



Dracut Public Schools Level 3 District Review

October 2010



This document was prepared on behalf of the Center for District and School Accountability of the
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Overview of Level 3 District Reviews

Purpose

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

Methodology

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

¹ In other words, as Level 3 was defined at the time of district selection, districts with schools in corrective action or restructuring. In 2010-2011, the Dracut Public Schools are assigned to Level 2, which now includes districts with schools in corrective action or restructuring, with Level 3 districts being defined as those with one or more schools among the lowest-performing 20 percent based on quantitative indicators. See <http://www.doe.mass.edu/sda/framework/default.html>.

Dracut Public Schools

The site visit to the Dracut Public Schools was conducted from April 26-April 29, 2010. The site visit included visits to the following district schools: Dracut Senior High (9-12), Lakeview Junior High (7-8), Englesby Intermediate (5-6), Brookside Elementary (K-4), Campbell Elementary (K-4), Greenmont Avenue (K-4), Parker Avenue (K-3). Further information about the review and the site visit schedule can be found in Appendix B; information about the members of the review team can be found in Appendix A.

District Profile²

The Dracut public school district has seven schools with an overall enrollment in 2009-2010 of 4,107. There are 4 elementary schools, 3 with students in grades kindergarten (K) to 4 and 1 (Parker Avenue) with students in grades K-3 only. Two of the elementary schools (Joseph A. Campbell and Brookside) have enrollments of approximately 600 students; two have seen several years of reductions in the number of classrooms and are small (Greenmont with 224 students, and Parker Avenue with only 159). The district also has one school for grades 5-6 (Englesby Intermediate), one for grades 7-8 (Lakeview Junior High) and one high school. One wing of Lakeview Junior High School is unoccupied.

The following table provides information concerning Dracut student enrollment by race/ethnicity and for selected populations.

Table 1: Dracut Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity & Selected Populations 2009-2010

Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity	Percent of Total	Selected Populations	Percent of Total
African-American	2.8	First Language not English	3.7
Asian	4.8	Limited English Proficient	1.0
Hispanic or Latino	5.3	Low-income	14.2
Native American	0.0	Special Education	11.7
White	85.7	Free Lunch	10.3
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	0.1	Reduced-price lunch	3.8
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	1.2		

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

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

Between 2006-2007 and 2009-2010, student enrollment decreased by just over 100 students. During the same time period, the race/ethnicity of the student population shifted slightly.

- The percent of White students decreased from 89.3 in 2006-2007 to 85.7 in 2009-2010.
- The percent of Hispanic students increased from 3.6 percent to 5.3 percent over the same period.
- There were increases of less than 1 percentage point in the enrollment of African-American and Asian students.

The district is undergoing a period of change at the superintendent level. Until June 2008, one superintendent had been in place for ten years. The next superintendent left abruptly after 19 months and was replaced with an interim superintendent, the same individual who had been superintendent for the previous ten years. At the time of the site visit, the district was in the midst of a search for its next superintendent.

The local appropriation to the Dracut Public Schools budget for fiscal year 2010 was \$28,088,475. In addition to the appropriation to the district budget, school-related expenditures by the town were estimated at \$14,498,719 for fiscal year 2010. In fiscal year 2009, the total amount of actual school-related expenditures, including expenditures by the district (\$25,609,041), expenditures by the town (\$12,862,043), and expenditures from other sources such as grants (\$5,869,052), was \$44,340,136.

Per-pupil spending is low, fifth from the bottom among school districts in the state for fiscal year 2009. The budget is consistently held at the required Net School Spending, which has forced severe limitations on funding for personnel and resources. The district used stimulus money to prevent major staff layoffs in 2009-2010. At the time of the review it was not yet clear how budget limitations would affect funding for staffing and resources in 2010-2011 with no stimulus money in the offing.

Student Performance³

According to 2009 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data, the Dracut Public Schools made AYP in ELA and mathematics in the aggregate and for all subgroups. This was an improvement over 2008 results when all subgroups did not make AYP in either ELA or mathematics. In grades 9-12, the district has consistently made AYP in the aggregate in both subjects since 2007 and in 2007 and 2009 made AYP in both subjects for all subgroups, also.

However, in grades 3-5 and grades 6-8 there is a different story:

- Only in ELA in grades 6-8 in the aggregate has the district since 2007 consistently made AYP.
- In 2008 and 2009 in grades 3-5 in ELA, Dracut failed to make AYP for one or more subgroups and in the aggregate.

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

- In 2008 and 2009 in grades 6-8 in ELA, one or more subgroups did not make AYP.
- In mathematics in 2009 in grades 3-5 and 6-8, the district failed to make AYP for one or more subgroups and in the aggregate.
- In mathematics in 2008, in grades 3-5 and 6-8, the district failed to make AYP in the aggregate and for one or more subgroups with one exception: at grades 3-5 students in the aggregate made AYP.
- Finally, in 2009 three Dracut schools had an accountability status in ELA or mathematics or both.
 - Brookside Elementary was identified for Improvement Year 2 for subgroups in ELA and Improvement Year 1 in mathematics;
 - Campbell Elementary was identified for Improvement Year 1 in ELA; and
 - Lakeview Junior High was identified for Improvement Year 1 for subgroups in ELA and for Restructuring Year 2 in mathematics.

The most striking aspect of MCAS achievement from 2006 to 2009 is the lack of significant movement either up or down over the four years. The main exception, again, is at the high school level. There, in 2006, 74 percent of students scored either *Advanced* or *Proficient*; this improved to 85 percent in 2009. In mathematics as well, in 2006 60 percent of students in grade 10 were at *Advanced* or *Proficient*, while 82 percent were in those categories in 2009.

The following table lists by grade level in ELA and mathematics gains or losses in percentage points between 2006 and 2009 of students scoring *Advanced* or *Proficient*.

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

Grade Level Assessment	2006	2007	2008	2009	Percentage Points Gained or Lost, 2006-2009
Grade 10 ELA	74	83	76	85	+11
Grade 10 Math	60	78	69	82	+22
Grade 8 ELA	73	77	66	66	-7
Grade 8 Math	37	52	41	35	-2
Grade 7 ELA	60	59	60	67	+7
Grade 7 Math	45	40	42	40	-5
Grade 6 ELA	73	75	69	69	-4
Grade 6 Math	54	57	53	56	+2
Grade 5 ELA	58	65	64	62	+4
Grade 5 Math	35	44	47	46	+11
Grade 4 ELA	61	66	56	55	-6
Grade 4 Math	40	58	51	35	-5
Grade 3 ELA	58	60	53	59	+1
Grade 3 Math	54	58	55	54	0

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

With the exception of the high school improvements in proficiency rates and the 11-percentage-point improvement in Grade 5 mathematics, there are only minor differences up or down between the 2009 and the 2006 percentages. And even in the case of grade 5 mathematics, there was a jump in the percent proficient in 2007 but those levels have been steady ever since. With one exception, 2009 proficiency levels in grades 3-8 in ELA and mathematics are close to what they were in 2006. Judged by proficiency levels, student achievement in grades 3-8 is not improving.

The Growth Model, which the state has been developing over the last two years, also yields important information. The Student Growth Percentile (SGP) compares students' improvement from year to year to that of their peers statewide with similar test scoring histories. The most appropriate measure to report growth for a group is the median SGP, or the middle score for a group when the individual student growth percentiles are arranged from highest to lowest. Moderate school or district growth is represented by a median SGP between 40 and 60.

Dracut growth model data shows pockets of growth as well as areas with little growth.

- Lakeview Junior High shows notably little growth in either ELA or mathematics with median SGPs of 28 and 34.
- When compared with other district schools Joseph A. Campbell Elementary shows the highest median SGPs in both ELA and mathematics at 55.5 and 52 respectively, although these SGPs are considered moderate.
- When growth is examined by grade, in ELA in grades 7 and 8 median SGPs are relatively low at 32 and 22. And in mathematics, grades 7 and 8 again show relatively low growth with median SGPs of 36 and 30.
- Title I students have a median SGP of 50 in ELA, but only 22.5 in mathematics.
- Special education students show greater growth in ELA (median SGP 37.5) than in mathematics (median SGP 31), although both median SGPs are relatively low.
- Finally, when growth is examined by race/ethnicity, White students at Brookside Elementary and Lakeview Junior High are the racial groups with the lowest growth rates, with median SGPs at 36 and 33 respectively.

In conclusion, Dracut students have shown little change in proficiency levels over the last four years and often show relatively low growth when compared to other students across the state with similar testing histories.

Findings

Leadership and Governance

Dracut Public Schools lack clear direction and centralized coordination of efforts to improve student achievement.

The Dracut Public Schools are in a period of transition. The former superintendent left the Dracut Public Schools in early March of the 2009-2010 school year after serving fewer than 19 months. At the time of the review team's site visit the school committee was searching for a new superintendent who would be the third to fill the post in less than a year.

The district has a detailed District Improvement Plan that contains hard targets for improvements in MCAS scores at each level. The level of detail in the plan goes to the classroom. However, interviews revealed that stakeholders, including school principals and teachers, were not involved in developing the District Improvement Plan.

Individual schools have both School Improvement Plans and MCAS Improvement Plans. The plans appear to be linked to and reflective of the District Improvement Plan. While each of these plans is replete with detail, the School Improvement Plans are, in reality, also MCAS improvement plans. From the School Improvement Plans it does not appear that the principals and school councils have, pursuant to G.L. c. 69, s. 1I, assessed the needs of their school in light of the student performance goals adopted in the plans. Despite the data and proposed strategies to raise achievement in these documents, most teachers reported being unaware of the content of the plans. Based on review of documents and interviews with staff, there is little sense of urgency to raise student achievement.

In 2008 the superintendent presented the school committee with a "Blueprint for the Enhancement of Student Achievement," meant to be a document that provided direction for the district. The subsequent progress report on the goals consists of a listing of the usual activities carried out in public schools. In particular, one indicator of progress was "Each department was given the responsibility to revise its curriculum and incorporate new expectations for student learning." Responses to questions by the review team from administrators, teachers, and members of the school committee indicated that they were not aware that such revised curriculum documents have been produced. Rather, members of the review team saw recent postings for paid committee service to revise both the math and science curricula.

The centralized function of purchasing lacks coordination and consistency. According to a central office administrator, individual schools order replacement texts and classroom supplies. It is common practice in the district to make several separate orders to the same vendor, thus eliminating any economy of scale. Both principals and central office administrators acknowledged that although the superintendent signs the purchase orders, there is no effort in evidence to coordinate or oversee the actual purchases. Thus, the materials and texts in use may vary from school to school.

Central office support for principals is inconsistent. According to interviews with principals, the two newest principals, appointed at the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year, do not have mentoring or coaching support—although programs are available in the surrounding area. One of these principals supervises approximately 600 elementary students without the benefit of an assistant principal. Two of the seven school principals have created their own professional development. Also, principals reported that they do not have an active role in district decisions or the purchases that affect their students' learning. For instance, mathematics scores are significantly lower in grades 3-8 than English Language Arts scores, yet a new reading basal was purchased while students continue to study mathematics from 10-year-old texts. Principals reported that they do not always have the authority to select and hire school staff: some have been assigned staff members whom they had neither interviewed nor hired.

Administrators, teachers, and members of the school committee were unable to articulate a clear direction given by the leadership for the school system to improve student achievement. Principals and teachers frankly stated that they are looking for a clearly articulated direction to improve student performance.

Without clear direction and consistent support, principals are left to determine the course for their schools on their own. This means that ideology, curriculum, management of student behavior, and effective instructional practices vary across the district. As a result, student achievement is for the most part stagnant.

The Dracut Public Schools are not currently in a position to make significant improvements in student achievement.

Despite the lack of centralized direction and coordination, some teachers have been working on curriculum and assessments, some principals have scheduled common planning time or professional development in their schools, and many administrators and teachers are motivated to make necessary changes to systemwide practices that will enhance student achievement.

The review team was told of instances of small groups of teachers working toward developing curriculum documents or accompanying assessments in an effort to improve student achievement. Teachers at the intermediate school have been working on establishing common assessments in mathematics. This effort is hindered, in the judgment of the review team, by the absence of a cohesive curriculum document. According to central office administrators, the secondary mathematics curriculum is currently under revision using a process that is inclusive of teachers. Although the revision is driven by the upcoming NEASC accreditation, the effort has been expanded to include the 7th and 8th grades. Teachers and supervisors are hopeful that this effort will serve as a model for revising the district's curriculum in all areas. Similar efforts in secondary English and science are in the initial stages.

The interim superintendent stated that there are also plans to offer a comprehensive professional development course in the area of formative assessment to elementary teachers. This is in response to teacher need expressed through a district survey.

Some principals reported taking the initiative to schedule common planning periods to provide much needed time during the school day for teams of teachers to collaborate and discuss the needs of students and changes to instruction. Some teachers reported using this time cooperatively. However, there appears to be a difference of opinion regarding whether the principal and other supervisors may, under the teachers' contract, have a role in teachers' activities during these common periods: principals and teachers believe that they may not, whereas the superintendent and union officials disagree with this interpretation of the contract.

Principals also reported taking the initiative in the area of professional development. The junior high school principal used the four half-days of system professional time this year to address instructional needs in the school. All four half-days for kindergarten through grade 6 were devoted to training on the new ELA program; therefore principals of schools with those grades have attempted to address the instructional needs of their schools on a voluntary basis by providing professional development after school hours.

Because they are disparate and in the elementary stages, it has not been possible for any of these staff-driven initiatives to have very much impact on student achievement in the district. In focus groups, both teachers and administrators expressed a great desire to make changes that would result in higher student achievement. Many also asked members of the review team what types of programmatic and instructional changes would be successful in accomplishing this. Many expressed an understanding that they would need to have systemic structures in place to increase student performance. However, most were unsure about the specific changes that are needed. Throughout the district, staff expressed anticipation for the review team's report, seeing it as a blueprint for the change they believe is needed.

Curriculum and Instruction

A lack of curriculum coordination at the district level leads to English language arts, mathematics, and science curricula not being aligned with state standards and not being aligned horizontally and vertically within the district.

Because district leadership has not taken steps to develop one, the Dracut Public Schools do not have a consistent, aligned, and effectively implemented curriculum. There is no common format for curriculum documents across the grades, a format that should at least include objectives, resources, instructional strategies, timelines, and assessments. Interviews as well as review of curriculum documents established that the K-6 English language arts (ELA) and mathematics curricula, written a number of years ago, are not standards-based, in the sense that they do not have clearly stated objectives, each accompanied by an assessment that measures the attainment of that objective. In addition, these curricula do not weave in references to the newly adopted Houghton-Mifflin series in ELA or the 10-year-old mathematics program in place in the district. High school and district staff reported that in preparation for an impending visit from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), high school departments have recently begun to lay out promising comprehensive curriculum documents which include timelines, essential questions, state standards, content knowledge, themes, key terms, skills, instructional

strategies, and assessments. Up to this point, however, syllabi for individual courses have stood for curriculum at the high school.

Principals, teachers, parents, and union representatives talked openly to the review team about the lack of a consistent curriculum in the district. Without unifying curriculum documents at the elementary level, the district relies for consistency on purchased programs, but purchased programs are not a curriculum. The introduction in 2009-2010 of a single literacy program for elementary ELA holds out the possibility of horizontal program alignment across the four elementary schools. The program in use for mathematics K-6 was originally purchased ten years ago, and while ownership of the program has shifted from company to company and the program has been modified under each new publisher, the district has continued to purchase texts from these successive companies. According to principals, the result is that mathematics is taught substantially differently across the four elementary schools, and students from these four schools arrive at the single intermediate school (grades 5 and 6) with varied orientations and backgrounds in mathematics. In the course of its interviews, the review team heard that without significant direction from the district or a helpful curriculum document, the intermediate school is struggling on its own to develop scope and sequences and common assessments. It is not clear why this lack of consistency in mathematics curriculum K-6 is not being addressed from the district level.

There have been recent attempts to coordinate curriculum, but the efforts have not come to fruition. Principals and teachers reported that in 2008-2009 the district set up K-12 content area “curriculum assessment committees,” each committee chaired by one of the principals. According to the principals, each committee’s somewhat ill-defined charge was to determine the strengths and weaknesses of curriculum in that specific content area, and then write assessments to determine students’ level of mastery. This is a nearly impossible task with curriculum documents as inadequate as they are. However, members of the science, mathematics, and ELA committees reported to the review team that their committees made progress with the charge. Yet interviewees also reported that somehow the documents submitted to the district were lost and that for some reason, these curriculum committees did not continue into 2009-2010. Principals and teachers reported having had a writing portfolio system in place, too, but this effort was also discontinued in 2009-2010.

At the high school department heads have responsibility for curriculum coordination, according to central office administrators and the department heads themselves. They report that a promising development has been the expansion of the responsibilities of the mathematics and ELA department heads to include the junior high school. These two individuals teach two classes and have time to be in classrooms and facilitate meetings. Unfortunately, while there were originally plans to assign more department heads 7-12 responsibility, this has not occurred. An additional promising curriculum development, as mentioned above, is that beginning in spring 2010 the secondary curriculum coordinator has brought high school departments together to write curriculum in preparation for a New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) visit.

School-based efforts to arrive at horizontal alignment without assistance from the district office are hampered by several factors. First, support and oversight for teachers in classrooms is extremely limited due to budget cuts in recent years. The review team learned from principals that the two large elementary schools have lost their assistant principals. This means that the principals themselves have a limited amount of time available to be in classrooms. Principals and teachers reported that mathematics coaches in place in the past have been eliminated. According to principals, district curriculum coordinators are seldom in schools providing guidance. Teachers themselves could contribute significantly to horizontal alignment if they had common planning time. However, interviews revealed a strong sense among elementary principals and teachers that the teachers' contract does not allow a principal to assign teachers to an activity such as team planning during their planning period. Some teachers who want to meet together are resorting to using Administrative Task Time, the contractual after-school time, to do curriculum planning on their own. In some cases, principals are covering teachers' duties to enable meetings to take place. Yet union representatives told the review team that it is allowable under the contract for teacher teams to meet one day a week for common planning. Overall, as a result of staff cuts and confusion around contractual restrictions, avenues for arriving at more horizontal alignment are extremely limited.

Without a complete and aligned curriculum, principals and teachers are at a loss as to what students are expected to know and be able to do. Efforts by principals and teachers to develop curriculum on their own is done in isolation without benefit of district coordination. The unfortunate combination of incomplete curriculum, lack of direction from the central office, limited opportunities for principals or coaches to support teachers and monitor classrooms, and restrictions on the use of common planning time leave students, teachers, and principals without the curriculum they need to guide student learning. And the ultimate result is students whose MCAS scores over time show little growth compared to statewide academic peers. For example, median Student Growth Percentiles for the six schools testing a sufficient number of students (in grades 4 and above) to have median SGPs calculated for ELA range from a low of 28 at Lakeview Junior High to a moderate 55.5 at the Campbell Elementary School. Efforts by principals and teachers to develop and align curriculum are not effective without clear direction and coordination from the district office.

Several factors contribute to low student achievement in mathematics, including lack of a coherent curriculum and consistent program and insufficient instructional time.

Mathematics achievement in Dracut is low except at Dracut Senior High School (83 percent proficient) and Parker Avenue (71 percent). The percentages of students proficient in mathematics at Brookside Elementary, Lakeview Junior High, Campbell Elementary, Englesby Intermediate, and Greenmont Avenue are 36, 38, 48, 52, and 53. Only two of these schools have proficiency rates in mathematics slightly over 50 percent. Median Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs) at the same schools are 36, 34, 52, 45.5, and 48.5. Proficiency levels and growth rates at Brookside Elementary and Lakeview Junior High are of particular concern. Yet reviewers did not sense an urgency to address this matter. In 2009-2010 the district purchased a new ELA program. According to interviews with principals, however, who were not consulted before this

purchase, there was a greater need to replace the mathematics program since there is no consistency in mathematics texts in the elementary schools and student achievement in mathematics is lower than in ELA. The review team found no evidence of actions or plans to address the inadequacy of the K-6 mathematics curriculum. In addition, the team heard little discussion about increasing the amount of instructional time devoted to mathematics. Principals reported that students receive 50 minutes of mathematics instruction per day at the high school, 48 minutes at the junior high, and at the intermediate school, only 20 minutes per day. At some of the elementary schools, the time allotted for mathematics is dramatically lower than for ELA.

The lack of both a coherent curriculum and a consistent program has an unquestionable effect on mathematics achievement in the district. It is not clear what students are to be taught or how they are to be taught. The amount of instructional time available for mathematics also has an impact on achievement. At some schools, principals reported, students study math for half or less the amount of time devoted to ELA. This means that teachers have little time to introduce concepts, provide practice time, and give students opportunities to apply and analyze what they are learning.

Classroom observations revealed instructional areas needing attention.

The level of student proficiency and the rate of student growth in the district indicate that students need better instruction. Overall proficiency levels for the district as of 2009 are at 66 percent in ELA and 50 percent in mathematics, very similar to the 2008 proficiency rates of 64 percent in ELA and 51 percent in mathematics. This means that approximately one third of students in ELA and half of students in mathematics are at Needs Improvement or Warning/Failing. And 2009 districtwide median student growth percentiles are at 39.0 in ELA and 42.0 in mathematics. The district has offered teachers some opportunities to improve their instruction. An examination of previous professional development offerings shows that they have included coursework on differentiated instruction. And the district has been quite successful in training elementary teachers in particular in Sheltered English Instruction (SEI).

Review team classroom observations also indicated the need for additional instructional training. Team members rated classrooms on 15 instructional characteristics. They indicated whether there was solid, partial or no evidence of each characteristic. There were some positive results: in 83 percent of the 59 classrooms observed there was solid evidence of a positive classroom climate. And in 71 percent of classrooms teachers showed a depth of content knowledge in their presentations. However, in a large percentage of classrooms, effective instructional characteristics were observed infrequently:

- In only 6 percent of classrooms was there solid evidence of students working together in pairs or small groups. Further, in 54 percent there was no evidence of this.
- In only 29 percent of classrooms was there solid evidence of teachers using a range of instructional techniques such as direct instruction, facilitating, or modeling.
- In only 27 percent of classrooms was there solid evidence of questions that required students to use higher-order thinking skills, i.e., application, analysis, synthesis, and

evaluation. However, there was partial evidence of this characteristic in 51 percent of classrooms.

- In only 37 percent of classrooms was there solid evidence of students articulating their thinking and reasoning. And in 29 percent of classrooms, there was no evidence of this.
- Finally, in 39 percent of classrooms there was solid evidence of teachers checking for understanding. However, in 27 percent there was no evidence of this.

The review team's classroom observation data reveal a lack of solid evidence of key instructional characteristics. Yet review team interviews with staff showed strong motivation to improve student achievement, although they also indicated a certain helplessness about how to do so. These staff interviews, in combination with district administrators' expressed belief that the primary purpose of professional development is to provide teachers with the courses the need for recertification, indicate that the district does not yet grasp the important role professional development should play in providing teachers with a range of instructional strategies. Administrators themselves, in interviews, demonstrated a lack of understanding of what effective instruction looks like and of the importance of effective instruction in improving student achievement. Administrators are not providing teachers with the instructional tools they need to bring students to higher levels of achievement.

Assessment

The district has few formative assessments. Although administrators and teachers see a need for formative assessments, they have a limited understanding of their power and importance.

While administrators and teachers expressed a need for formative assessments when interviewed by the review team, they at the same time demonstrated a limited understanding of how formative assessment data could improve instruction. Few seemed to recognize that, armed with data concerning their students' strengths and needs, teachers are much better equipped to plan appropriate and effective instruction. Interviewees said that teachers consider assessment valuable for student placement but are not at the point of using it to improve learning.

The district has offered some professional development concerning formative assessments. At the time of the site visit, the district had offered one course on the topic and made it available to high school staff only. According to interviews, the district now plans to offer the course to elementary teachers during the next school year. However, this professional development effort is inadequate; in the end, at most 50 teachers—about 20 percent—will have been trained. At the end of the 2009-2010 school year, there were release days available in 2010-2011 for professional development. But there was no evidence that administrators see an urgent need to use this time to provide all teachers with this important training.

At the present time, the district has a few formative assessments in place. The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) or revised DRA2 is administered to students in kindergarten through

grade 4. However, in interviews elementary teachers questioned the validity of the DRA, as there is a discrepancy in what responses teachers will accept as correct. Attempts to use the end-of-unit tests in the Addison-Wesley mathematics series at the elementary level have not been successful. As mentioned above, there are many editions in use since the series has not been replaced in ten years, so the end-of-unit tests vary from school to school. And as one district administrator pointed out, summative assessments like the MCAS are infrequent and do not yield detailed and timely information concerning what needs to be re-taught.

The high school has pacing guides that include assessments, and it also administers common assessments in math and ELA that are updated every other year. However, according to department heads, most departments do not review the results of midyear and final exams, and therefore these have little impact on instruction. According to interviewees, assessment at the high school is just getting off the ground. The only common assessment in place at the junior high at this time is one dealing with the Open Response Question. In focus groups, junior high school teachers said that they each make their own tests.

Attempts have been made to develop formative assessments. Two years ago the district formed the curriculum assessment committees mentioned above with the goal of evaluating the curriculum and developing assessments. The committees included teachers from each school with a principal in charge. The science assessment team met throughout the 2008-2009 school year and worked on a common assessment for science. But, as interviewees reported to the review team, there were good intentions, but the effort to come up with a common science assessment was not successful. Teachers attributed the failure to a lack of direction and lack of expectations. Principals reported that none of the curriculum committees met during the 2009-2010 school year, but the review team learned that district administrators plan to have the mathematics curriculum team meet during 2010-2011 in order to develop curriculum and assessments. The review team also learned that two intermediate school teachers worked during 2008-2009 to develop a mathematics assessment. Completed material was forwarded to the central office for review, but it was lost, and no further progress has been made.

Throughout the review team's visit, district and school staff indicated that they recognize the need to develop formative assessments in order to improve instruction. But until the district revises its curricula, there is little basis upon which to develop formative assessments that will provide teachers with information regarding the needs of students. The current lack of such information has a strong impact on instruction and contributes to the lack of academic progress by the district's students.

The district's collection of and dissemination of data and the staff's ability to analyze it are limited.

Dracut has one data analysis staff member at the district level whose primary responsibility is to enter Student Information Management System (SIMS) data. While this staff member was unable to attend the formal training on the Education Data Warehouse offered by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, he has worked through it himself. He has offered individual tutorials in accessing information from the Warehouse to principals and to the ELA

and mathematics coordinators at the high school. During interviews principals and the coordinators said that their ability to use the Education Data Warehouse varied. Most of those interviewed were aware of the prodigious amount of student data in the Data Warehouse, but did not feel adequately trained to access and use it. Central office staff reported to the review team that they are not involved with the dissemination and analysis of school level data, leaving it to principals and department heads.

Since the district does not administer many formative assessments, the main assessment that is analyzed is the MCAS. All interviewees did say that MCAS data is made available at the school level and that principals as well as department heads share MCAS results in the form of item analyses with staff members. However, teachers in focus groups acknowledged that their ability to analyze data has not been formed by training but depends rather on the ability of principals and department heads to interpret the information for them. Interviewees also said that new teachers are at a particular disadvantage, as they have not had any experience in working with MCAS data and are dependent upon colleagues to help them to interpret it. Teachers at the high school said that the high school is not data-driven, and teachers at the elementary level expressed a similar view of their schools.

According to the former superintendent, the interim superintendent, and the principals, during the 2008-2009 school year the former superintendent instructed principals to develop MCAS Improvement Plans. The review team examined each of the schools' plans. The plans include quantitative goals for increasing student scores in a number of areas. But, in interviews, principals and department heads said that most of the plans were written by either the principal or department head without input from teachers. And administrators acknowledged that they have not worked with staff to monitor the attainment of goals throughout the year.

As a result of the lack of data as well as the lack of a well-trained staff capable of data analysis, the district's use of data to revise instruction in order to improve student achievement is limited. In addition, interviewees could not identify programmatic or policy decisions that had been made as a result of the analysis of data.

At this point, in the judgment of the review team, there is no ownership regarding data, and district staff and leaders do not display any urgency about gaining access to more data and increasing their ability to analyze it.

Human Resources and Professional Development

Evaluations of professional staff are not instructive in a way that promotes professional growth.

In a review of 37 randomly selected teacher evaluations, review team members determined that, while most of the evaluations reviewed were timely, had been signed by both the evaluator and the teacher, and were somewhat informative, the vast majority were not instructive, in that they did not contain specific recommendations that would lead to professional growth for the teacher. Recommendations in formal evaluations provide teachers with both commendations regarding

their strengths and areas to work on to improve student learning. These recommendations are also opportunities for administrators to focus their teachers' work on effective practice. In Dracut, teachers are receiving few suggestions in evaluations for professional growth; this in turn ultimately limits student achievement.

A review of administrator personnel files revealed that administrator evaluations have not been in compliance with 603 CMR 35.06(1)(a), which prescribes that administrators be evaluated annually. District administrator evaluations were not completed in the 2008-2009 school year. In the 2009-2010 school year, the former superintendent developed and implemented a new principal evaluation instrument. The instrument is a single-page form that contains the Principles of Effective Administrative Leadership, against which the administrator was rated with either a "P" for proficient, or an "NI" for needs improvement. There is no place designated for comments or recommendations. The bottom of the form contains a space for signatures and dates. The administrator being evaluated attaches a self-assessment of performance in areas determined by the superintendent. A review of all principals' evaluations revealed that each principal was rated proficient in every category. This lack of differentiation, along with the absence of specific recommendations for growth in all but two of the administrator evaluations, does not promote professional growth and the improvement of administrative performance. The review team was unable to review the former superintendent's evaluation since it was not available.

Because of the district's evaluation practices for both teachers and administrators, professional staff in the Dracut Public Schools are not held accountable for student achievement.

The district's professional development program lacks the vision, consistent support, and sufficient time allocations necessary to address the district's needs.

The district lacks a clear vision of the purposes and power of professional development. For two reasons, professional development in the district is narrow in its focus. Available time is one key limitation. School committee members reported that the practice of having release time days was discontinued eight years ago due primarily to parental objections. Without release time during the school day, the district has for years had limited opportunities to develop curriculum, promote effective instructional strategies, and encourage meaningful staff discussion. A further time limitation comes from the strong perception on the part of principals and teachers that principals cannot direct the use of teacher time during the school day for activities such as team meetings. (Neither the interim superintendent nor union officials agreed with this interpretation of the contract.)

According to district administrators, in 2009-2010, driven by the need for the high school to prepare for the upcoming NEASC accreditation visit, the district provided for four half days of in-service training. Principals recounted how the release time was used. The junior high school used two of the four release days to work on differentiated instruction strategies, one to work on open response questions, and the last on formative assessments. At the elementary levels half days were devoted to training for the new Houghton-Mifflin series in ELA. At the time of the

review team visit, there was no decision as to whether these release time opportunities would continue in 2010-2011.

Professional development is further limited by the assumption that its purpose is in large part to facilitate teacher recertification rather than to increase student achievement by improving all teachers' practice. Until 2009-2010, without early release time, the district focused its professional development energies on developing a set of courses or workshops teachers take on a voluntary basis outside of school time for college credit or professional development points. Courses in which 25 teachers enroll are important, but they do not have the impact on student learning that release time training for all teachers has.

In interviews, district administrators consistently expressed their collective hope that the practice of having release days would be continued in subsequent school years: release time would allow opportunities for teacher training, a critical need in the district. With professional development primarily available as workshops or courses teachers take voluntarily outside the school day, it does not have the impact on student achievement the district needs. The district's professional development is limited by its narrow focus.

Student Support

Dracut supports English language learners through an effective program that results in improved student achievement in ELA.

Data from the 2009 MCAS tests indicates that the district's 53 tested limited English proficient (LEP) and formerly limited English proficient (FLEP) students performed better than LEP/FLEP students across the state in ELA. In ELA, 51 percent of all Dracut LEP/FLEP students achieved *Advanced* or *Proficient* ratings, versus 30 percent in the state. In addition, the district subgroup's median Student Growth Percentile (SGP) for ELA of 58.0 approaches the high range of growth compared to statewide academic peers. Dracut LEP/FLEP students' proficiency rates in mathematics were close to, but slightly below, those of the state LEP/FLEP population (25 percent versus 29 percent). The district subgroup's Composite Performance Index (CPI) scores in both ELA and mathematics, however, exceeded the CPI scores of the statewide subgroup (76.9 versus 64.8 in ELA and 59.6 versus 59.2 in mathematics).

According to documentation provided by ESE, the percentage of district ELL students moving two or more steps on the MEPA within the same grade span, or one or more steps between grade spans, reached 96 percent in 2009, up from 64 percent in 2008, a significant improvement when compared to the statewide rate of 66 percent in 2009. Similarly, 53 percent of Dracut ELL students met or exceeded the Annual Measurable Achievement Objective (AMAO) attainment target on English language proficiency compared to the statewide rate of 34 percent.

The Dracut ELL program, in its current format for two years, is well administered, with clear policies and procedures. At the time of the review it served 51 students in grades K-12. A program director stated that the program was developed following a recommendation made after ESE's 2007 Coordinated Program Review. The reviewers were told that before that there was no

structured program, and teachers went from school to school providing tutoring in a pullout model. The program now has written procedures that include steps for initial identification of ELL students, procedures for monitoring FLEP students, a description of the instructional programs available, and a list of and timeline for assessments. The district has two certified ESL teachers, one of whom serves as the chair, as well as two paraprofessionals, one full-time and one part-time. The staff serves students in 7 schools with ELL populations ranging from 15 to 1 at the elementary level, with 4 each at the junior and senior high schools.

A significant number of teachers in Dracut have participated in training in the four categories of Sheltered English Immersion (SEI). According to the ELL director, the highest percentage of teachers trained in all four categories teach in grades K-4, while the lowest percentage of teachers trained are at the junior and senior high schools. Of the approximately 250 K-12 staff, 70 teachers have been trained in Category 1, 56 in Category 2, 65 in Category 3, and 28 in Category 4. The director noted that as ELL students move to the upper grades, the need for trained teachers at the junior and senior high schools will be greater. During interviews, the view was expressed to the team that the reasons for high teacher interest in training have been the recognition of the usefulness of the strategies in the classroom and the belief by elementary teachers that this training would be required to maintain certification.

It is the review team's judgment that the combination of strong leadership, program clarity, and extensive classroom teacher training have led to improvement in LEP/FLEP student performance on the MCAS in ELA. Of all of the academic support programs in place in Dracut, ELA MCAS data indicate that the ELL program has been the most successful in raising the achievement level of participating students.

The special education program does not meet the academic needs of its students or provide enough support to ensure that students remain in school through graduation.

MCAS data for 2009 for students with disabilities in Dracut shows that their mathematics and ELA performance is below statewide performance for this subgroup at every grade level except grade 5, and significantly below at grades 8 and 10. At grade 8, 21 percent of Dracut special education students scored *Advanced* or *Proficient* in ELA, versus 40 percent of state special education students. At grade 10, 19 percent of district special education students scored *Advanced* or *Proficient* in ELA, versus 43 percent of state special education students. In 2009, Dracut special education students in grades 3-5 and 6-8 failed to make AYP in both ELA and Math. It should be noted however, that at the high school, all subgroups met AYP in 2009, when they had not done so in 2008. Districtwide, the special education subgroup demonstrated low rates of proficiency in both ELA (19 percent) and mathematics (14 percent), as well as comparably low growth in both subjects (median SGPs of 37.5 in ELA and 31 in mathematics). Also, in Dracut the four-year graduation rate in 2009 for special education students was 51 percent, versus the state's rate for special education students of 64.9 percent; 21.6 percent of that cohort of district special education students dropped out, versus 16.1 percent of the state cohort.

Two factors which affect special education student performance were mentioned by nearly all school and program leaders: all teachers' undeveloped skills at implementing inclusion programs

effectively and the lack of content-area training for special educators, particularly in mathematics above grade 5.

Dracut does not have a districtwide initiative or requirement to train all teachers in methods of inclusion and differentiation. Participation in the few programs that exist is minimal. In documentation provided by the district, 11 teachers participated in a 4 PDP/Credit workshop entitled “Supporting Students with Disabilities in the Regular Education Classroom” in 2008-2009, and a similar number participated in “Autism Spectrum Disorders: Developing Effective Learning Environments and Strategies.” Twenty-nine teachers participated in one course this school year entitled “Special Education 101.” At the time of the review, eight regular and special education teachers were in a 30-hour comprehensive Orton-Gillingham Reading course. Enrollment in these courses is significantly lower than the number of teachers trained in the four categories of professional development in SEI for English language learners.

One principal stated that at the elementary level the inclusion model is in place in those classrooms where teachers desired to teach special education students. This has created a track for special education student placement and narrowed placement options for students. At the junior and senior high schools, while progress has been made in shifting from a pull-out to an inclusion model, principals and program leaders stated that the number of teachers trained in inclusion is insufficient and that skill levels vary, also limiting placement options for students. According to interviews, teachers’ attitudes regarding responsibility for special education students vary at each level, although some leaders said that this is changing. One administrator noted that there are pockets of teachers very skilled in differentiation, but that a large percentage have not been exposed to training. This administrator noted that progress is being made. The review team reported few examples in classroom observations of differentiation in instruction or programs.

Interviews with the executive director of special education, school principals, and teachers revealed that a system of special education processes and procedures is in place across all 7 schools; this is substantiated by the 2007 Coordinated Program Review report. However, according to the same interviewees, quality and type of service delivery vary by school. The review team also learned in interviews that this variation affects student performance at grades 5-6: service delivery models vary at the feeder schools; consequently, students arriving at grade 5 have experienced different support models. The executive director stated that he reviews and signs all individualized education programs (IEPs) and is able to monitor the types of service delivery; in recent years he has placed team chairs in each school to improve consistency.

The review team learned from interviewees that although students may be eligible for both Title I and special education, there are no systems or structures that allow for coordination between the two programs. The Title I and special education departments do not have scheduled meetings to examine data and service delivery or address at-risk students together. Thus Title I reading support and special education support are not well coordinated.

Interviewees stated that there is no systemwide data analysis for special education students. The executive director of special education indicated that analysis of individual special education

student data was the responsibility of the principals and teams. In numerous interviews with leaders and staff, all were aware of the poor performance of special education students; some voiced frustration and helplessness about not knowing how to help the students, but generally the review team did not find evidence of a sense of urgency, clear direction, or coordination among all leaders and program directors regarding the poor performance of special education students.

The executive director of special education stated that while the number of special education students in Dracut is low, 11.7 percent versus 17 percent in the state, students on the special education rolls have the “most” significant disabilities. The review team questioned whether the gap between the district and state percentages might be due to the district only having identified for special education students with greater special needs. Specialized programs in the district include: an integrated preschool program housed at Greenmont, pervasive developmental disorders (PDD) classrooms in preschool and elementary K-3, a language-based intensive needs program at Englesby Intermediate, and life skills programs at the junior and senior high schools. In 2009-2010, a grade 7-12 alternative program entitled Choices supported students with emotional disabilities (at the junior high) or behavioral needs (at the high school); the junior high school program had 5 students on IEPs while the senior high school program had some at-risk students without IEPs as well as with (6 regular education students, 4 special education students). High school staff expressed the view that the program was helping some students remain in school, though they had no specific data.

An administrator said that additional programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders are needed at the junior and senior high school levels, that teachers would benefit from training in working with this population, and that perhaps 3-4 students who are currently placed outside of the district could be returned if these changes were in place. The programs that do exist are a good start in meeting the academic learning needs of special education students, yet, according to the data, they are currently ineffective in helping students achieve proficiency in mathematics and ELA.

According to an administrator, special education teachers have not received sufficient content-area training to be able to develop in their students the skills that they need to achieve proficiency, particularly in mathematics. Only recently have special education teachers participated in professional development with classroom teachers in ELA. For example, the executive director stated that although elementary special educators were not included in past training for the balanced literacy program, in 2009-2010 they were included in training for the new Houghton-Mifflin reading program.

The review team believes that a combination of all of the factors cited above—lack of professional development in inclusion and, for special educators, in content teaching; limited placement options for students; variation in quality and type of service delivery by school; lack of coordination between reading support and special education support; and the lack of systemwide data analysis for special education—contributes to significantly poor achievement, a low graduation rate, and a high dropout rate among students with disabilities in the district.

Particularly in the upper grades, Dracut provides insufficient support to students who are not eligible for special education or Title I services, but who are struggling with behavioral or academic issues.

School and program leaders stated that there are insufficient resources and teacher training to meet the needs of students who struggle with academic or emotional problems. Dracut does provide some programs to assist students within the regular education setting. Five guidance counselors, one supervisor of guidance, and one adjustment counselor work with students at the high school. A second adjustment counselor works at the junior high school and one elementary school, and is available for crisis counseling at the intermediate school. A third adjustment counselor serves three elementary schools and special education students at the intermediate school. Teachers told the review team that there is only limited guidance staff support in the elementary schools. A “freshman support team” consisting of grade 9 staff is in place for students identified as “at risk,” and, as described above, the Choices program at the high school for students with behavioral needs admits some non-special-education students. Peer tutoring is available from student members of the National Honor Society.

Despite these programs, intermediate, junior, and senior high school leaders expressed concern that the needs of at-risk students are not adequately met. For example, the acting supervisor of guidance expressed concern that though a phone check system is in place to monitor the attendance of individual students, it relies upon each guidance counselor to place these calls, a process which can take up to an hour each day. She also noted that a credit recovery program was being worked on, but nothing concrete was yet in place. While at one time Saturday school was available to make up work and attendance, it is no longer offered. She did say that potential dropouts meet with guidance counselors before leaving school, a meeting where other options are explored, as required by G.L. c. 76, s. 18, and that a “transition counselor” works with repeating freshmen and incoming at-risk students. One assistant principal expressed concern about students who transfer to the area vocational school, are unsuccessful there, and are then “sent back” to Dracut High School.

The assignment of reading support staff in the district is driven by the location of Title I resources: there are three reading teachers provided at the elementary level, funded by district resources, and three additional reading teachers for the elementary grades provided by the Title I program. The Brookside and Parker Avenue elementary schools are Title I schools; Campbell and Greenmont Avenue are not. This leaves some students without access to sufficient help in reading. Under the direction of the executive director of special education, the district has trained some classroom teachers in the Orton-Gillingham reading program. However, direct service for students with poor reading skills is unevenly provided. Further, according to interviewees, reading support and special education support are not coordinated at the central office level. Although a Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) is in place at each school, various administrators stated that the teams vary in skill and effectiveness. Also, more training in differentiation to meet the needs of all learners is needed at all levels according to school leaders.

There are neither districtwide plans nor consistent programs across all schools to identify at-risk students, coordinate and monitor the effectiveness of support programs, or track student progress. Because there is no K-12 overview of student performance data, patterns and trends among groups can only be identified at the school level, where principals' skills in using the state's Education Data Warehouse vary. An administrator noted that there is currently no systematic vertical or horizontal collaboration among support program leaders. Exacerbating the fragmentation of services and variation in quality is the perception by school leaders that use of planning time during the school day for such purposes as team meetings and professional development is restricted by the teachers' contract. In the review team's judgment, due to the lack of cohort data analysis, K-12 program planning for support services for all students, and embedded and long-range professional development in differentiation, Dracut is unable to provide effective support for all of its students.

Financial and Asset Management

Regardless of the district's needs, required Net School Spending (NSS), as determined by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, determines the budget recommended by the town manager and superintendent of schools.

The Dracut school system is in transition between superintendents; this has resulted in different approaches to budget preparation. Under the current interim superintendent and for the ten years she was the superintendent, the budget process is and was a complex one. According to the interim superintendent, it starts with the superintendent, business manager, and bookkeeper meeting to project salaries for the ensuing budget year, since salaries make up over 80 percent of the school budget. This is followed by the distribution of a financial planning package to the principals and cost centers (health, athletics, and special education); the planning package includes data on programs, personnel, instructional expenses, textbooks, and media.

Upon completion of the planning package, the information is reviewed by each principal and cost center, where, the review team was told, there is "give and take." As more information on state aid and town revenues becomes known, several meetings with administrators take place to discuss the budget and decide what items to cut. An example of a budget change made after such a discussion was the elimination of some Merrimack Educational System (MEC) aides who were paid by the school district. These discussions are followed by one or two meetings of the school committee finance subcommittee. The budget is then submitted to the school committee for their deliberations. A public hearing follows, and ultimately final approval by the school committee.

The result of this lengthy process has been that the superintendent has forwarded an adequate budget. However, the town manager, regardless of what the superintendent has recommended, has always supported only the required Net School Spending (NSS) at the annual town meetings. A community's NSS funding must equal or exceed the NSS requirement established annually by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The level of funding in Dracut is not adequate and has resulted in insufficient staffing, professional development, and textbook replacement. The fiscal year 2009 per-pupil expenditure for the school district is \$9,606 as

compared to the state average of \$13,006. This is \$3,400 less than the state average and the fifth from the bottom of all districts across the state. Dracut ranks at the bottom in per-pupil expenditures when compared on the ESE website with ten similar districts based on grade structure, district wealth, and enrollment.

Dracut's foundation budget does not provide adequate resources to meet the educational needs of the students.

There are unresolved issues between the school district and the town—separate accounting systems, lack of transparency of school finances, and lack of an agreement on municipal expenditures in support of schools—that create inefficiencies, allow possible inaccuracies, and undermine cooperation between the two.

The school system and the town each have their own accounting software system. The school system uses the Pentamation accounting system, while the town uses Softwriters. According to town officials, there have been several unsuccessful attempts to consolidate accounting systems. The procedures that result from having dual systems involve the town accountant receiving the signed school committee warrants. These are then are posted into the town accounting system. The school system submits a quarterly Excel report to the town accountant that is also entered into the town's accounting system. The town uses a modified accrual system that is separate from the school system's full encumbrance system. These procedures create duplication.

According to one town official, officials for the town of Dracut are unable to obtain information from the school system on the "the cost to run the schools." Detailed reports regarding grants, revolving accounts, circuit breaker, tuition, and stimulus funds are not made regularly available to town officials.

In interviews with the town manager and treasurer, it was reported that there is no signed written agreement between the school department and the city on municipal expenditures in support of schools. The town finance director/treasurer provided an unsigned agreement between the town of Dracut and the school department that listed charge-backs and methods of calculation. It did not have expenditure data. A list of expenditures by the town for \$123,000, given to the review team, was included under school committee in the End of Year Report. These indirect charges were not verified by the school department. The finance director reported that the indirect charges had not been a matter of concern.

The independent accountant's report applying agreed-upon procedures for compliance applicable to Massachusetts school districts' End of Year Report states, "The Town of Dracut and the District Public School Department have not executed an ESE-compliant written methodology for reporting town expenditures paid on the behalf of the School Department. Additionally, the School Department was unable to provide sufficient support for town expenditures reported on Schedule 1, IIB. Therefore, the review team was unable to verify the accuracy of the expenditures reported." This lack of oversight and clarity concerning these charges may result in costs being improperly attributed to the school system, thereby increasing the municipality's share of the cost of the educational system. The lack of a signed written agreement on municipal expenditures in support of schools allows for the possibility of inappropriate assignment of costs.

The town manager indicated that the End of Year Report had to be revised a number of times as a result of the fiscal year 2009 audit report. The town manager stated that they did not have a final report at the time of the review team's onsite visit. The town's annual audit report showed no issues with the school's financial system.

The separate accounting systems, the lack of a signed written agreement on municipal expenditures in support of schools, and the apparent lack of transparency of the school budget are costly, confusing, and limit cooperative efforts between the schools and the town.

Recommendations

Leadership and Governance

The Dracut Public Schools should consider building upon the current disparate efforts to improve education by developing a comprehensive strategic plan that provides specific direction for the district.

The lack of significant improvement in student performance in Dracut over recent years is a result of a lack of centralized direction and coordination as well as a lack of understanding of the essential systems needed to improve student achievement. Administrators, teachers, and members of the school committee were unable to articulate a clear direction given by the leadership for the school system to improve student achievement. Furthermore, most teachers and administrators were unsure of what specific systems are needed to improve achievement. Without clear direction, achievement will continue to be much as it has been across the system. Because there is a lack of direction and a lack of infrastructure, such as a coordinated approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment, any initiatives will be episodic rather than systemic, thus impeding the improvement of student achievement.

Teachers and administrators are eager for guidance on how to improve student performance. It is advisable to capitalize on this openness to substantive change. An inclusive planning project that draws from all stakeholder groups will lay a firm foundation upon which to build a dynamic system that is responsive to the needs of all students. To make substantive change teachers and administrators need to participate in systemwide planning. They also need to be able, within the larger district strategies, to make the instructional decisions that affect their students.

A shared vision supported by clearly articulated expectations for student performance will focus the district's efforts. Annual goals to implement and measure change in curriculum, instruction, and assessment will create the cohesive structure that is needed to move the student achievement to higher levels, thus preventing stagnation. A comprehensive plan that also includes the expansion of professional development to include all teachers and budget planning to facilitate the (previously uncoordinated) purchase of materials will result in higher student achievement.

The Dracut Public Schools should re-examine and redesign their deployment of critical resources, human and financial.

The Dracut Public Schools are funded at required Net School Spending, the minimum allowed by statute. Thus, resources are precious. The team found many examples of inefficient and ineffective deployment of resources. For instance, the district does not have adequate supervisory staff in curriculum and instruction at the school level: both large elementary schools have no assistant principal, mathematics coaches have been eliminated, and district curriculum coordinators are seldom in schools providing guidance. There is no school level coordination across the elementary schools. Although students may be identified as eligible for both Title I and special education, there is no coordination between the two programs, eliminating the possibility of a more efficient delivery of services. Guidance services are deployed unevenly throughout the system. Another cogent example is the continuance of small elementary schools

(of 159 and 224 students), with their attendant administrative and support staffs, in the face of several years of reductions in the numbers of classrooms. At the same time, one wing of Lakeview Junior High School remains unoccupied.

The district used its stimulus money to support positions that would otherwise have been eliminated. While this sustains the instructional program in the short term, using this infusion of federal money for salaries creates a potential “hole” in the fiscal year 2012 budget that will have to be filled with appropriated funds to maintain these positions. This “one-time” money might have been better spent upgrading classroom technology, texts, and materials. An infusion into the professional development program to provide teachers with current research-based instructional strategies would have had a broader and longer-lasting impact.

By determining student needs and deploying its resources to better meet those needs, the district will be able to raise student achievement.

Curriculum and Instruction

The district office must initiate and direct necessary efforts to develop a complete, aligned curriculum.

Because district leadership has not taken steps to develop one, the Dracut Public Schools do not have a consistent, aligned, and effectively implemented curriculum. Instead, the district has a patchwork of curriculum that is neither complete nor aligned to state standards. It is also not aligned internally either horizontally or vertically. Principals and teachers with the best of intentions are making isolated efforts to address this situation. However, these isolated efforts will only contribute to the overall lack of coherence already characteristic of the district curriculum. District leadership must direct a systemwide comprehensive effort to establish and implement a complete, aligned curriculum. Having such a curriculum will bring clarity concerning what students across the grades and content areas must know and be able to do, which will help increase rates of proficiency and student growth.

The district must address the issues that lead to low student achievement in mathematics.

The patchwork of curriculum in mathematics is exacerbated by additional problems. Mathematics is taught substantially differently across the four elementary schools because of the change in ownership and resulting modification of the program over the ten years it has been in use in the district. And insufficient instructional time in mathematics is a widespread problem in the district. At the intermediate school, according to principals, students receive 20 minutes of mathematics instruction a day, and at some of the elementary schools, the time allotted for mathematics is dramatically lower than for ELA.

The inconsistency in the mathematics curriculum must be addressed through development, under the direction of the district office, of a complete and aligned mathematics curriculum K-12. Particular attention should be paid to horizontal and vertical alignment across the four elementary schools. Resource materials must be thoughtfully chosen and implemented with

support. And time available for mathematics instruction in the district must be increased significantly. A complete, aligned mathematics curriculum K-12, well-chosen resource materials, and more time devoted to mathematics instruction will bring coherence and focus to the program and increase student achievement in mathematics.

The district should develop a vision of effective instruction and then support its teachers as they expand and update their repertoire of instructional strategies.

In interviews, district administrators demonstrated a lack of understanding of what effective instruction looks like and of the key role teachers' use of effective instructional strategies plays in the effort to improve student achievement. Also, district professional development offerings place little emphasis on providing teachers with opportunities to expand their instructional capabilities. The review team's classroom observations revealed infrequent occurrences of many effective instructional characteristics. There was little solid evidence of students working together in groups, or articulating their thinking and reasoning, or using higher-order thinking skills. Also, in only a minority of the classrooms observed did teachers use a range of instructional techniques or check for student understanding with regularity.

Teachers need opportunities and support to learn and then incorporate a broader range of instructional strategies into their practice. Professional development opportunities during release time and after school should address this need. In addition, school staff should be available to support teachers as they take risks in implementing a broad array of instructional strategies. Only then will the district see higher rates of student proficiency and more rapid student growth.

Assessment

While providing professional development for all teachers on developing and using formative assessments, district leaders should communicate the value of formative assessments and the ways they can drive instructional change.

The district and its schools have few formative assessments in place; there is also a lack of understanding among staff regarding the value of these assessments. Throughout the review team's site visit, interviewees said that teachers do not understand that formative assessment can drive instruction. Assessment is still viewed by many as an indicator of student growth rather than as an opportunity to assess student needs and provide appropriate instruction. Interviewees said that teachers consider assessment valuable as a tool in student placement but are not at the point of using assessment to improve learning. While the district did offer one course for high school teachers on formative assessments, it should provide all its teachers with the necessary training in the development and use of formative assessments. The professional development offered continues to be scheduled after school hours rather than during release time when all teachers would be required to attend. Providing all teachers with professional development in developing and using formative assessments will give teachers the tools to assess students' needs and tailor their instruction to meet those needs, thus increasing student achievement.

The district should assign to a central office staff member the responsibility for collection, analysis, and dissemination of data. This individual should make sure that opportunities exist for staff to be trained in accessing, analyzing, and using data.

At the present time there is no individual at the district level who is responsible for the collection, analysis and dissemination of student assessment data. Only Student Information Management System (SIMS) data is maintained at the district level, by a staff member who is concerned only with this data. And while he has had no formal training in the use of the Education Data Warehouse, he has offered to provide some training on it to individuals in the district. Only principals and the ELA and mathematics coordinators at the high school have participated in this training, and most of these individuals reported they still do not feel adequately trained.

Since there is no one person responsible for data in the district, principals and department heads sort out the data and present it to staff at individual schools. However, not all principals are aware of how to access all the data that is available; some are more proficient than others. In interviews, teachers admitted a lack of ability to analyze data and understand its implications for instruction and ultimately student success. Some staff reported that new teachers, particularly, are dependent upon their colleagues for support in analyzing data. The lack of the ability to analyze data resulted in staff members at the high school reporting to the review team their view that the high school is not a data-driven school; elementary teachers expressed a similar view of their schools. The district's use of data to revise instruction is limited. In addition, interviewees could not identify programmatic or policy decisions that had been made as the result of the analysis of data.

Particularly given the reported widespread staff inability to access and analyze data, the district should assign responsibility for collecting, analyzing, and disseminating data to a central office staff member, who should also assume responsibility for providing related training in accessing, analyzing, and using data. Having a staff member who discharges these responsibilities will help staff at the school and central office levels understand weaknesses in instruction, programs, and policies and make changes to improve them, thus improving student achievement.

Human Resources and Professional Development

The district should create a mechanism to ensure that all evaluations are instructive, containing specific recommendations to promote the professional growth of teachers and administrators.

The vast majority of teacher evaluations reviewed by the team were not instructive, in that they did not contain specific recommendations that would lead to the teacher's professional growth. Specific recommendations to promote teacher growth ultimately promote student achievement. Further, administrator evaluations should be completed annually, as required, and should include specific recommendations for growth as well. This will contribute to the improvement of administrative performance.

Improved evaluation practices will allow the district to hold teachers and administrators accountable for student achievement.

The district should re-establish release time professional development days throughout the year, and clearly direct and consistently support a professional development effort aimed at curricular and instructional excellence.

While the district provides a variety of professional development opportunities for staff outside of the regular school day, there is a need to re-establish the practice of having release time professional development days throughout the year, in order to allow staff to articulate the curriculum and acquire effective instructional strategies. Although the district did provide for four half-days of in-service training during 2009-2010, driven by the need for the high school to prepare for the upcoming NEASC accreditation visit, at the time of the review team's visit there was no decision as to whether this release time would continue in 2010-2011.

In discontinuing the practice of having release time days, the district limited the ability of its staff to engage in meaningful discourse relative to both consistency and coordination of curriculum delivery and instructional practices districtwide. Lack of improvement in achievement in the district underscores the need for such discourse, clearly directed and consistently supported by the district. This cannot be accomplished without release time. The curriculum articulation and instructional improvements that will result will lead to improved student achievement.

Student Support

The district must improve the achievement of its special education students in ELA and mathematics. The district should provide training in inclusion practices for all teachers and content training for special educators, monitor the effectiveness of the special education program, and coordinate the support provided by its regular and special education programs.

In 2009, in all grades, 81 percent of students with disabilities scored Needs Improvement or Warning/Failing in ELA. In all grades in mathematics, 86 percent of students with disabilities scored in these same categories. In grades 3-8, students in the special education subgroup did not make AYP in ELA or mathematics. To improve the effectiveness of its special education program and the achievement of its special education students, the district must provide training to both regular and special education staff, develop a system to coordinate its regular and special education support programs, and monitor the effectiveness of the latter.

At the classroom level, the district must build teacher capacity to meet the learning needs of its special education students. According to administrators, all teachers do not have the tools they need to effectively teach students with IEPs. The district has already identified the need for training special educators in some content areas, in particular in mathematics. The review team was told that especially in mathematics special education teachers have not received sufficient content area training to be able to develop proficiency in their students. Content area training

must be a priority for special educators. Further development of the co-teaching model in grades 5-12 will help special and regular education teachers exchange content knowledge and specialized instructional strategies.

In addition, the review team was told that a large percentage of teachers have not been exposed to training in differentiation. To address a need recognized by most of the school and program leaders interviewed, all teachers must be trained and supported in effective inclusion practices. Maintaining only a small cadre of teachers who have been trained in these practices narrows the placement opportunities for students and impedes full ownership by all teachers of the learning of all students.

Though a system of special education processes and procedures is in place in all schools, and in recent years team chairs have been placed in each school to improve consistency, the quality and type of service delivery vary by school, in particular affecting student performance at the intermediate school as students arrive there from the elementary schools. In addition, there is no systemwide data analysis for special education students; special education data analysis is left to individual schools. The district should establish systemwide data analysis for special education and use the data to monitor the special education program. Delivery of special education services should be made consistent and high-quality.

Finally, there are no systems or structures that allow for coordination between the Title I program and the special education program—for instance, scheduled meetings to examine data and service delivery or address at-risk students together. Thus Title I reading support and special education support are not well coordinated. By providing for the coordination of the two programs, the district can provide better reading support to students in a more cost-effective manner.

By training its teachers, coordinating its regular and special education support, and using data to monitor the effectiveness of the special education it delivers, the district will address the learning needs of its special education students, thus fulfilling its educational responsibility to these students in addition to meeting requirements of federal and state law.

The district should develop and coordinate student support services to improve achievement of at-risk students regardless of the school they attend.

The assignment of reading support staff in the district is driven by the location of Title I resources, with the two Title I elementary schools receiving reading support from three additional reading teachers funded by Title I. This leaves some students without access to sufficient help in reading. Under the direction of the executive director of special education, the district has trained some classroom teachers in the Orton-Gillingham reading program. However, direct service for students with poor reading skills is unevenly provided and should be consistent throughout all the schools in the district.

There is an uneven deployment of school counselors among the schools, with some adjustment counselors split between schools and some schools without sufficient services. In addition, guidance staff at the elementary schools is limited. Deployment of guidance and counseling staff

should be reviewed and a plan developed to address the current shortage, so that the availability of the services they provide is equitable across schools.

Although a Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) is in place at each school, various administrators stated that the teams vary in skill and effectiveness. The TAT process should be consistently applied; this process assures that the needs of individual at-risk students are examined and addressed.

There are neither districtwide plans nor consistent programs across all schools to identify at-risk students, coordinate and monitor the effectiveness of support programs, or track student progress. According to an administrator, there is currently no systematic vertical or horizontal collaboration among support program leaders. Despite the programs that the district provides to assist students within regular education, intermediate, junior, and senior high school leaders expressed concern that the needs of at-risk students are not adequately met. According to school leaders, more training in differentiation to meet the needs of all learners is needed at all levels.

The district should institute K-12 program planning for support services for all students, including cohort data analysis and embedded professional development in differentiation. K-12 program planning should include a review of all student academic support systems at the intermediate, junior, and senior high schools to determine their effectiveness. Programs not supporting their at-risk students should be eliminated or drastically altered. The review, development, and coordination of support services through K-12 program planning that includes data analysis and professional development will greatly increase Dracut's ability to provide effective support for all of its students.

Financial and Asset Management

The school district and town should develop a strategic financial plan for the town that will provide adequate funding to support both the educational system and town services; the district and the town should sign a written agreement on municipal expenditures in support of schools, including indirect costs.

With the uncertainty of state, federal, and local funding, the school committee, town officials, and other stakeholders should make a unified and collaborative effort to prepare a five-year town financial strategic plan. This will ensure that available resources are allocated to both educational and town services so as to obtain the greatest benefit. During the planning period, the school district should make available requested information to town officials and to the public on expenditures from grants, stimulus funds, revolving accounts and any other state and local receipts. The plan should be reviewed and updated periodically to take into consideration updated educational and financial information.

The school district has experienced budget cuts in recent years that have resulted in the loss of staff and services and an inability to provide an effective education. Its per-pupil spending is the fifth lowest of all districts in the state for fiscal year 2009. During each budget development period, school and city officials should meet often and review areas for possible collaboration or

consolidation so as to find additional resources to meet town and educational needs. Consideration should be given to the combination of city and school services, grade level reorganization, and elementary school consolidation.

There is also a need for school district and town officials to work together to produce a signed, written agreement on municipal expenditures in support of schools. An independent accountant's report completed in conjunction with the district's 2009 End-of-Year Report noted this need, and ESE recommends it. Developing such an agreement and abiding by it will prevent the possibility of inappropriate assignment of costs to the school district.

The district should review the operation of its financial system and establish a single accounting software system for the district and the town that meets the operational and financial needs of both.

The district and town have separate accounting software and accounting systems. The resulting procedures create duplication. Additionally, according to a town official, complete reports on school finances are not available to town officials.

A review of the district's financial system should be undertaken in order to optimize its operation and investigate the possibility of reducing costs by reducing duplication of services between the town and the school district.

In particular, in order to improve efficiency of operation and reduce redundancy, the town and school district should partner to provide for a single, unified accounting system. The anticipated savings from a single accounting system will result in additional funding for the town and school system. The single system will also benefit the school system and the town by promoting transparency in how all funds are allocated and spent.

Appendix A: Review Team Members

The review of the Dracut Public Schools was conducted from April 26-April 29, 2010, by the following team of educators, independent consultants to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Christine Brandt	Student Support
Dr. William Contreras	Human Resources and Professional Development
Stratos Dukakis	Financial and Asset Management
Dolores Fitzgerald	Assessment
Dr. Magdalene Giffune	Leadership and Governance
Patricia Williams	Curriculum and Instruction, Review Team Coordinator

Appendix B: Review Activities and Site Visit Schedule

Level 3 Review Activities

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

- The review team conducted interviews with the following: town manager, finance director, chair of finance committee.
- The review team conducted interviews with the following members of the Dracut School Committee: chair; two members.
- The review team conducted interviews with the following representatives of the Dracut Teachers' Association: president, representative.
- The review team conducted interviews and focus groups with the following representatives from the Dracut Public Schools' central office administration: interim superintendent, former superintendent, curriculum coordinator 7-12, curriculum and professional development coordinator K-6, business manager, director of buildings and grounds, executive director of special education, student data manager.
- The review team visited the following schools in the Dracut Public Schools: Parker Avenue, Greenmont Avenue, Campbell Elementary, Brookside Elementary, Englesby Intermediate, Lakeview Junior High, and Dracut High School.
- During school visits, the review team conducted interviews with school principals, assistant principals, guidance staff, teachers, Title I director, ELL director, high school supervisors,
 - The review team conducted 60 classroom visits for different grade levels and subjects across the 7 schools visited.
- The review team reviewed the following documents provided by ESE:
 - District profile data
 - District Analysis and Review Tool
 - Latest Coordinated Program Review Report
 - Any District or School Accountability Report produced by Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) or ESE in the past three years
 - Staff contracts
 - Reports on licensure and highly qualified status
 - Long-term enrollment trends
 - End-of-year financial report for the district for 2009
 - List of the district's federal and state grants

- Municipal profile
- The review team reviewed the following documents at the district and school levels (provided by the district or schools):
 - Organization chart
 - District Improvement Plan
 - School Improvement Plans
 - “Blueprint for the Enhancement of Student Achievement” and subsequent progress report
 - School committee policy manual
 - Curriculum guides
 - High school program of studies
 - Calendar of formative and summative assessments
 - Copies of data analyses/reports used in schools
 - Descriptions of student support programs
 - Program evaluations
 - Student and Family Handbooks
 - Faculty Handbook
 - Professional Development Plan and program/schedule/courses
 - Teacher planning time/meeting schedules
 - Teacher evaluation tool
 - Classroom observation tools/Learning walk tools
 - Job descriptions (for central office and school administrators and instructional staff)
 - Principal evaluations
 - Randomly selected personnel files

Site Visit Schedule

The following is the schedule for the onsite portion of the Level 3 review of the Dracut Public Schools, conducted from April 26-April 29, 2010.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
April 26 Introductory meeting with district leaders; interviews with district staff and principals; review of documents; review of personnel files, school visit.	April 27 Interviews with district staff and principals; school visits (Greenmont Avenue, Parker Avenue, Campbell Elementary, Englesby Intermediate, Lakeview Junior High School); classroom observations; interview with union and focus group with parents; review of personnel files	April 28 School visits (Englesby Intermediate, Lakeview Junior High, Dracut High School); interviews with school leaders; classroom observations; teacher focus groups; school committee interviews	April 29 School visits: (Campbell Elementary, Brookside Elementary, Greenmont Avenue), interviews with school leaders; classroom observations; follow-up interviews; team meeting; closing meeting with district leaders