monthly reports on use and analysis of Study Island were generated and distributed to principals.

Participation of all subgroups in the 2007 MCAS tests for grades 3-8 and 10 averaged 98 percent or higher for all grades and subjects tested with the exception of LEP students. District staff members reported that the lower participation rate for this subgroup was due to the number of first-year students from foreign countries who did not speak English well and were exempt from taking the MCAS tests according to NCLB guide-lines. The district's 2007 NCLB accountability status for grades 3-5 was 'Corrective Action-Subgroups,' as African-American students did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in 2007. For most district subgroups, however, the percentage of students scoring 'Proficient' or higher exceeded the state average for those sub-groups.

Over the previous two years, the district used many approaches to encourage parents and community organizations to be involved in the education of children. For example, teachers held conferences with parents to report on their child's progress and to inform parents about ways to support their child's learning. The district also provided free transportation and childcare for parents to attend events such as early childhood or kindergarten parent orientations and ELE program parent meetings. The district invited community organizations to provide support for low-income students and their families through initiatives such as the "Angel" fund covering the cost of preschool student immunizations, the Lions Club funding new eyeglasses, and Casa Latina to provide translation services when non-English speaking parents took their children to doctors who only speak English. This community support helped students to attend and be successful in school.

# Attendance

The district experienced an improvement in its average attendance rate during the period under review. For the period 2004 to 2006, the average attendance rate was 94.9 percent for the Amherst elementary schools, 95.8 percent for Pelham Elementary School, and 93.5 percent for the regional middle and high schools. The chronic absenteeism rate for the middle and high schools dropped from 20.3 percent in 2004 to 14.8 percent in 2006. A unified district attendance policy and enforcement of this policy likely contributed to the increase in the average attendance rate and the decrease in chronic absences.

# **Discipline and Dropout Prevention**

Elementary schools in the district suspended few students during the review period. The rate of out-of-school suspension for the middle and high schools averaged 5.3 percent for the period 2004 to 2006, lower than the state average of 6.0 percent. Middle and high school in-school suspensions averaged 9.0 percent for the period 2004 to 2006, higher than the state average of 3.5 percent during the same period. District staff members attributed the high rate of in-school suspensions to students who repeatedly missed after-school detention. The dropout rate for Amherst Regional High School decreased from 3.3 percent in 2004 to 1.5 percent in 2006, less than half the state's average dropout rate of 3.3 percent in 2006. Dropout prevention programs such as Prep Academy, the Mentoring Program, Reduced Day academic plans, and ELA, math and MCAS tutoring and support likely contributed to the improved dropout rate.

# Financial and Asset Management Effectiveness and Efficiency

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

# **Budget Process**

Interviewees and documents provided by the district described the budget process in Amherst Regional as open and participatory. Known cost areas were identified as well as expenses based on student enrollments to maintain the same level of service within mandates and regulations. Principals and program directors submitted staffing and expense requests which the superintendent and administrative team reviewed in order to identify those items that could be defined as level service. Funds for instructional materials and supplies were allocated to each school based on a per pupil formula, and other funding was allocated based on student needs. The superintendent prepared detailed documents that provided information on students, staff, programs, and budget as well as revenue and expenditure assumptions to the three school committees as well as the community. The superintendent, school committees, and town officials held budget sessions from December to April. The superintendent disseminated information throughout the budget development process prior to the approved school department budget and regional assessments being presented at the annual town meetings for voter approval.

The school committees received quarterly budget reports and did not approve requests for transfers. Principals did not receive budget reports. They had access to the financial accounting system with the ability to control and track their budgets and manage their funds. Central office personnel regularly reviewed and monitored expenditures to ensure spending remained within fiscal budget limits. The district used purchase orders to encumber expenditures from all funds for goods and/or services. Adequate internal controls existed in the business office to ensure the district adhered to procurement laws and processed payroll correctly.

# Performance at a Glance

#### **Ratings on Performance Indicators**

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



#### Areas of Strength

- The ongoing analysis of student assessment data, primarily those from the MCAS tests, influenced budget decisions and allocation of funds.
- The district implemented an evaluation-based review process to determine the cost effectiveness of its programs, initiatives, and activities.
- Funds received by the district in federal and state entitlement grants declined with the exception of the 94-142 special education allotment, which increased. Based on the analysis of data, the district incorporated into the local budget positions that could no longer be funded by grants.
- In FY 2007, Amherst town meeting members approved expenditures totaling \$408,978 for the purchase of capital equipment for the school district recommended by the Joint Capital Planning Committee (JCPC).

#### Areas for Improvement

- The FY 2004 reduction in Chapter 70 aid impacted the school district. The district did not cut programs but eliminated positions, increased class size, and reduced supplies and textbooks.
- All front doors of the elementary school buildings as well as the middle and high school buildings remained unlocked during the school day.

# **Financial Support**

The three school districts comprising the Amherst Regional Public Schools exceeded their net school spending (NSS) requirement of the Education Reform Act for each of the years in the period under review, and the per pupil expenditure for each district exceeded the state average each year during that period. Interviewees generally stated that the towns provided adequate support for the elementary and regional middle and high schools. Voters in Amherst approved an operational override in FY 2004 totaling \$2 million; however a \$2 million operational override attempt in FY 2007 failed, and this led town officials to investigate alternate sources of revenue.

The Amherst Education Foundation, Inc., an independent nonprofit education fund, provided community members with direct school funding opportunities either for core needs at the elementary level or for the athletic, performing arts, and library booster clubs at all levels. Interested parties had the opportunity to make tax-deductible donations either online or by check. Teachers submitted proposals for projects and programs to the foundation. The foundation award-ed approximately \$20,000 each year of the period under review.

# Facilities and Safety

The district's schools were clean and well maintained by an in-house staff of custodians and maintenance workers. The district did not have a formal written preventive maintenance schedule but contracted outside vendors each year for elevator, generator, boiler, fire alarm, and fire extinguisher preventative maintenance.

Neither the Pelham Public Schools nor the Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools had a long-term capital plan; however, a long-term capital plan had been developed in the town of Amherst by the Joint Capital Planning Committee (JCPC). The JCPC's focus during FY 2007 was to update the town's five-year capital plan for the period FY 2008 to FY 2012 and to develop specific recommendations for FY 2008 for consideration at the 2007 annual town meeting.

The district lacked a system to ensure student safety. School district administrators in interviews indicated the culture of the community could not bear school site buildings being totally "locked down." The district posted notices at the main entrance of each school that directed visitors to the main office to sign in. The EQA team observed visitors to the districts' schools who accessed the building via the main entrance and failed to stop at the main office in order to sign in as directed.

# APPENDIX A: EQA'S DISTRICT EXAMINATION PROCESS

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

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

#### Data-Driven Assessment

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

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

# Standards-Based Examination

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

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

# APPENDIX B: EXPLANATION OF TERMS USED IN EQA REPORTS

ABA: Applied Behavioral Analysis

ADA: Average Daily Attendance

ALT: MCAS Alternative Assessment

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

ATA: Accountability and Targeted Assistance

AYP: Adequate Yearly Progress

CAP: Corrective Action Plan

CBM: Curriculum-Based Measures

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

CMP: Connected Math Program

**CORI:** Criminal Offender Record Information

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

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

**CRT:** Criterion-Referenced Test

CSR: Comprehensive School Reform

**DCAP:** District Curriculum Accommodation Plan

**DIBELS:** Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills

DIP: District Improvement Plan

DOE: Department of Education

**DPDP:** District Professional Development Plan

DRA: Developmental Reading Assessment

ELA: English Language Arts

ELL: English Language Learners

**EPI:** English Language Arts Proficiency Index

ESL: English as a Second Language

FLNE: First Language Not English

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

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

FTE: Full-Time Equivalent

FY: Fiscal Year

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

GASB: Government Accounting Standards Board

**GMADE:** Group Math Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation

**GRADE:** Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation

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

IEP: Individualized Education Program

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

IPDP: Individual Professional Development Plan

IRIP: Individual Reading Improvement Plan

ISSP: Individual Student Success Plan

LASW: Looking at Student Work

LEP: Limited English Proficient

MASBO: Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials

MASC: Massachusetts Association of School Committees

MASS: Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents

MAVA: Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators

MCAS: Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System

MCAS-AIt: Alternative Assessment – a portfolio option for special needs students to demonstrate proficiency

MCPPO: Massachusetts Certified Public Purchasing Official

**MELA-O:** Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral

MEPA: Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment

MPI: Math Proficiency Index

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

MUNIS: Municipal Information System

**NAEYC:** National Association for the Education of Young Children

NCLB: No Child Left Behind

**NEASC:** New England Association of Schools and Colleges

NRT: Norm-Referenced Test

NSBA: National School Boards Association

NSS: Net School Spending

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

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

**PIM:** Performance Improvement Management

**POA:** Program Quality Assurance – a division of the DOE responsible for conducting the Coordinated Program Review process

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

**ORI:** Qualitative Reading Inventory

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

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

SEI: Sheltered English Immersion

SIMS: Student Information Management System

SIOP: Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol

SIP: School Improvement Plan

SPED: Special Education

**STE:** Science and Technology/Engineering

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

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# APPENDIX C: STATE AND LOCAL FUNDING, 1998-2007

A school district's funding is determined in part by the Chapter 70 program - the major program of state aid to public elementary and secondary schools. In addition to supporting school operations, it also establishes minimum requirements for each municipality's share of school costs. The following chart shows the amount of Amherst Regional's funding that was derived from the state and the amount that the town was required to contribute.

In FY 2007, Amherst Regional's per pupil expenditure (preliminary), based on appropriations from all funds, was \$14,770 (weighted average), compared to \$11,789 statewide. The district exceeded the state net school spending requirement in each year of the review period. From FY 2005 to FY 2007, net school spending increased from \$39,810,936 to \$45,533,153; Chapter 70 aid increased from \$14,289,450 to \$15,788,462; the required local contribution increased from \$12,536,753 to \$14,520,096; and the foundation enrollment decreased from 3,620 to 3,490. Chapter 70 aid as a percentage of actual net school spending decreased from 36 to 35 percent over this period.



# WHERE DOES THE COMBINED FUNDING FOR AMHERST REGIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS COME FROM?

# HOW IS THE FUNDING FOR AMHERST REGIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS ALLOCATED?

FY06 Expenditures By EQA Standards (With City/Town Charges)

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