



## **Gill-Montague Regional School District Level 4 District Review**

---

March 2011



This document was prepared on behalf of the Center for District and School Accountability of the  
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.  
Commissioner

**Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Members**

Ms. Maura Banta, Chair, Melrose  
Ms. Harneen Chernow, Vice Chair, Jamaica Plain  
Dr. Vanessa Calderón-Rosado, Milton  
Mr. Gerald Chertavian, Cambridge  
Mr. Michael D'Ortenzio, Jr., Chair, Student Advisory Council, Wellesley  
Ms. Beverly Holmes, Springfield  
Dr. Jeff Howard, Reading  
Ms. Ruth Kaplan, Brookline  
Dr. James E. McDermott, Eastham  
Dr. Dana Mohler-Faria, Bridgewater  
Mr. Paul Reville, Secretary of Education, Worcester

Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D., Commissioner and Secretary to the Board

The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, an affirmative action employer, is committed to ensuring that all of its programs and facilities are accessible to all members of the public.

We do not discriminate on the basis of age, color, disability, national origin, race, religion, sex or sexual orientation.

Inquiries regarding the Department's compliance with Title IX and other civil rights laws may be directed to the Human Resources Director, 75 Pleasant St., Malden, MA 02148 781-338-6105.

© 2011 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

*Permission is hereby granted to copy any or all parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes. Please credit the "Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education."*

*This document printed on recycled paper.*

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education  
75 Pleasant Street, Malden, MA 02148-4906  
Phone 781-338-3000 TTY: N.E.T. Relay 800-439-2370  
[www.doe.mass.edu](http://www.doe.mass.edu)



**Table of Contents**

---

**Overview of Level 4 District Reviews ..... 1**

    Purpose ..... 1

    Key Questions ..... 1

    Methodology ..... 1

**Gill-Montague Regional School District ..... 2**

    District Profile ..... 2

    Student Performance..... 4

    Findings ..... 9

        Key Question 1: How has the district addressed the issues that placed it in Level 4? .....9

        Key Question 2: Is student achievement on the rise? ..... 18

        Key Question 3: Do the district and schools have strong systems and practices in place? 22

        Leadership and Governance .....22

        Curriculum and Instruction .....27

        Assessment.....31

        Human Resources and Professional Development .....39

        Student Support .....41

        Financial and Asset Management.....45

        Key Question 4: Has the district built the capacity to maintain continuous improvement on its own, without continued assistance from ESE targeted to the district? .....52

        Key Question 5: Does the district have the resources needed to implement a turnaround plan effectively? .....55

    Recommendations..... 57

**Appendix A: Review Team Members..... 68**

**Appendix B: Review Activities and Site Visit Schedule..... 69**

**Appendix C: Gill-Montague CPI Trends 2003-2010 for Schools and Subgroups... 73**

**Appendix D: ESE Financial Analysis of Gill-Montague for FY09 ..... 74**

**Appendix E: Commissioner’s November 23, 2010 Letter Ending Fiscal Control of GMRSD..... 84**

# Overview of Level 4 District Reviews

---

## ***Purpose***

The Center for District and School Accountability (CDSA) in the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) conducts district reviews under Chapter 15, Section 55A of the Massachusetts General Laws. CDSA will periodically review districts placed in Level 4 under 603 CMR 2.05(1)<sup>1</sup> or previously declared “underperforming” by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) and placed on turnaround plans. The purpose of this review of Level 4 districts is to provide the Department and the Board with information allowing them to assess the extent to which the district has strengthened its systems since its placement in Level 4 or the implementation of its turnaround plan, in order to determine future ESE assistance and intervention.

## ***Key Questions***

Five overarching key questions guide the work of the review team in this review.

1. How has the district addressed the issues that placed it in Level 4?
2. Is student achievement on the rise?
3. Do the district and schools have strong systems and practices in place?
4. Has the district built the capacity to maintain continuous improvement on its own, without continued assistance from ESE targeted to the district?
5. Does the district have the resources needed to implement a Turnaround Plan effectively?

## ***Methodology***

The 2010-2011 reviews use former district review reports, the district’s turnaround plan, an analysis of the district’s current systems and practices, and district and student data in order to assess the district’s progress and its capacity to sustain improvements. To focus the analysis, reviews collect evidence for each of the Key Questions and for each of the six district standards: **Leadership and Governance, Curriculum and Instruction, Assessment, Human Resources and Professional Development, Student Support, and Financial and Asset Management.** Team members preview selected district documents and ESE data and reports before conducting a four-day site visit to the district and schools. The team consists of independent consultants with expertise in each of the standards.

---

<sup>1</sup> Approved by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in April 2010.

# Gill-Montague Regional School District

---

The site visit to the Gill-Montague Regional School District (GMRSD) was conducted from September 27 –September 30, 2010. The site visit included visits to the following district schools: Turners Falls High School (9-12), Great Falls Middle School (6-8), Montague Elementary School (Pre-K-5), and Gill Elementary School (K-6). Further information about the review and the site visit schedule can be found in Appendix B; information about the members of the review team can be found in Appendix A.

## ***District Profile<sup>2</sup>***

As of the 2010-2011 school year, the district has four schools under the administration of three principals. As of June 2010, Sheffield Elementary has become Montague Elementary (pre-K to 5) and now includes the students from what was Hillcrest Elementary School (a pre-kindergarten/kindergarten school) as well as students from the Montague Center School, closed in June 2008. Gill Elementary continues to serve students from kindergarten through grade 6. Great Falls Middle School (6-8) and Turners Fall High School (9-12) now have a single principal. All Montague Elementary students move to the middle school for 6<sup>th</sup> grade. However, students at Gill Elementary have the option of remaining there for 6<sup>th</sup> grade and moving to the middle school for 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and most of them stay at Gill.

As the Table 1 below indicates, enrollment in each of the schools is low. At Gill Elementary School, enrollment is a particular issue since its enrollment has risen recently from under 100 to 131 due to the influx of “choice” students. 40 percent of its current enrollment comes from “choice” students, some from neighboring Greenfield and some district students who chose to come to Gill when the Montague Center School closed. Under the regional agreement, Gill is guaranteed its elementary school, but should some “choice” students leave the school and should the enrollment dip below 100 again, the school might no longer be viable.

**Table 1: Gill-Montague Enrollment by District and School, 2009-2010**

District	1085
Gill Elementary School	131
Montague Elementary School	398
Great Falls Middle School	240
Turners Falls High School	316

Source: ESE data

As the Table 2 below shows, the district’s students are primarily (88.4 percent) white, and 52 percent of its students fall in the low-income category.

---

<sup>2</sup> Data derived from ESE’s website, ESE’s Data Warehouse, or other ESE sources.

**Table 2: 2009-10 Gill-Montague Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity & Selected Populations**

Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity	Number	Percent of Total	Selected Populations	Number	Percent of Total
African-American	20	1.8	First Language not English	62	5.7
Asian	13	1.2	Limited English Proficient	45	4.1
Hispanic or Latino	60	5.5	Low-income	564	52.0
Native American	2	0.2	Special Education*	227	20.7
White	959	88.4	Free Lunch	433	39.9
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	4	0.4	Reduced-price lunch	131	12.1
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	27	2.5	<b>Total enrollment</b>	<b>1085</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\*Special education number and percentage (only) are calculated including students in out-of-district placements.  
Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website and other ESE data

The Board of Education, as it was then named, declared the district underperforming in June 2007 on the basis of a report by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) forwarded to the Department of Education in February 2007. The Board voted to accept a turnaround plan submitted by GMRSD at a special meeting on April 28, 2008.

The current superintendent is in his second year in Gill-Montague, having arrived in the district in July 2009. He replaced an interim superintendent who began full-time in that position in June 2007 and served in that position during 2007-2008 and 2008-2009, and who developed the turnaround plan approved in April 2008.

As a result of the school reorganization for 2010-2011, two administrative positions were temporarily added to the central office staff. The high school principal moved to the central office as assistant to the superintendent for special projects; he will retire in February 2011. In addition, the principal of what had been Hillcrest Elementary became the director of early childhood education. Her presence in the central office beyond this year is dependent upon her finding grant funding. Also, after the departure of the director of special education, an interim appointment was made to that position.

According to ESE officials, school administrators, school committee members, and town officials, one or both towns have rejected the school committee's proposed budget in each of the past four years. Each year the district called a special districtwide meeting, as provided by law,

which also failed to reach agreement on a school budget, and the commissioner of elementary and secondary education finally had to set a budget for the district.<sup>3</sup>

The local appropriation to the Gill-Montague Regional School District budget for fiscal year 2011 was \$16,408,162, down slightly from the appropriation for fiscal year 2010 of \$17,095,633. In fiscal year 2010, the total amount of actual school-related expenditures, including expenditures by the district (\$16,210,675) and expenditures from other sources such as grants (\$3,455,395), was \$19,666,068.

## ***Student Performance<sup>4</sup>***

Under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) statute, the district as a whole made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in both English language arts and mathematics in 2010 and has done so annually both in the aggregate and for all subgroups since 2006. Within grade spans, however, the picture is more complex.

In ELA,

- In grades 3-5, students have made AYP in the aggregate and for all subgroups in 2008, 2009, and 2010.
- In grades 6-8, students have not made AYP in the aggregate or for subgroups in 2008, 2009, or 2010. The white, special education and low-income subgroups did not make AYP in 2010.
- In grades 9-12 in 2010, for the first time, students did not make AYP in the aggregate and white students did not make it as a subgroup.

In mathematics,

- In grades 3-5, students have made AYP in the aggregate and for all subgroups in 2009 and 2010. However, in 2008, these students did not make AYP in either subject.
- In grades 6-8, students did not make AYP either in the aggregate or for all subgroups in both 2008 and 2009. However, in 2010, students did make AYP in the aggregate. The special education and low-income subgroups did not make AYP in 2010.
- In grades 9-12 in 2010, again for the first time, students did not make AYP in the aggregate, and white students did not make AYP as a subgroup.

---

<sup>3</sup> On November 18, 2010, two months after the review team's site visit, a districtwide meeting convened in accordance with 603 CMR 41.05(3)(f) unanimously approved the district's fiscal year 2011 budget. This action officially ended two years of fiscal control over the Gill-Montague Regional School District by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. As a result, Gill-Montague's spending and budget decisions no longer need to be submitted to ESE for approval. See Appendix E.

<sup>4</sup> Data derived from ESE's website, ESE's Education Data Warehouse, or other ESE sources.

Students in grades 3-5 have for the last two years made AYP under NCLB standards in both English language arts and mathematics. Middle school results tell a different story: beginning in 2008, only in 2010 in mathematics in the aggregate have middle school students made AYP. And at the high school in 2010, for the first time, in both ELA and mathematics, students both in the aggregate and in the white student subgroup have not made AYP.

**Table 3: 2010 Gill-Montague and State Composite Performance Index (CPI) and Median Student Growth Percentile (SGP) by Selected Subgroups**

**ELA**

	Gill-Montague		State	
	CPI	<i>Median SGP</i>	CPI	<i>Median SGP</i>
All Students (555)	82.7	42.0	86.9	50.0
Asian (3)	---	---	89.8	59.0
African American/Black (8)	---	---	76.6	46.0
Hispanic/Latino (29)	68.1	NA	73.6	47.0
White (506)	83.6	41.0	90.5	50.0
ELL (23)	69.6	NA	59.8	50.0
FLEP (---)	---	---	80.1	55.0
Special Education (123)	63.2	39.0	67.3	41.0
Low Income (291)	79.6	43.0	76.5	46.0

Note: 1. Numbers in parentheses are the numbers of students included for the purpose of calculating the CPI. Numbers included for the calculation of the median SGP are different.

2. CPI is only reported for groups of 10 or more students.

3. Median SGP is calculated for grades 4-8 and 10 and is only reported for groups of 20 or more students.

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website



**Table 4: 2010 Gill-Montague and State  
Composite Performance Index (CPI) and Median Student Growth Percentile (SGP)  
by Selected Subgroups  
Mathematics**

	Gill-Montague		State	
	CPI	<i>Median SGP</i>	CPI	<i>Median SGP</i>
<b>All Students (564)</b>	<b>74.0</b>	<b>53.0</b>	<b>79.9</b>	<b>50.0</b>
Asian (3)	---	---	89.0	62.0
African American/Black (9)	---	---	65.1	48.0
Hispanic/Latino (30)	62.5	NA	63.9	47.0
White (513)	75.1	52.0	84.1	50.0
ELL (24)	59.4	NA	56.2	53.0
FLEP (---)	---	---	73.3	55.0
Special Education (129)	56.4	32.0	57.5	43.0
Low Income (298)	69.4	46.0	67.1	47.0

Note: 1. Numbers in parentheses are the numbers of students included for the purpose of calculating the CPI. Numbers included for the calculation of the median SGP are different.

2. CPI is only reported for groups of 10 or more students.

3. Median SGP is calculated for grades 4-8 and 10 and is only reported for groups of 20 or more students.

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

The tables below show the percentages of district students achieving proficiency in ELA and mathematics between 2007 and 2010, as well as the median Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs) for 2010, by grade. Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs) are a measure of student progress that compares changes in a student's MCAS scores to changes in MCAS scores of other students across the state with similar test histories. Groups whose median SGPs are between 40 and 60 are considered to have shown moderate growth.

**Table 5: 2007-2010 Gill-Montague Proficiency Rates,  
with 2010 Median Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs), compared to State:  
by Grade  
ELA**

Grade	2007	2008	2009	2010	<i>Median SGPs 2010</i>
Grade 3—District	<b>51</b>	56	53	<b>52</b>	<i>NA</i>
Grade 3—State	59	56	57	63	<i>NA</i>
Grade 4—District	<b>36</b>	38	42	<b>41</b>	<i>32.0</i>
Grade 4—State	56	49	53	54	<i>50.0</i>
Grade 5—District	<b>37</b>	44	60	<b>62</b>	<i>57.0</i>
Grade 5—State	63	61	63	63	<i>50.0</i>
Grade 6—District	<b>60</b>	50	48	<b>48</b>	<i>29.0</i>
Grade 6—State	67	67	66	69	<i>50.0</i>
Grade 7— District	<b>56</b>	64	54	<b>65</b>	<i>47.5</i>
Grade 7— State	69	69	70	72	<i>50.0</i>
Grade 8— District	<b>72</b>	66	71	<b>67</b>	<i>59.0</i>
Grade 8— State	75	75	78	78	<i>50.0</i>
Grade 10— District	<b>66</b>	66	82	<b>69</b>	<i>46.0</i>
Grade 10— State	71	74	81	78	<i>50.0</i>

NA: SGPs are not calculated for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders because they are taking MCAS for the first time.

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

Grade 6 has lost ground in percent proficient in ELA over the last four test administrations, and grade 5 has seen a substantial increase over the same period. At other grade levels, for instance grade 7 and grade 8, the percent proficient has fluctuated over the four tests. The dramatic improvement shown for Grade 10 in 2009 was not maintained in 2010. In grades 4 and 6, the median Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs) in ELA for 2010 are notably low. Students in the other grades and the district as a whole show moderate growth.

**Table 6: 2007-2010 Gill-Montague Proficiency Rates,  
with 2010 Median Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs), compared to State:  
by Grade  
Mathematics**

Grade	2007	2008	2009	2010	<i>Median SGPs 2010</i>
Grade 3—District	38	51	60	59	<i>NA</i>
Grade 3—State	60	61	60	65	<i>NA</i>
Grade 4—District	22	22	35	40	<i>32.0</i>
Grade 4—State	48	49	48	48	<i>49.0</i>
Grade 5—District	19	22	39	45	<i>60.0</i>
Grade 5—State	51	52	54	55	<i>50.0</i>
Grade 6—District	36	31	35	34	<i>34.5</i>
Grade 6—State	52	56	57	59	<i>50.0</i>
Grade 7— District	33	31	27	45	<i>81.5</i>
Grade 7— State	46	47	49	53	<i>50.0</i>
Grade 8— District	52	43	27	33	<i>47.5</i>
Grade 8— State	45	49	48	51	<i>51.0</i>
Grade 10— District	69	65	78	60	<i>46.0</i>
Grade 10— State	69	72	75	75	<i>50.0</i>

NA: SGPs are not calculated for 3<sup>rd</sup> graders because they are taking MCAS for the first time.

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website; and, for 2007 all grades data, District Analysis and Review Tool on ESE website

Percentages of students achieving proficiency in mathematics in grades 3, 4, 5 and 7 have risen significantly, while there has been a downward trend over the four test administrations in the mathematics proficiency rate in grade 8. And, as in ELA, grade 10 showed a substantial gain in the proportion of students achieving proficiency in mathematics in 2009, but that gain was not maintained in 2010. As for students' growth between 2009 and 2010, the median SGPs are notably low for grades 4 and 6 and notably high for grade 5 and, especially, grade 7. Other grades and the district as a whole show moderate growth.

For additional information and analysis of student achievement, see Key Question 2 in this report.

## **Findings**

### **Key Question 1: How has the district addressed the issues that placed it in Level 4?**

**The district has completed numerous action steps and attained numerous goals in the turnaround plan. However, the key goal of creating an educationally sound and fiscally sustainable budget for fiscal year 2009 and beyond is not yet in place, and the district's need for leadership in the four areas identified in 2007 remains. In addition, the turnaround plan does not always effectively address the issues that placed the district in Level 4.**

The Board of Education, as it was then called, declared the Gill-Montague Regional School District underperforming in June 2007 on the basis of a report by the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) forwarded to the Department of Education in February 2007. By its vote, the Board directed the commissioner to appoint a fact-finding team to “assess the reasons for the under-performance and whether the district has the capacity and willingness to implement effectively an improvement plan in partnership with the Department.” In its District Leadership Evaluation Report of November 2007, the fact-finding team found that the district needed leadership in four areas: at the superintendent, curriculum and instruction, school committee, and municipal levels. In 2010, the district's need for leadership in these four areas remains. The new superintendent has made some progress but is still trying to lead the district out of its financial problems and has not been able to turn his full attention to the leadership and management of the instructional program. Large gaps remain in the development of curriculum and the implementation of effective instruction. The school committee has resolved the elementary school configuration issue, but because of the contentious nature of its meetings focuses little attention on improving the achievement of its students. And municipal leaders are not doing their part to move the stakeholders to consensus on establishing the budget: as described above, one or both towns have rejected the school committee's proposed budget in each of the past four years, resulting eventually in the commissioner of elementary and secondary education having to set the district's budget.<sup>5</sup>

*Impediments to resolving the district's budget problems and addressing the improvement of student achievement:*

Many factors make it difficult for the district to focus on its mission, improving student achievement, but three stand out. Interviews revealed that these issues constitute impediments that stakeholders have not been able to move past. The first is the closing of the Montague

---

<sup>5</sup> As noted earlier in this report, on November 18, 2010, two months after the review team's site visit, a districtwide meeting convened in accordance with 603 CMR 41.05(3)(f) unanimously approved the district's fiscal year 2011 budget. This action officially ended two years of fiscal control over the Gill-Montague Regional School District by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. As a result, Gill-Montague's spending and budget decisions no longer need to be submitted to ESE for approval. See Appendix E.

Center School in June 2008. When it was closed, the school had an enrollment of 63 students and was no longer viable. However, it served one of the five villages in Montague, and that village prided itself on the educational and socio-economic background of its citizens and fought fiercely to maintain its own village school. Interviewees repeatedly stressed that continuing bitterness over the closing affects many aspects of district operations, but particularly has effects within the school committee and among Montague Center parents.

The second major stumbling block is the town officials' negative memory of recent increases in school spending, increases that occurred in spite of a decrease in fiscal year 2009 in required net school spending. These increases are associated in town officials' minds with the interim superintendent's decision to award three-year contracts to several central office administrators. The memory of these spending increases interferes with town officials' ability to trust the district administration and move forward to address the district's severe budget problems.

A third issue, and another contributing to the failure to resolve Gill-Montague's budget issues, is the determination on the part of many to "keep the state at the table." Interviewees frequently repeated this phrase as the reason some key stakeholders are unwilling to resolve the district's budget issues. In other words, there is a fear that if a district budget is approved, the state will not continue to support the district as extensively as it has. In fact, the turnaround plan specifically states the district's belief that the state must play a major role in sustaining it fiscally. The plan's executive summary recounts what the district has done up to that point to address its challenges and asserts that it cannot sustain itself fiscally without continuing state support. In the Key Recommendations on page 6 of the plan is a list of six recommendations for ESE funding. In fact, all but two of the goals in the turnaround plan, Goals A and B, are predicated on ESE support. Goal A, "Resolve elementary configuration question," has been accomplished with the closing of the Montague Center School and the establishment of the Montague Elementary School. Goal B, "Create an educationally sound and fiscally sustainable budget for FY09 and beyond," has not been accomplished, but to a certain extent the state has shouldered this responsibility by setting the district's budget for the last three years. But beyond Goals A and B, the turnaround plan's goals involve improving elementary and secondary education, restoring elementary, middle, and high school programs, and reorganizing central office and educational administrative staffing. And the numerous action steps that accompany each goal involve numerous positions and programs to be added with few or no entries as to their funding sources.

This final stumbling block in the way of the district addressing its challenges, the determination of some and the assumed need in the turnaround plan to "keep the state at the table," is built on the belief is that the district cannot "make a go of it" without extensive state support. There is a real concern among many that if the district addresses its challenges and comes up with a budget, the state may then back away rather than remaining a continuing funding source. The district's insistence that state aid is the *sine qua non* of its viability is a barrier to its turning itself around.

*Shortcomings in the turnaround plan:*

The interim superintendent developed the turnaround plan. The expressed assumption of the plan is that the district cannot effectively turn itself around without substantial state support. The goals in the plan are wide-ranging and might provide an effective frame for a turnaround. However, many of the action steps involve hiring individuals and implementing programs for which the plan frequently does not specify funding sources and seems to assume outside support. In any event, if all the action steps were completed (and they have not been), the district would not necessarily turn itself around. Hiring a superintendent by itself does not mean the district has effective leadership. Creating the position of director of curriculum, instruction, and professional development does not necessarily lead to the development of an effective aligned curriculum or the implementation of effective instructional strategies in classrooms. Adopting the Developmental Design program at the middle school may or may not improve middle school achievement. The turnaround plan does not get at what it will take for the district to become a coherent system in which all the working parts address students' needs.

As the following paragraphs will indicate, the district has completed a number of the action steps in the turnaround plan. However, the various kinds of leadership called for in the District Leadership Evaluation Report (long-term superintendent leadership, curriculum and instruction leadership, school committee leadership, and municipal leadership) are not yet fully in place. Simply continuing to address action steps in the turnaround plan will not necessarily turn the district around.

The original turnaround plan was accepted by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in April 2008; the new superintendent has released updates dated September 3, 2009, and August 19, 2010. To avoid confusion in this report, the original 2008 turnaround plan is the basis for the review team's summary of its implementation. However, references are made throughout the summary to the 2009 and 2010 updates. Also, only action steps that have not yet been completed are described in this report.

*GOAL A: Resolve elementary configuration question.*

Action Steps A, B, C, D.                      Completed

Although these action steps have been completed, a few issues still require attention. They include:

- the inconsistent delivery of the grade 6 curriculum and the resulting inconsistent preparation of 6<sup>th</sup> graders for grade 7 given the housing of most of the grade 6 students at the Great Falls Middle School and others at the Gill Elementary School;
- the equity of resources—services and staff—at the two grade 6 locations, particularly specialty and support personnel such as reading, art, music, and physical education teachers.

*GOAL B: Create an educationally sound and fiscally sustainable budget for FY 09 and beyond.*

The district has completed some action steps but the overall goal has not been achieved.

The superintendent's 2010 update on the turnaround plan noted that major savings have been accomplished to create room in budgets for the restoration of programs and services. Montague Center School has been closed. The district has joined the Group Insurance Commission (GIC) to reduce health insurance costs. A long-range fiscal sustainability plan is being prepared. Administrators reported that teacher contracts have been negotiated within budget parameters (teachers got zero percent raises for fiscal year 2010 but received step movement, and in fiscal year 2011 teachers stayed at the same step but the salary at each step was increased). The district has reduced special education costs by creating programs to provide in-district services for some students who had had out-of-district placements.

However, as described in detail under Key Question 3, these steps have not been sufficient to create fiscally sustainable budgets. In June 2010 Montague rejected the assessment needed to fund the fiscal year 2011 budget, as, in the face of uncertain and declining state aid, one or both of Gill-Montague's member towns have done every year since 2007, depending on ESE each year to set district budgets.

*GOAL C: Restore elementary educational programs and services.*

Action Step A: Restore elementary educational programs and services (three-year phase-in).

A1, 2, 3, 4, 9. Completed

A5. Provide additional art, music, and PE instruction. Not completed and dropped from later turnaround plan updates.

A6. Hire math coach for Math Expressions curriculum. Completed, but position grant-funded and scheduled for elimination in June 2011.

A7. Hire reading coach (replacing Reading First grant position). Completed, but position grant-funded and eliminated in June 2010.

A8. Hire computer technology teacher for elementaries. Completed

Train teachers in Galileo. Completed, but Galileo dropped and Northwest Education Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress tests adopted.

A10. Provide science specialist (physical and environmental). Not completed and dropped from later turnaround plan updates.

A11. Provide foreign language instruction. Not completed and dropped from later turnaround plan updates.

*GOAL D: Improve elementary education.*

Action Step A: Extend Responsive Classroom model to all elementary classrooms and schools.

A1. Completed

A2. Completed and ongoing.

A3. Working with Northeast Foundation for Children (NEFC), develop rubrics and monitoring tools for student achievement. Not completed and dropped in later turnaround plan updates.

Action Step B: Establish Math Expressions as core math curriculum

B1, 2. Completed

B3. Math coaches continue to help teachers implement. Completed, but both math coaching positions scheduled for elimination in June 2011 when grant funding ends.

Action Step C: Maintain and expand reading and literacy initiatives.

C1, 3. Completed

C2. Hire reading coach to continue support of literacy teaching. Completed, but position eliminated in June, 2010, in connection with budget reductions.

Action Step D: Map and align elementary curriculum, identify power standards.

D1. Complete mapping and alignment for math and ELA. Curriculum mapping not completed. Pre-K to 12 literacy team scheduled to complete ELA vertical alignment in June 2011. Math alignment not yet addressed.

D2. Completed

D3. Develop rubrics and academic expectations linked to maps and standards. Not completed and later dropped from turnaround plan.

Action Step E: Explore Expanded Learning Time (ELT) models.

E1, 2, 3. The director of curriculum informed review team members that after two years of study of the potential for extended teaching and learning time, particularly at the Sheffield Elementary School, the district made the decision not to submit a grant proposal because the time frame overlapped with the time frame for the reconfiguration of the elementary schools—a task that consumed the district's time, energies, and attention. In addition, the state appeared unable to financially support ELT for teachers and staff long-term, and district leaders were sure that district resources could not support the effort indefinitely, especially



with respect to transportation. In addition, the district had received a five-year 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center Grant to provide both before- and after-school academic assistance and enrichment activities for most high-risk students. This program continues.

*GOAL E: Restore middle school and high school programs and services.*

Action Step A: Restore middle school and high school educational programs and services to students (three year phase-in).

A3,4,9. Completed

A1. Add math/science instructor at high school. Not completed due to lack of funding.

A2. Add teacher to 8<sup>th</sup> grade team. Not completed and later eliminated from turnaround plan.

A5. Add 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade team leaders. Tenth grade team not established. Ninth grade team leader position created and filled, but the individual resigned from that role in 2010 due to lack of team common planning time.

A6. Add middle school math specialist. Completed, but scheduled for elimination when grant funds no longer available.

A7. Add high school career/guidance counselor. Not completed due to lack of funding.

A8. Add middle school reading specialist. Completed, but position scheduled for elimination when grant funding ends.

Action Step B. Provide professional development to teachers to improve teaching effectiveness.

B6. Completed

B1, 2. Galileo software training for all teachers and Galileo software trainer/coach. Completed, but use of Galileo software discontinued.

At the request of the school committee the superintendent developed a document entitled “Strategic Vision,” which he presented to it in March 2010. In that document he proposed a three-year plan for focusing on curriculum, instruction, and assessment, Year One of which, 2010-2011, was to be spent re-defining assessment. A key and commonly understood goal of the Year of Assessment, as it is called in later district documents, was to eliminate the Galileo benchmark assessment system and replace it with a new, more adaptive, diagnostic growth model assessment, using the Northwest Evaluation Association’s (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests. The early stages of this have been

accomplished. Newly appointed school-based assessment teams will work with their school's faculty to analyze MAP test data—RIT scores and growth profiles—to position teachers to develop differentiated lessons and assessments. The school-based assessment teams received professional development during the summer of 2010 to prepare them to analyze MAP test data, and there will be ongoing professional development for team members. However, there is concern because the number of professional development half days has been reduced from 11 to 4. The very real need to use professional development to build teacher capacity to analyze and use assessment data may not be addressed because time and funds for professional development are already stretched to the limit and will likely either not be available at all or not be available in sufficient quantity for teacher training in this area this year.

B3. Responsive Designs Training. The Developmental Design program is here incorrectly referenced. Completed and ongoing.

B4. Collins Writing program Training. Not yet addressed. Planned for future.

B5. Sedita Literacy training. Sedita Keys to Literacy training for middle school coaches has occurred, along with some implementation in middle school reading classes. However, other trained coaches have full-time teaching responsibilities and so have limited opportunities to work with teachers. Plans to expand to other grade levels have not been addressed.

#### GOAL F: *Improve secondary education.*

Action step A: Continue to train teachers in curriculum mapping to align curriculum and assessments with standards.

A1. Continue to train teachers in curriculum mapping. No further training has occurred. Not completed.

A2. Map additional courses and put on-line. Mapping not complete. Two new high school Advanced Placement courses being mapped this year.

A3. Vertical mapping by content area 6-12. Not completed. ELA vertical mapping underway. No plans for vertical mapping in mathematics.

Action Step B: Expand 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy to 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Initiative dropped due to scheduling difficulties.

Action Step C: Maintain and expand Reconnecting Youth dropout prevention program. (Program re-named Rise Up.)

C1, 2, 3. Completed

Action Step D: Train all staff in use of Galileo software to improve continuous assessment and remediation of students. Completed. See Goal E, Action Step B.

Action Step E: Continue literacy initiative for MS and HS staff.

E1, 3, 4. Completed

E2. Generate implementation timetable with team-set goals. Not yet addressed due to coaches' lack of available time.

Action Step G: Advisor/Advisee High School program

G1, 2, 3. Completed

*GOAL G: Reorganize central office and educational administrative staffing.*

Action Step A: Plan educational administrative staffing for SY08-09.

Action Steps 1-11 completed. However, further adjustments have been made. The director of elementary education has become the director of curriculum, instruction, and professional development. And the principal for Hillcrest Elementary School is now in the central office as director of early childhood education. The Hillcrest students have been absorbed into Montague Elementary School.

The documents available to the review team and interviews with administrators indicated that the district currently has seven central office administrators as well as three principals and three assistant principals. The superintendent stated that although the district had hired some additional central office administrators and some new principals and assistant principals since the development of the turnaround plan, he was reviewing the overall administrative needs of the central office. In addition, he mentioned that this was an appropriate time for such a review since the three-year contracts for almost all central office administrators expire at the end of this school year (2010-2011). According to the superintendent, this goal is still a work in progress.

Action Step B: Re-do all administrative contracts.

B1, 3, 4. Completed

B2. Perform county-wide compensation survey. The superintendent indicated that a compensation survey was in progress for future central office administrator contracts since most of them end in June 2011.

Action Step C: Add central office capacity to manage data, technology, and IT training of staff.

The district has made progress in the collection and dissemination of achievement data and in its increased expectations for the analysis and use of assessment data to drive instructional and programmatic decision-making. The coordinator of data services in the past produced data reports from the Galileo assessment system and MCAS; these were disseminated to district and school leaders and other stakeholders. This year, Galileo has been discontinued and replaced with NWEA MAP tests. Reports from the MAP tests in ELA and mathematics will be collected and disseminated. While raw achievement data is plentiful in the district, there was little evidence that analysis of raw data takes place beyond discussions in grade level or subject level meetings. There was no evidence that leaders prepare documents or presentations showing trend analyses or cohort comparisons of raw data to share throughout the district. When principals presented MCAS data at a school committee meeting observed by the review team, there were no visuals to inform the public in attendance about MCAS, although meeting packets sent to committee members probably contained visuals, and the principals handed information to them at the meeting. The MCAS presentations by the principals at the school committee meeting were inconsistent in the extent to which they referred to AYP status, subgroups, student growth percentiles, proficiency trends, and comparisons; in fact, there were hardly any such references. Although data is clearly collected and disseminated in the district, it is not yet analyzed and used to provide stakeholders with the best possible information about progress and the best possible information on which to base decisions about instruction and assessment.

## Key Question 2: Is student achievement on the rise?<sup>6</sup>

**Student achievement in the district presents a mixed picture, with some areas of improvement but some persistently negative indicators.**

To address the question whether student achievement is on the rise, it is useful to look at percentages of students scoring at or above the Proficient level on MCAS since that, broadly understood, is a school district's goal with regard to MCAS achievement—to bring all students to proficiency. As Table 7 below indicates, there has been a steady but small increase in the percentage of students scoring Proficient or Advanced in ELA from 2006 to 2010. However, in 2010 only 58 percent of all students are proficient, a generally low percentage and 10 percentage points below the state proficiency rate. The district also shows an increase in the percentage of students scoring at or above proficient in mathematics between 2006 and 2010, from 31 percent to 45 percent. There has been a 14 percentage point improvement over this period, but 2006 achievement levels were extremely low, and in 2010, despite the improvement, only 45 percent of district students are proficient in mathematics. The increase is again steady, but the district's proficiency rate is considerably below the 58 percent of students in the state scoring proficient or above in mathematics, and it means that 55 percent of the district's students continue to score in the Warning/Failing or Needs Improvement category in mathematics.

**Table 7: 2006-2010 Proficiency Rates for All Gill-Montague Students Compared to State, for ELA and Mathematics**

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
District ELA	52	55	56	58	58
State ELA	63	66	65	67	68
District Math	31	39	39	41	45
State Math	47	53	55	56	58

Source: District Analysis and Review Tool on ESE Website

Since 2008, the state has calculated Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs), a measure of student progress that compares changes in a student's MCAS scores to changes in MCAS scores of other students across the state with similar test histories. Groups whose median SGPs are between 40 and 60 are considered to have shown moderate growth. Table 8 below shows a decrease in the district's median SGP in ELA between 2008 and 2010, from 47 to 42, a decrease to a score very low in the moderate range. In mathematics, the median SGP has increased between 2008 and 2010, from 39 to 53. The state considers a change in a group's median SGP of 10 points or more over two or three test administrations educationally meaningful. The district's students have

---

<sup>6</sup> Data derived from ESE's website, ESE's Education Data Warehouse, or other ESE sources.

shown meaningful growth in mathematics since 2008. And the district’s median SGP in mathematics is above the state’s, which is always at 50.

**Table 8: 2008-2010 Gill-Montague Median Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs) in ELA and Mathematics**

	2008	2009	2010
District ELA Median SGP	47	39	42
District Math Median SGP	39	47	53
State Median SGP	50	50	50

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

The Composite Performance Index (CPI) is a 100-point measure of students’ progress toward proficiency in English language arts and mathematics. Table 9 below shows that district students have a higher performance level in ELA than in mathematics, but their performance in ELA shows minimal movement between 2008 and 2010. In mathematics, while students have a lower performance level than in ELA, there is steady improvement over the two-year period.

**Table 9: 2008-2010 Gill-Montague CPIs in ELA and Mathematics**

	2008	2009	2010
English language arts	82.0	82.7	82.7
Mathematics	66.6	69.6	74.0

Source: District Analysis and Review Tool

The district’s overall attendance rate in 2009-2010 was 94.0 percent. This rate is close to the statewide attendance rate for 2009-2010 of 94.6 percent. However, the district’s attendance rate has fallen steadily since 2007-2008, when it was 94.8 percent; in 2008-2009, it was 94.3 percent. The attendance rates in individual schools vary as is usual in districts: both elementary schools have higher rates, with Gill Elementary at 95.9 percent and Sheffield (now Montague) at 95.1 percent in 2009-2010. The Great Falls Middle School’s 2009-2010 rate was 93.2 percent and Turners Fall High School’s rate was lower, at 92.5 percent. An important additional piece of data, shown by Table 10 below, is that students in grades 6-12 are chronically absent at high rates.<sup>7</sup> The highest rate is at grade 8 where 28.2 percent of the students were chronically absent in 2009-2010. More than one out of five students was chronically absent in each of the high school grades, also. At every middle school and high school grade, students were chronically absent at higher rates, sometimes significantly higher, than students in that grade across the state.

<sup>7</sup> Chronic absence is defined as absence for more than 10 percent of a student’s days enrolled in the district.

So while the overall attendance rate is acceptable, a closer look at the data reveals pockets of unacceptable attendance that need attention.

**Table 10: 2009-2010 Rates of Chronic Absence for Gill-Montague in Grades 6-12, Compared to State Rates**

	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade10	Grade11	Grade 12
Gill-Montague	15.6	19.0	28.2	23.1	24.4	21.9	25.6
State	8.9	10.7	12.9	20.0	18.5	19.5	21.4

Note: Chronic absence is defined as absence for more than 10 percent of a student’s days enrolled in the district.

Source: ESE Education Data Warehouse

As Table 11 below indicates, the percentage of students receiving out-of-school suspensions in the district is high; 10.0 percent of students in the district received out-of-school suspensions in 2009-2010. Although this is down from the previous two years, the district’s rate of out-of-school suspensions has been and remains considerably higher than the rate across the state. According to ESE Education Data Warehouse data, the percentage of students receiving out-of-school suspensions has been particularly high in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. In 2008, 19.2 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders received out-of-school suspensions; in 2009 20.5 percent; and in 2010 23.1 percent. In 2009 and 2010 the 8<sup>th</sup> grade was the grade with the highest percentage of students receiving out-of-school suspensions.

The district dropout rate has shown significant improvement. Between 2005 and 2009, the rate has trended steadily downward from a high of 10.4 percent in 2005 to a low of 3.5 percent in 2009. At 3.5 percent in 2009, the district was approaching the state rate of 2.9 percent.

However, according to the data available at the time of the review, in 2009 the district’s graduation rate was 66.0 percent. This compares most unfavorably with the state graduation rate of 81.5 percent for the same year.

**Table 11: 2008-2010 Selected Student Indicators (in Percentages) for Gill-Montague, with State Comparisons**

		2008	2009	2010
Out-of-School Suspension rate	District	11.0	10.9	10.0
	State	6.2	5.3	6.0
Annual Dropout rate, Grades 9-12	District	5.8	3.5	*
	State	3.4	2.9	*
4-year Graduation Rate	District	64.7	66	*
	State	81.2	81.5	*

\*Data not yet available

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

Examining the district’s data around student achievement leads to mixed conclusions. There has been a small but steady increase in the percentage of students scoring Proficient and above in both ELA and mathematics over the last four years, an increase that is slightly greater than the increase in proficiency in these subjects at the state level. However, district proficiency rates are still well below proficiency rates statewide, and they mean that in both ELA and mathematics large percentages of students in the district are not achieving proficiency. The increase in median student growth percentiles is encouraging in mathematics, but in ELA they have decreased over the last two years to low moderate growth. And in 2009 the ELA median SGP for the district was below the moderate growth range.

The district’s overall attendance rates are close to the state’s, but there are high rates of chronic absenteeism between grades 6 and 12. On the positive side, the dropout rate has seen a remarkable decrease and is now close to the state rate. But the district’s four-year graduation rate was only 66 percent in 2009. In sum, proficiency levels are rising slowly, but large percentages of the district’s students are not achieving proficiency. The dropout rate has dropped, but the district’s graduation rate is still remarkably low.

Given the persistence of some negative indicators, the team concludes that student achievement is not yet on the rise overall.



### **Key Question 3: Do the district and schools have strong systems and practices in place?**

#### **Leadership and Governance**

##### **Stakeholders expressed different opinions and uncertainty as to which educational plan is driving the school system.**

Administrators stated that the former interim superintendent prepared the initial district turnaround plan dated January 30, 2008. The plan included an introduction, executive summary, key findings and recommendations, a narrative on district leadership, educational improvement, and fiscal analysis, seven goals, and four appendices. The seven goals, accompanied by objectives and suggested action plans, were: (A) resolve elementary configuration question, (B) create an educationally sound and fiscally sustainable budget, (C) restore elementary educational programs and services, (D) improve elementary education, (E) restore middle and high school programs and services, (F) improve secondary education, and (G) re-organize central office and educational administrative staffing.

According to the superintendent and school committee members in interviews, the current superintendent prepared a “Strategic Vision” at their request. He presented the Strategic Vision to them on March 16, 2010. This document included background information, district strengths, weaknesses, values, vision (whole child) and goals (school committee, administrative and school level), and the fiscal landscape. Its overarching strategy was to focus on leadership, instructional improvement, early childhood and elementary education, and secondary education. School committee action was required. The school committee members and the superintendent indicated that the school committee accepted the Strategic Vision. The school committee meeting minutes of March 16, 2010, substantiate this.

The superintendent and the other central office administrators mentioned that not every school in the district has a School Improvement Plan. These interviewees said that the Great Falls Middle School and the Turners Falls High School did not have School Improvement Plans as a result of the lack of interest on the part of parents in serving on the councils of the two schools. The principal confirmed this.

The Gill Elementary School has a 2010-2011 improvement plan approved by the superintendent with four goals and accompanying objectives. The four goals focus on (1) aligned curriculum, (2) assessment and tiered instruction, (3) fostering family-school relationships, and (4) students’ social, emotional and health needs.

The principal of Montague Elementary School shared a draft copy of her school’s 2011 improvement plan with the review team. The plan has four goals, namely (1) academic achievement, (2) whole child breadth of learning, (3) increased parent/guardian engagement, and (4) increased school and learning readiness for young children (0-5 years). Each goal has a minimum of two and a maximum of four objectives. Also, each objective identifies key

instructional actions, the ways progress is determined, person(s) responsible, and professional development and resources needed.

When questioned about which educational plan is driving the school system, the superintendent identified the turnaround plan. He stated that the turnaround plan is the District Improvement Plan. Furthermore, the superintendent remarked that he envisioned the Strategic Vision as a plan to follow the turnaround plan, or to be incorporated into a succeeding turnaround plan if one is developed.

School committee members whom the review team interviewed said that the school committee had input into the Strategic Vision and that it is the educational plan that is driving the school district. They said that the superintendent prepared the Strategic Vision at their request. When questioned about School Improvement Plans for 2010-2011, school committee members said that they had not received any of them and had no knowledge of their existence.

Other central office administrators had various opinions about which plan was providing direction for the school system. Some said it is the turnaround plan, some said the Strategic Vision, and others said both plans. The three principals expressed the view that the Strategic Vision is the document driving the district. Two of the principals also mentioned their School Improvement Plans as the documents they follow to move their schools ahead, while the third principal confirmed that an improvement plan for her schools did not exist. One of the principals told the review team that when she assumed her position, she had prepared an entry plan at the request of the superintendent and that she had taken her direction from that. The principals mentioned the goals in the Strategic Vision—goals for the school committee, administrative team, and individual schools.

Most of the teachers who were asked which plan is providing direction for the school district mentioned the Strategic Vision, while some named the turnaround plan and others were uncertain.

There is not unanimous understanding among the various stakeholders as to which educational plan is providing direction for the school system. As a result, confusion exists in the school system and in the regional school district's communities concerning which educational plan the administrators and teachers are to follow. Without a single agreed-upon plan that is regularly referenced and used to monitor progress and make mid-course corrections, the district cannot develop the systems necessary to move it forward.

**The number of central office and school level administrators has increased from 10 in 2006-2007 to 13 in 2010-2011 and contributes to the political and fiscal stress in the district.**

According to a document made available to the review team, in 2006-2007 the district had four central office administrators. They were the superintendent, director of business operations, director of student services/special education, and director of grants. At the school level, the district had five administrative positions, namely, a principal of secondary education, an assistant principal for Turners Falls High School/Great Falls Middle School, a principal for Sheffield

Elementary School, a principal for Hillcrest Elementary School, and a shared principal (.5 each) for Gill and Montague Center elementary schools.

In 2010-2011, the central office has seven administrative positions, those of the superintendent, assistant to the superintendent for special projects, director of curriculum, instruction, and professional development, director of business operations, director of student services/special education, director of early childhood education, and director of grants. In spite of the consolidation of elementary schools, the number of administrative positions at the school level is now six: those of the principal/headmaster of the Turners Falls High School (TFHS)/Great Falls Middle School (GFMS), an assistant principal/housemaster of TFHS, an assistant principal/housemaster of GFMS, a principal at Gill Elementary School, and a principal and an assistant principal at the Montague Elementary School. The number of administrators in the district was confirmed from observations, interviews, and an examination of documents including the GMRSD Central Office Organizational Chart and administrative job descriptions.

Increasing the size of the administrative staff has raised concerns. Interviewees expressed awareness that Gill-Montague’s administrative staff is appreciably larger than that of similar-sized districts (see Table 12 below) and expressed concern about the number of administrators, especially at the central office, given the current economy and the financial constraints in Gill and Montague.

**Table 12: 2009-2010 Gill-Montague District Leadership FTEs and Student-to-Leadership Ratio, Compared to Six Similar Districts<sup>8</sup>**

	Gill-Montague	Ayer	Mohawk Trail	North Brookfield	Pioneer Valley	Quaboag	Ware
District Students	1,085	1,197	1,130	627	1,167	1,452	1,309
District Leadership, FTEs	7.1	4.3	6.5	2.0	5.4	5.0	2.9
Student-to-Leadership Ratio	152:1	276:1	175:1	314:1	216:1	290:1	451:1

Source: ESE analysis of Education Personnel Information Management System (EPIMS) and Student Information Management System (SIMS) data

<sup>8</sup> These six K-12 districts are of similar size to Gill-Montague (500-1,500 students) and are similar and/or are considered benchmark districts by the Technical Panel of the Gill-Montague Oversight Group (see the end of the second finding under Financial and Asset Management, below).

A concern registered often during interviews was the perception that some of the money saved from the contentious closing of the Montague Center School, which was decided on for financial as well as educational reasons, was used for administrative salary increases and new administrative positions. These perceptions create a lack of trust among stakeholders. The increase in the number of administrators in the district in recent years is one of the factors contributing to the lack of financial support for the school department's annual budget.

**Members of the Gill-Montague Regional School Committee have difficulty working with one another and do not have sufficient clarity or agreement on appropriate roles and responsibilities of a school committee member, including the responsibility to advocate for the school district budget.**

Interviewees indicated that the school committee divides into three groups, (1) supporters of the schools and their programs, (2) individuals who still resent the closing of the Montague Center School, and (3) fiscal conservatives. They also indicated that school committee members have difficulty working with one another. Their meetings were reported to be contentious and confrontational; teachers said that they were demoralized by conflicts among the school committee. When questioned, school committee members claimed that they understood their roles and responsibilities. However, many other interviewees disagreed. The superintendent reported that last year, on two occasions, he brought in individuals who provided professional development sessions for the school committee on their roles and responsibilities under the Education Reform law. He added that following these two sessions some school committee members indicated that they did not agree with the presenters.

Not only do school committee members have difficulty working with one another, but also, interviews indicated, some are not reliable advocates for the students. Some interviewees reported that the previous year some school committee members voted for the school department's budget and then advocated against the assessment at the town meeting with the explanation that if the town rejected the assessment, the state would continue to provide additional aid to the district.

It is essential for the school committee members to understand their roles and responsibilities as leaders overseeing education in the district. Their demeanor and actions not only reflect on themselves, but also affect the image that they project of the district, and with it the amount of community respect for committee leadership and the amount of community support for the schools.

**Some members of other stakeholder groups are not advocates of the educational system and have difficulty working collaboratively within and across groups.**

In addition to the school committee, there are four stakeholder groups in the district: the Gill and Montague communities; the town officials; the Gill-Montague Education Association; and school and district administrators.

The **communities of Gill and Montague** make up the first of these other stakeholder groups; like the school committee, they also do not always advocate for the school system. Interviewees characterized Gill as a community of farmers, many of whom are well educated. In recent years Gill has supported the school budget, but this has not always been the case. The town of Montague consists of five villages, each with its own personality. Interviewees reported that the closing of the Montague Center School (63 pupils) for financial reasons was a controversial and stressful issue that still rankles in the two communities. As a result, there has been no agreement among the residents of the five different villages in Montague during the past four years to rally together to pass an annual school department budget. However, several school leaders and parents reported a recent positive development. The Gill-Montague Community School Partnership has sponsored various activities such as community dinners and a block party with the goal of increasing parent engagement.

Principals reported that parent involvement varies from school to school and level to level. At the elementary level, principals described active parent involvement and the existence of school councils and School Improvement Plans. However, administrators commented that parent involvement decreases at the secondary level. According to administrators, the Turners Falls High School and the Great Falls Middle School do not have School Improvement Plans because parents have not been willing to serve on the school councils.

Administrators also said that the lack of parental support for the school system manifests itself in the number of parents who have chosen to have their children attend school outside of the district, partly because of the high student dropout rate at TFHS, and partly because of the classification of the district as underperforming. They referred to the fact that some parents do not send their children to Montague Elementary and choose instead to send them to Gill. Forty-one percent of the students enrolled in the Gill Elementary School are from outside of Gill, either from Montague or from outside of the district, and 80 percent of these students are from the Montague Center village.

The second stakeholder group is the **town officials** for Gill and Montague. Administrators and teachers said that the relationship between the school department and the municipal departments can be characterized as “us versus them,” although the current superintendent has made strides in improving this relationship. Interviewees stated that finance committee members have not forgotten that in the past, the school department received 10-13 percent budget increases, and that they feel strongly that their town cannot afford it now. As a result, at the last four annual Montague town meetings, the finance committee has not recommended the school department’s budget. And the taxpayers in Montague have voted accordingly not to approve the school department’s budget.

The **Gill-Montague Education Association (GMEA)** is the third stakeholder group. Individuals from several interview groups remarked on the difference in attitude between the leaders of the GMEA and its rank and file members. Some claimed that since the last EQA review in 2005, there have been new leaders elected who bring a change in attitude. Some interviewees expressed the opinion that the association leadership hinders educational initiatives

rather than supporting them.<sup>9</sup> Some administrators reported that association threats of grievances and claims based upon past practices have hindered their ability to manage and lead their schools. Also, some administrators expressed disappointment that pre-conferences are not part of the evaluation protocol agreement.<sup>10</sup> Some administrators stated their belief that the positions and attitudes of the association leaders are not held by many of the rank and file teachers.

The GMEA leaders contended when interviewed by the review team that they have a good relationship with the current superintendent. They did, however, indicate that the atmosphere surrounding contract negotiations has been confrontational. They expressed disappointment with the school committee's decision to discontinue interest-based bargaining, something they perceived to be successful in the past.

**School and district administrators** are the fourth stakeholder group. In interviews, administrators expressed a view of themselves as advocates for the school system working with limited resources in the best interest of the students. However, interviews revealed that they frequently do not work with one another as a collaborative team. The review team heard concerns about the infrequency of regularly scheduled administrative cabinet meetings involving the principals last year. The superintendent is trying to address this issue by meeting more regularly with the principals as a separate group. Also, school administrators referred to the lack of visibility of some central office administrators in the schools and the communities, and several interviewees commented about the turnover of administrators in the district and the need to maintain stability and continuity in the educational leadership team.

Valuable energy is lost when stakeholders assume negative positions and prolong debates. Attention is not where it needs to be—on providing the students with the best possible education. The failure of members of the various stakeholder groups to work together within their groups and to form coalitions across groups to advocate for the school system affects the quality of education available for all the young people in the Gill Montague Regional School District.

## **Curriculum and Instruction**

### **The district's curriculum is not complete or aligned.**

The district's approach to developing curriculum since the establishment of the turnaround plan has been to add pieces. However, these pieces do not, when taken together, constitute a complete aligned curriculum. An examination of the curriculum segments that exist showed minimal documentation of alignment with state frameworks. Horizontal alignment is frequently in place. However, the district is only now turning its attention to establishing alignment between grades, known as vertical alignment.

---

<sup>9</sup> The Gill-Montague Education Association disagrees, citing its role in supporting educational initiatives such as the Advanced Placement grant and its support for the district's Race to the Top application.

<sup>10</sup>GMEA described its willingness to explore changes in the evaluation protocol, stating that their issues with principal pre-conferencing involved the fact that the current collective bargaining agreement does not include a provision for pre-conferences as would be required.

At the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten levels, the district implements the Tools of the Mind program, which interviewees reported constitutes the curriculum at that level and which, according to the superintendent, is aligned at the kindergarten level with the state curriculum frameworks. The Tools of the Mind program is so thoroughly laid out that implementation results in both horizontal and vertical alignment, including alignment between kindergarten and Grade 1.

At the elementary level, the district has adopted Houghton Mifflin Reading and Math Expressions programs, which the publishers verify are aligned with Massachusetts standards. However, no district curriculum document specifies all of the state standards being addressed at each point in the program. To guide teachers in the implementation of the ELA and mathematics programs, administrators and teachers have recently developed pacing guides, which the review team examined. Also, in summer 2010 teachers designed a scope and sequence for elementary level science. These pacing guides allow the programs to be implemented with both vertical and horizontal alignment. For elementary ELA and mathematics, teachers have also selected power standards from among the state standards, and these are prominently displayed in classrooms. These power standards are the only specific reference to state standards across the elementary curriculum.

In middle school mathematics, the district has adopted Pearson Prentice Hall's Connected Mathematics 2 (CMP2), another program that promotes its alignment with state standards. For curriculum areas apart from CMP2, individual secondary teachers have developed curriculum maps for their own courses. Curriculum maps reviewed by the team were dated 2007-2008 and each carried one teacher's name. There are not yet curriculum maps for all secondary courses. None were available to the review team for middle school ELA or grade 11 English. The format is a five-column chart that addresses Time Allocation, Essential Questions, Content, Skills, and Assessments. There is no column for notation of state framework objectives being addressed. Specific references to indicators in the state frameworks are sometimes included as a list at the bottom of the Content column, but these references do not indicate complete coverage of the state framework. Examination of the curriculum maps revealed additional issues. Numerous maps are only partially completed. What is included under Essential Questions is seldom an essential question, more often the name of a topic, and sometimes there are no entries in the Essential Questions column. In addition, the entries in the Assessment column are frequently generic rather than specific (e.g., "class participation," "quizzes," "tests"), and again, sometimes the column has no entries. So not all courses have curriculum maps, and those curriculum maps that do exist are frequently incomplete.

The fact that one teacher teaches each course has guaranteed horizontal alignment. Unfortunately, since these curriculum maps were developed in isolation without reference to courses that preceded or followed them, they do not establish vertical alignment. The district is forthright in agreeing that vertical alignment of its curriculum remains to be addressed. Central office administrators indicated that the literacy team is working on vertical alignment in ELA

pre-K to 12, work that will be completed in June 2011. Similar work is not planned for mathematics or science.

Interviews with teachers brought to light that little has been done to revise the curriculum maps since 2008, except in the area of middle school mathematics. In addition, in 2010-2011 the high school assigned more than one teacher to some courses, with the result that ownership of the curriculum map was broadened. Implementation by more than one teacher may compromise horizontal implementation at the high school, particularly since the new teachers teaching the course did not take part in the development of the map.

Since the district does not align what is being taught with what is in the state frameworks, it cannot provide assurance that its students have the opportunity to master the content of those frameworks. The district also does not yet know that what is taught from year to year follows a logical sequence. So the state is measuring the achievement of Gill-Montague students against its standards, but there is limited evidence that curriculum in the district addresses those standards in an effective sequence.

This lack of alignment, particularly with state standards but also vertically, was originally documented in the EQA report of its December 2005 review, discussed with the district in 2006 and forwarded to ESE in February 2007. Several years have passed. Programs have been adopted, and curriculum maps have been written, but the curriculum is still very much a work in progress, with negative consequences for the achievement of the district's students. The district has not yet adequately addressed its curriculum needs.

**Classroom observations revealed strong evidence of certain instructional characteristics and less evidence of others.**

Review team members observed instruction in 52 classrooms from kindergarten through grade 12 and found some clear strengths in classroom instruction as well as some areas needing attention. The tally sheet the team used lists 14 characteristics, 3 related to organization of the classroom and 11 related to instructional design and delivery. In each classroom the observer noted whether there was solid evidence, partial evidence, or no evidence of the characteristic.

- In 88 percent of classrooms, the review team found solid evidence that the climate was “characterized by respectful behaviors, routines, tones, and discourse.”
- In 96 percent of classrooms, observers found solid or partial evidence that “available class time [was] maximized for learning,” although in 29 percent of classrooms there was only partial evidence of this characteristic.
- However, in only 38 percent of classrooms was there solid evidence of a posted learning objective, and in 35 percent there was no evidence of a posted objective.
- Positive indications of instructional design and delivery included:
  - In 86 percent of classrooms there was solid or partial evidence of instruction that linked to students' prior knowledge.



- In 86 percent of classrooms there was solid or partial evidence that “presentation of content is within the students’ English proficiency and developmental level.”
- In 90 percent of classrooms, observers found solid or partial evidence that lessons were paced to ensure student engagement.
- In 79 percent of classrooms there was solid or partial evidence that students had opportunities to apply new knowledge.
- Observers found solid or partial evidence of the teacher’s depth of content knowledge in 75 percent of classrooms, though that evidence was partial in 46 percent of instances.
- Characteristics of instructional design and delivery observation of which indicated district challenges included:
  - In 29 percent of classrooms there was no evidence of a range of instructional techniques; in only 38 percent of classrooms was there solid evidence of this characteristic.
  - In only 21 percent of classrooms was there solid evidence of students engaged in application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; in 38 percent of classrooms there was no evidence of this.
  - In 23 percent of classrooms there was solid evidence, in 33 percent partial evidence, and in 44 percent no evidence of students articulating their thinking and reasoning.
  - In 29 percent of classrooms there was solid evidence that students were “inquiring, exploring, or problem solving together, in pairs, or in small groups,” in 13 percent there was partial evidence; and in 58 percent there was no evidence of this.

There are a number of important instructional characteristics in evidence in classrooms in the district. Teachers set a positive tone in classrooms; they maximized the use of classroom time for learning; the pace of instruction was appropriate; and students had opportunities to apply new knowledge. At the same time, the team did not see strong evidence of a number of key instructional characteristics. There was limited evidence of a variety of instructional techniques, of the use by students of the skills of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, of students articulating their thinking and reasoning, and of students working in groups. These characteristics are essential for a strong instructional environment. Students grow as learners when they work with other students in small groups and have opportunities to express their own thinking.

Interviews with teachers and administrators revealed a solid understanding of strategies that promote the social curriculum (intended to improve school culture and climate and described in the next finding), but little awareness of academic instructional strategies and their importance. And the review team’s observations in classrooms revealed some serious limitations to

classroom instruction. These limitations impede the development of the district's students as learners.

## **Assessment**

**It is doubtful that the goals for the Year of Assessment can be adequately addressed because of the variation in understanding of goals, roles, and responsibilities throughout the district, because of the scarcity of appropriate resources, and because of the absence of the degree of planning called for by an initiative of this scope.**

Under the leadership of the superintendent, the district has planned a three-year improvement initiative encompassing a Year of Assessment (2010-2011), a Year of Curriculum (2011-2012), and a Year of Instruction (2012-2013). The review team learned about the scope of this improvement effort in interviews with school committee members, district leaders, principals, and teachers and from the superintendent's Strategic Vision of March 2010. Further details about the Year of Assessment were contained in the documents "School Culture and Climate Assessment Project, 2010-2011" (August 2010) and "Year of Assessment 2010-2011" (August 30, 2010). During this Year of Assessment in 2010-2011, the district intends to examine assessment at all levels, refine the tools and processes used to assess student progress, and assess the effectiveness of both the academic and social curricula. While the current school year's improvement initiative emphasizes assessment, district leaders recognize that work on assessment will require simultaneous work on curriculum and instruction. District and school leaders expressed a strong commitment to using assessment as a lever for improvement.

### *Variation in knowledge about assessment initiatives:*

As one moved away from personnel in the central office to staff at the school level and then teachers at the classroom level, there was less clarity about key assessment goals and strategies for attaining them. District leaders saw the need both to address the assessment of student achievement and to evaluate the effectiveness of both the academic and the social curricula. The district defines the social curricula as those programs intended to improve school culture and climate, exemplified by Tools of the Mind (pre-kindergarten-kindergarten), the Responsive Classroom (grades 1-5), and Developmental Designs (grades 6-8). The social curriculum at the high school (grades 9-12) is in the process of being strengthened with the implementation in January 2010 of an advisor/advisee program and, during this school year, with the implementation of a program from Main Street Academix using leadership teams of students and teachers to survey and monitor school climate. (Since it is fairly new, the high school program is not currently in a position for evaluation.) In district-level interviews and documents, leaders described the expectation that school administrators would "collect and review evaluative data for all programs (as an administrative team activity)." For example, because the Responsive Classroom Assessment Guide "had not been looked at yet," although the program has been in use for eight years, and "the district does not have the capacity to do that kind of research," evaluations of the social curriculum would be completed by administrators based on "teacher

efficacy and academic achievement.” The district plans to complete its own effectiveness study of the social curricula by using data on attendance and tardiness; ESE reports and sub-reports on discipline, dropouts, and transiency; and data about parent engagement in school activities. Principals, however, did not refer to a formal assessment of the cultural curricula as central to their work during the Year of Assessment nor was this included in their School Improvement Plans. Still, principals said that they were highly committed to educating “the whole child” and to improving the implementation of the social curriculum to support students’ development of self-regulation and of social, emotional, and learning skills and to create stronger dispositions in students for academic work and learning.

*Assessment goals in the two SIPs that exist:*

During this Year of Assessment, the two School Improvement Plans (SIPs) in existence address assessment. The principal of the Gill Elementary School shared an approved School Improvement Plan (June 11, 2010) with the review team that includes one assessment goal: “to explore a wide variety of assessment practices with an emphasis on the interpretation and implications of data as a guide for implementing curriculum and for differentiating classroom instruction.” The plan further includes three assessment objectives elaborating on this goal. The draft SIP from the Montague Elementary School includes an objective for “increased effective use of assessment data to guide instruction” under its first goal for academic achievement. The plan then details five “key instructional actions” to support attainment of this assessment objective. The middle and high schools have no documented School Improvement Plans. One reason given in interviews for there being no SIPs was that parents had not been willing to participate on school councils. The review team gleaned from interviews and documents that another reason was that developing SIPs for the middle and high schools has not been a priority. In interviews, there was a lack of clarity about how most middle and high school leaders and teachers would address assessment issues other than in the broadest sense.

*Creation of data teams; variation in knowledge of assessment initiatives between data team members and other classroom teachers:*

One goal—to create assessment teams at each school composed of the principal and representative teachers, coaches, and/or specialists to support the work of the Year of Assessment—has been accomplished. The district has assembled the teams and provided professional development to team members in August, with more anticipated during this school year even though the number of professional development days has been reduced from 11 to 4 half-days. Team members need additional professional development to strengthen their ability to use data well in order to work effectively with faculty colleagues as each school addresses assessment goals. In interviews, several members of school-based assessment teams could describe the main goals of the Year of Assessment and their roles and responsibilities. Other classroom teachers expressed only vague notions of broad goals and of how the year would progress in terms of their own work at both the school level and in their own classrooms. Teachers in focus groups noted that leaders offered few details about assessment goals in the plenary session that opened the school year. Teachers were also unfamiliar with details of the

district's Strategic Vision, which outlines the superintendent's vision for the Year of Assessment; likewise, they expressed only vague familiarity with the district's turnaround plan. Some teachers noted that the lack of clarity might derive from the fact that the review team's site visit occurred during the last week of September and faculty meetings, held monthly, had not yet taken place in all schools.

*Changeover to use of MAP tests; difficulty in using MAP test data to plan differentiated instruction without professional development for teachers, a more developed curriculum, and more extensive common planning time, and with funding for coaches ending:*

A key and commonly understood goal of the Year of Assessment is to eliminate the Galileo benchmark assessment system and replace it with a new, more adaptive, diagnostic growth model assessment using the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) tests of the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA). The early stages of this replacement have been accomplished. While the review team was on site, the first round of MAP tests in ELA and mathematics was being administered to all students in grades 2 through 10 and to grade 11 and 12 students with Educational Proficiency Plans (EPPs). The target completion date was mid-October.

To learn to interpret MAP test data, e.g., RIT scores and growth profiles, district leaders anticipated that the school-based assessment teams would experience additional professional development in mid-October. In late October, team members were to meet with their school's faculty (for two hours) to analyze grade-level MAP data and begin the process of planning differentiated instruction to meet the needs of individual students or groups of students. Unfortunately, according to district leaders, it is likely that no meaningful resources (time and money) will be available to support additional professional development for teachers to learn how to use assessment data to create differentiated lessons and differentiated assessments. In addition, there has been no delineation of an inquiry period during which teachers could experiment with and share differentiated lesson plans, perhaps taping and critiquing lessons and then modifying and re-teaching them to improve their skills. Just the same, according to district leadership there is an expectation that principals will soon require differentiated instruction and will evaluate teachers on how well they differentiate. As mentioned, professional development days in the district have been reduced this year from 11 to 4 half-days, making any initiative requiring extensive collaboration or capacity building a difficult task. The only provision for collaboration is to work in grade-level teams at monthly faculty meetings and in meetings that teachers arrange on their own.

By November, the district was to have Individual Student Success Plans (ISSPs) as well as MAP data for all students, pointing logically to the need to differentiate instruction for individuals and/or groups of students. According to district and school leaders and evident in documents, a further complication to moving toward a more differentiated instructional model is that much of the curriculum, even in the core subjects of ELA and mathematics, is not richly developed, and assessments, too, are not well-developed in many curriculum maps. In addition, the review team was told that teachers have not had much training on developing curriculum. As leaders said

when describing the Year of Assessment, it will also, by default, need to address curriculum and instructional issues, overlapping tasks.

District and school leaders noted that “many” or “too many” teachers have limited knowledge and skills with respect to analyzing assessment data and then using it to design and implement differentiated instruction. Early elementary teachers who use Tools of the Mind and middle school teachers who use Developmental Designs have stronger skills since these programs integrate differentiation into lessons. There is, however, a meaningful lack of such knowledge and skills at the high school level. And, as noted earlier, few resources (time and money) exist in the district to add more formalized training in differentiation. To overcome the lack of capacity, the expectation is that already designated meeting time will be used to explore these topics at the high school. But little common planning or meeting time exists for teachers beyond elementary school and many teachers already meet before and after school. Support is expected from the math coaches in using assessment data to differentiate instruction. However, leaders see this as a “dilemma” since coaches’ positions are supported by grant funds that end this year. The literacy coach’s position was eliminated in June 2010 due to lack of funding. A district literacy team for pre-kindergarten to grade 12 does meet monthly with support from a consultant from ESE, but their work currently focuses on developing exit benchmarks and addressing content overlap, with no mention of assessment. In addition, district leaders, principals, and teachers expressed concern about “burnout” and “overloading,” given the district’s small size. “The same group of teachers is always doing everything,” the review team was told. One solution expressed by district leadership is to wait until 2012-2013 when it will be the Year of Instruction, a solution not deemed credible by the review team

*Additional assessment activities:*

Other activities for the Year of Assessment were included in documents and explained in interviews by leaders. These are to be completed in addition to the training of the data teams and the use of MAP data to plan instruction, and the work needed to accomplish them will be appended to the normal work day—at a time when, according to teachers, the administration has made a commitment not to overload teachers with new initiatives:

- A districtwide Grading Task Force will be convened to study assessment practices pre-K-12 and make recommendations for improving assessment and reporting of student assessment results.
- Individual teachers in all subjects, curricular and co-curricular, will be expected to reflect on and evaluate their classroom assessments—their means of knowing what their students know—including pre-assessments, post-assessments, formative assessments, and summative assessments such as unit tests, chapter tests, quizzes, written assignments, and projects.
- A team will review homework and grading policies and make recommendations.

- Some principals noted that to better link assessment to curriculum and instruction teachers need to develop more useful formative assessments and more authentic assessments.

*Little evidence of planning of assessment initiatives:*

While review team members were on site, they were not given and did not see any evidence of a planning tool such as a planning matrix to manage the myriad detailed activities expected to take place during the Year of Assessment. For example, one district leader noted the need to “get Doug Reeves here,” and then added that if that were not possible, then, “the staff would just have to read and discuss his books.” It would likely take careful planning to engage such a high-profile speaker. The timing of this visit would be important, as would consideration of the potential cost to a district that has limited resources. Discrete Year of Assessment tasks in documents reviewed by the team had no defined beginning or end dates, other than the August professional development and the fall work of the school-based assessment teams. Other than recommendations, no end products such as a report or reports, teachers’ work samples, or a presentation to the school committee, administrators, or staff were stipulated. Planning documents would give evidence that leaders have full control of the assessment agenda and are able to manage it using a timely and thorough process. The only planning statement the review team saw was found at the end of the document “Year of Assessment 2010-2011” (August 30, 2010), which noted, “This work will be accomplished over the year through a combination of conversations with grade level teams or departments, faculty meetings and regular School-Based Assessment Team meetings. People serving on the District Leadership Assessment Team will meet and report to the Superintendent on a regular [sic] over the course of the next year about these conversations.”

*Ingredients needed for the success of the district’s assessment initiatives:*

The ambitious focus on assessment this school year has already raised important issues and questions at all levels throughout the district. Many of the components of assessment articulated by the superintendent in the Strategic Vision are appropriate and need to be addressed in the district. District and school leaders and teachers are beginning to consider ways to make the use of assessments more thoughtful and more relevant in improving the quality of teaching and student achievement in all subjects. At the end of the first month of school, there was a sense of urgency and enthusiasm about the three-year improvement sequence. However, the review team detected some confusion about goals and roles and a heightened sense of anxiety that the key components and resources needed for success in attaining so many assessment goals—human capacity, knowledge, skills, time, support, and professional development—are not available in the district in sufficient depth for that success and perhaps not available enough even to move the agenda meaningfully forward. While the Strategic Vision is grounded on the work of Richard Elmore’s research in large-scale improvement, the district might also keep in mind Elmore’s references to the “principle of reciprocal accountability,” which requires that “for every increment of performance leaders require of others, there is an equal responsibility to provide the resources to build capacity” for performance (e.g., professional development, time, knowledge,

skills, support) so that success is ensured. In the judgment of the review team, there is doubt that the district can sustain the initiatives outlined in the Year of Assessment without more careful planning, focused attention of administrators, and time for staff to collaborate.

**The district’s collection, timely dissemination, analysis, and use of assessment data have expanded and improved since 2005, but not all teachers, especially at the high school level, have the ability to use data well to inform instructional and curricular decisions, and raw data is still the primary form of data used in the district.**

Since the last EQA review in 2005, the district has made considerable progress in collecting, disseminating, analyzing, and using data to better understand student progress, to plan for more effective instruction, and to inform decisions at both the district and school levels. Although the superintendent examines MCAS data, he sees MCAS results as being most useful at the school level. According to district leaders and the school committee, budget and policy decisions are less driven by MCAS or other assessment results and more aligned with enrollment data and other district and school needs. The district coordinator of data services has created reports of aggregated and disaggregated raw assessment data that have been consistently distributed to principals, coaches, and teachers. She has also conducted training sessions to improve data analysis skills, and individual teachers occasionally meet with her to review data. Still, leaders and teachers noted in interviews that although principals, coaches, specialists, and members of the school-based assessment teams have participated in professional development to boost their analytical skills, many teachers need more professional development and more experience to become more effective in analyzing and using data.

Many examples of assessment data reports were shared with the review team. Before this school year, principals, coaches, and specialists received spreadsheets of MCAS test results, Galileo profile grids, Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation (GRADE) test data, Diagnostic Inventory of Basic Early Literacy (DIBELS) test data, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) results, and test data and skill inventory data for elementary mathematics. Beginning this year, Galileo results will be replaced by the RIT scores and growth profiles produced by MAP tests in ELA and mathematics. Principals and some teachers noted that the district may continue to administer GRADE and DRA tests at the elementary level this year, depending on MAP results; however, there were variations on this point of view—others thought that GRADE and DRA would no longer be given to students.

In the elementary schools, principals analyze raw ELA data first and then hold discussions with teachers, usually at regular grade-level team meetings (Montague) or with individual classroom teachers (Gill). In addition to standardized test data, elementary principals review unit test results, writing assignments, and pacing charts with teachers. Math coaches also meet with elementary teachers during grade-level team time. Data discussions at the middle school are one-on-one conversations between teachers and the principal and/or the math coach, especially to review MCAS results. Teachers and coaches use assessment data to plan for and improve instruction and also, in the early grades, to group students for instruction. Principals, coaches,

and teachers stated that data discussions have often led to deeper insights about achievement and the need for instructional improvements.

District leaders agreed in interviews that the analysis and use of assessment data needs to be “pushed up” more to the high school level, where, although this is changing, it is not common practice, mainly because of the number of singleton classes (classes with only one section). There is an initiative this year to have common mid-term and final exams in courses with multiple sections at the secondary level. To improve data analysis and use at the secondary level, the English and mathematics department chairs participate in the new high school assessment team. Other assessment tools are in use throughout the district. In the early childhood center (pre-K-K), in addition to teacher assessments of student work, children learn to assess their own work and write rudimentary learning plans for themselves, using buddies to check each other’s work as part of the Tools of the Mind curriculum. At the elementary schools, the district now uses a standards-based report card that evaluates students’ mastery of knowledge and skills aligned to grade-level standards for ELA, mathematics, science, and social studies, as well as evaluating how well students develop personal work habits and meet school responsibilities. The latter two evaluations are loosely linked to self-regulation and social skill development in the social curricula. Many teachers use common grading rubrics to assess student work and to help students better understand learning expectations and exemplars of good work. A number of rubrics were shared with the review team. Most rubrics tend to be course-specific and/or teacher-specific, although the elementary schools each have common writing rubrics. Yet there is no common rubric for what constitutes good writing across the district or across all courses at the secondary level.

As described above, raw aggregated or disaggregated student or classroom or school data is the dominant form of data used in the district. The review team did not see or learn about any districtwide or schoolwide user-friendly reports tracking MCAS results over time or using data comparisons among cohorts that could be used for identical presentations across all schools to inform the school community about progress in proficiency or strengths and weaknesses. (This is a common way school leaders elsewhere typically let staff members and parents know about progress and challenges.) For example, at a school committee meeting observed by the review team, each principal gave a short oral presentation about 2010 MCAS results, the first MCAS presentation in one and a half years according to committee members. The MCAS presentations relied on different formats and included limited information about student achievement or analysis of it, other than in the broadest sense, e.g., “making AYP” or “math scores showed improvement.” Also, there were no visual representations of MCAS data for meeting observers or the television audience to view. School committee members did not exhibit familiarity with the data during the discussion and, in fact, asked for a whole meeting to be scheduled to review MCAS results.

Given the increase in the district’s expectations for data use, the timeliness of data availability, and the multiple forms of assessment data available in the district, leaders and many teachers are increasingly more conversant with the status of student achievement. They have also grown more



nimble, overall, in their ability to use assessment data to make better decisions about curriculum, instruction, and assessment, especially at the elementary level. With the help of principals and coaches, this agility in data analysis has led to better decisions and better understanding of progress at the school, classroom, and individual student levels. This year, with the implementation of the MAP tests and creation of school-based assessment teams, the district aims to take further steps in improving teachers' information about student academic progress and in improving the use of data to inform instructional and curricular decisions. However, the lingering inconsistencies in some teachers' abilities to use data well, especially at the high school level, have prevented the district from maximizing good practice in analyzing data. Hopefully, improvement will be realized this year for those teachers at all schools who need additional support in learning to use data well. This needed improvement is jeopardized by the lack of resources (time and money) to support professional development. In addition, the lack of integrated historical comparisons in formal reports, the lack of internal reviews of academic programs (see next finding), and the limited use of achievement data to plan for budget allocations and to prioritize resources (see second Financial and Asset Management finding, below) all indicate that there is still much work to be done in the district before there is a comprehensive system of using data for decision-making in place.

**The district has no systems or procedures in place to evaluate curricular or co-curricular programs and services in order to determine their strengths, weaknesses, needs, or cost-effectiveness.**

The district has a proliferation of programs that address the academic and social needs of students. In addition to the academic curricula, there is a sequence of social curricula implemented in all schools to support the improvement of school culture and climate and to promote the development of students' ability to self-regulate and of their disposition to learn and conduct academic work. Although as mentioned above the district anticipates an evaluation of the both the academic and social curricula during 2010-2011, other than reviews mandated by the state and accrediting agencies, the district has no procedures for examining the strengths, weaknesses, cost-effectiveness, and improvement needs of its many programs and services and their delivery. The review team found numerous programs in the district, some that had been in place for a long time, but no evidence that the district regularly evaluates programs.

Because the district does not carry out a systematic, thoughtful cycle of review and evaluation for curricular programs and key support services, it has no real understanding of the status of programs vis-à-vis district and school goals, state goals, and state-of-the-art practice. The district does not have insight into the cost-effectiveness of its programs and services: whether or not a meaningful investment of funds, training, meeting time, etc., produces a meaningful benefit for student learning. Without this insight, it cannot realize the budget savings that would be possible through eliminating programs and services that are not cost-effective.

A number of internal stakeholders offered the following observation, or a version of it, in interviews: "Why do we keep getting all these programs if we have no data that says they work or that we need them?" This distancing from new initiatives can present problems when any new

practice is being considered and implemented. When leaders can clearly explain the positive outcomes they expect from aspects of the academic curriculum or convey their vision, in choosing a program, of its strengths, its needs, its next-steps, its exemplary practices, its achievements in supporting students to learn better or more deeply, and *the reasons* for these achievements, the district as a whole can be made stronger. Without a focused, systematic, thoughtful multi-year process that engages faculty in reflecting and looking at both internal practice and external best practice, it is difficult to sustain a culture of continuous improvement.

## **Human Resources and Professional Development**

**The district has institutionalized the professional development process by establishing a representative districtwide committee to develop a district professional development plan. However, the district cannot address the extensive professional development needs outlined in the plan with the four half-days available in 2010-2011 for professional development.**

School, central office, school committee, and teachers' association representatives met once each month during the 2009-2010 school year to develop a district professional development plan to be implemented during 2010-2011. The committee consisted of one school committee member, the director of curriculum, instruction and professional development, two principals representing elementary and secondary education, six teachers representing the four schools, and the teachers' association president. The school committee approved the plan in June 2010. Before this, as was cited in the EQA report of its December 2005 review, the district had no professional development plan. Earlier professional development in the district was described as site-based and not informed by any systemic or districtwide procedures.

The professional development plan for 2010-2011 was intended to cover a three-year period, with updates for 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, according to the collective bargaining agreement between the Gill-Montague Regional School District and the Gill-Montague Education Association. However, according to an email from the superintendent to the school committee dated September 27, 2010, ESE requested that ratification of the collective bargaining agreement be postponed until after this review has been completed and the final report submitted to the commissioner of elementary and secondary education. Both the school district and the association indicated in interviews that they consider this action by ESE to prevent further activity by the professional development committee.

In the plan, the director of curriculum, instruction and professional development cited the district's extensive professional development needs between 2010 and 2015. To address these needs, the plan calls for supporting and sustaining six initiatives at the high school, four at the middle school, and seven at the elementary schools. The plan also includes the five annual state-mandated training requirements. The district professional development focus during 2010-2011 will be student assessment. In focusing on assessment, the plan states the purpose of developing in teachers a deeper and shared understanding of instructional improvement and increased student achievement, supported by performance data.

However, a review of the district 2010-2011 calendar indicates only four half-days for in-service. Principals and teachers reported there had been eleven half-days for in-service in 2009-2010 and twelve half-days at the time of the 2005 EQA review. Principals said that they had had no input into this decision, and both school administrators and teachers agreed to some confusion as to why professional development time was so drastically cut. Some reported that a high number of student absences on the Fridays on which in-service half-days fell was a possible reason for the reduction. But principals in interviews indicated that having only four half-days will limit their opportunities to address school and district goals and expressed concern as to the sufficiency of in-service time.

Teachers in the district have a wide variety of needs. The district needs to support them in acquiring effective instructional strategies, in using data to improve instruction, and in developing curriculum, to name a few areas. Without effective professional development in these areas, teachers will not acquire the skills they need to facilitate their students' learning.

In the judgment of the review team, the implementation of the much-needed and ambitious professional development plan is severely limited by the reduction in available professional development time.

**The district's teacher evaluation instrument does not promote growth and overall effectiveness.**

The 2010 review team examined 29 teacher personnel files during the site visit and found that 21 of 29 teacher evaluations met the requirements of the Education Reform Act of 1993 and 603 CMR 35.06(1) as to timeliness. All 29 teacher evaluations were informative, but only 10 of 29 promoted individual growth and overall effectiveness.

Under the contract, teachers whose performance is satisfactory are evaluated using a checklist. The evaluation process only moves to using goals in the assessment of teacher performance when a teacher's performance is not satisfactory. Additionally, there is no differentiation by position, so teachers, guidance counselors, and reading teachers are evaluated with the same instrument.

Principals indicated in interviews that the teacher evaluation instrument is not always useful in bringing about improvement in the instruction of teachers whose performance is satisfactory. They favored the use of teacher and school goals to replace the checklist of teacher performance standards. In their interviews, central office administrators expressed a similar view of the ineffectiveness of the teacher evaluation process in improving instruction. They cited the value of teacher goal-setting and goals imposed by principals.

The Gill-Montague Regional School District and the Gill-Montague Education Association have agreed under the pending contract to establish a joint labor/management committee to address the teacher evaluation process and other related issues. However, at ESE's request, the ratification of that contract has been postponed until after the present review has been completed

and the final report submitted to the commissioner. As a result, this important matter will not be addressed for a while.

An effective professional evaluation process for teachers and administrators is essential to assure accountability for instructional improvement. In the judgment of the review team, because it does not enable principals and teachers to establish goals for all teachers, the current teacher evaluation process does not promote improved classroom performance.

## Student Support

**The district has successfully reduced the high school dropout rate through a pre-K to grade 12 effort to enhance the level of connectedness of children to their school communities. To accomplish this, the district has implemented curricula and programs with social development components, along with support programs intended to enhance students' academic performance.**

The data in Table 13 below clearly indicates that the percentage of Gill-Montague students who drop out of high school is trending down; the gap between district and state dropout rates has been closing steadily since 2005.

**Table 13: 2005-2009 Gill-Montague and State Annual Dropout Rates (Grades 9-12)**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Gill-Montague	10.4	7.4	6.5	5.8	3.5
State	3.8	3.3	3.8	3.4	2.9

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

In interviews, district and school staff cited a district study completed three years ago for the purpose of identifying factors related to students dropping out of high school. That study identified a common risk factor among students who drop out to be low connectedness to the school. Interviewees referred to several programs that have been established, some before the study cited above, with the goal of enhancing the level of connectedness among students.

The superintendent, principals, and other interviewees stated that curricular programs that include intense focus on the social growth of children are in place at the pre-K-K, elementary, and middle school levels. Those are, respectively, Tools for the Mind, the Responsive Classroom, and Developmental Design. Those same interviewees noted an advisor/advisee program that is in its second year of operation at the high school; that program's goal is for students to feel connected with a staff member. In addition, the high school community is preparing to implement a program from Main Street Academix this school year, which, according to the superintendent's turnaround plan update in August 2010, will include "student-faculty empowerment-based action projects to reduce bullying, improve respect, build positive school climate, and enhance student engagement and learning."

The peer mediation program at the high school and middle school offers assistance to students as they deal with the stresses associated with interactions among peers. In addition, the district has adopted an academic offering, Rise Up (formerly the Reconnecting Youth program), in which students, some perceived to be at risk, others enrolled to serve as model students, participate in self-governing activities (e.g., goal-setting, classroom policy choices), along with community service learning activities. The high school student attendance policy, included in the Student Handbook, has been revised so that it no longer includes mandatory reduction of the class grade in response to student absence.

Interviewees also cited several academic support programs outside the regular school day that work to limit the discouragement stemming from academic difficulty, difficulty that can lead children to disengage from school. Such a program is in place at the elementary level, both before and after school, which has served 45-90 children daily and includes breakfast. Middle school students receive services both after school and during the summer months which allow them to recover a grade in a course they failed. High school students may participate in an MCAS preparation program after school in April.

Some interviewees had significant involvement in the Community School Partnership, serving as district representatives. They reported on recent and ongoing activities designed to enhance connectedness with parents and families. Well-attended events include a community block party, family dinners, and a community awards celebration where students and community members were recognized. In addition, an E-newsletter allows for communication with community members.

High school interviewees noted the Education Transition Program for students in grades 11-12 that allows them to enroll in classes at Greenfield Community College, either full-time or in addition to their high school classes. The intent is to provide an alternate educational experience for students for whom it may be appropriate, including those who may feel disconnected to the high school. In addition, a summer credit recovery program is in place to allow high school students to retake, digitally online, classes that they failed during the school year. High school staff also spoke of the establishment of the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy in 2007-2008, which provides a school experience comparable to that provided in the middle school format in which a team of teachers provide integrated instruction and through regular interaction with one another may have enhanced insight into the academic, personal, and social needs of the students they teach.

School administrators, counselors, and health staff are members of the High School Student Support Team, a group that meets weekly to discuss students with varying needs who may be in crisis and to design strategies for intervention. Some of the members indicated to the review team that the efforts of this group are aligned with other steps taken to assist students with challenges that may weaken their connection to the school community.

It appears that the curricula employed from pre-K to grade 8, (Tools for the Mind, the Responsive Classroom, and Developmental Design) and the co-curricular experiences cited above are enhancing the social school experience for students, increasing their sense of

connectedness with their school communities, leading to a decreasing dropout rate at the high school level. The numerous and varied efforts within the district to address, directly or indirectly, the level of connectedness of students with their school communities are contributing to the increase in the percentage of high school students who maintain their engagement with the school, though the lack of formal assessment of these programs makes it impossible to know with certainty the specific programs that are contributing to this increase and to what degree each is doing so.

**Some student support programs integral to the accomplishment of the district's turnaround plan and the superintendent's Strategic Vision have experienced reductions in staffing and other resources and are not functioning at maximum potential.**

The middle school/high school principal, superintendent, and teachers indicated that the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy was implemented to establish an environment in which the level of connectedness of 9<sup>th</sup> graders with the school community is enhanced, as a team of teachers working with the same students is able to provide integrated instruction (team teaching) and, as importantly, has opportunities to share important information regarding these students. A critical component of a program with this design is regularly scheduled common planning time for all teachers on the team. Before the 2010-2011 school year, teachers working in the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy were provided common planning time twice weekly. In the 2010-2011 school year, common planning time is not in the schedule. Instead the school asked teachers to plan together once a week after school during the time they are usually available to students.

According to a number of interviewees, a co-teaching model was implemented at the high school during the 2009-2010 school year, with a regular education and a special education teacher sharing responsibility for one class. The program included regularly scheduled common planning time for some of those teachers. This school year, the co-teaching model is still operating, but the number of co-taught classes has been reduced because of staffing constraints brought on by the accommodation of other scheduling needs. And teaching partners have even less scheduled common planning time.

Multiple interviewees indicated that the district employs only one librarian who provides services in the shared middle and high school library. All elementary schools have areas within their buildings that were, in the past, fully functioning libraries. There are now no librarians assigned to the elementary schools, and so the concept of libraries as media centers where students obtain access to information in a variety of ways is not being carried out. The function of these libraries is now reduced to checking books in and out. In these school libraries, either parent volunteers or teachers assume responsibility for book distribution and return processes. The middle school/high school librarian, middle school/high school principal, and teachers confirmed the important role the librarian plays at the middle school and high school as she teaches literacy skills, assists classroom teachers from all academic departments in their instructional efforts, and addresses those strands included within the state curriculum frameworks associated with the school library, e.g., research skills. These critical components of

the educational experience are not being provided within the district to children in pre-kindergarten to grade 5.

Principals indicated appreciation for the efforts of curricular coaches, whose role includes supporting the efforts of classroom teachers within their schools. Two coaches are in place in mathematics, and student MCAS performance has improved in that subject. In English language arts, however, literacy coach positions have been eliminated for budgetary reasons. Funding for math coaches will cease in June of 2011.

The cutbacks described above are preventing the delivery of the full potential benefit to students of the programs affected and are impeding the successful implementation of both the district's turnaround plan and the Strategic Vision. Interviewees noted that instruction by the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy staff now lacks the collaborative features possible when teachers have sufficient time to plan together. Teachers' familiarity with their students and their strengths, weaknesses, and issues is diminished relative to last year, when teachers were able to share information within their teaching team regularly.

The decrease in the number of co-taught inclusion classes at the high school limits opportunities for special education students to learn in the least restrictive environment (LRE). As with the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy, the potential benefit of the instructional format is not being realized.

Both the turnaround plan and the Strategic Vision refer to the need for instructional improvement across the district. The Strategic Vision includes a commitment to "producing high school graduates who are college and career ready." The turnaround plan called for action in response to the relatively high dropout rate of high school students, along with the "expansion and extension of reading and literacy initiatives" including the addition of reading specialists. It is clear that all of these have been determined to be important factors in the district's path to excellence. Decisions, however, have been made pertaining to the structure and delivery of the programs described above that do not support the goals and objectives established for the district. Educationally sound practices such as 9th grade teams, co-taught classes, teacher coaching, and libraries as media centers have been compromised or eliminated and so cannot bear the hoped-for fruit.

## Financial and Asset Management

**Many unresolved issues have led to the inability of the district and its member towns to agree on a budget in each of the past four years.<sup>11</sup>**

According to ESE officials, school administrators, school committee members, and town officials, one or both towns have rejected the school committee's proposed budget in each of the past four years. Each year the district called a special districtwide meeting, as provided by law, which also failed to reach agreement on a school budget, and the commissioner of elementary and secondary education finally had to set a budget for the district. In 2010, according to the superintendent, the school committee approved a level-funded fiscal year 2011 budget of \$16,408,162 (actually \$129,626 less than the budget set by the commissioner for fiscal year 2010), a budget requiring \$800,000 in cuts and the elimination of 18 positions. The town of Gill approved its assessment for this budget but the town of Montague did not.

The review team interviewed ESE officials, school administrators, school committee members, and town officials about the reasons for this problem. According to ESE reports, Gill-Montague Regional School District (GMRSD) spent more per pupil in fiscal year 2009 than ten comparable districts and 11 percent more than the state average per-pupil expenditure (\$14,433 to \$13,006). Similarly, the district's Net School Spending (NSS) has been higher than required. Town officials pointed out that district expenditures have increased in spite of declining enrollments and other reduced needs. Reductions in state aid, including in Chapter 70 aid (fiscal years 2004 and 2009), in transportation aid, and in "circuit breaker" reimbursements (fiscal year 2010), along with increases in school choice and charter tuitions, have also contributed to increased assessments to towns. Town officials emphasized that the portion (assessment) of their town budgets allocated to schools has increased faster than revenues, creating the concern that school expenses will cause structural deficits for the towns over the long run. Montague town officials described guidelines for "affordable assessments": approximately 48.5 percent of the town budget (based on past assessments) including \$125,000 from free cash (an additional \$125,000 to be allocated to town budgets and the remainder to be put into the stabilization fund). Department of Revenue reports show that both towns are at or near their levy limit. In spite of budget cuts under the school committee's proposed budget for fiscal year 2011 the assessment for Montague would have increased by \$417,185, due to its increased share<sup>12</sup> and reduced state aid; this would have required 51 percent of the town budget, so the town did not approve its assessment. In addition to their assessments, town officials and district administrators stated, the towns are responsible for capital expenditures on school buildings: in fiscal year 2011 Montague has

---

<sup>11</sup> As noted earlier, on November 18, 2010, two months after the review team's site visit, a districtwide meeting convened in accordance with 603 CMR 41.05(3)(f) unanimously approved the district's fiscal year 2011 budget. This action officially ended two years of fiscal control over the Gill-Montague Regional School District by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. As a result, Gill-Montague's spending and budget decisions no longer need to be submitted to ESE for approval. See Appendix E.

<sup>12</sup> Based on the increased percentage of Montague students in the district this year.



contracted for a roof replacement and Gill is planning on a boiler replacement. On the other hand, school officials pointed out that they have used approximately half of \$1 million or so in district circuit breaker and excess and deficiency balances to reduce the budget and lower assessments, but that the towns, especially Montague, have reserves that they are reluctant to allocate to the district even in difficult budget years; town officials reported that Montague's free cash and stabilization funds totaled \$1,439,062 in 2010.

Town and school officials blamed the lack of agreement on budgets on political issues as well. In 2008 the district closed an elementary school, the Montague Center School, and officials reported that as a result disgruntled parents and community members have voted against district assessments. Town officials noted that the towns, like the district, have had to make cuts in personnel and programs, including reductions in police officers and Department of Public Works employees and decreased subsidies for employee health insurance. According to interviewees, some school committee members and town officials have argued that the towns should "keep the state at the table" during the budget process, presumably to continue to profit from state aid (a study of Chapter 70 by a town official indicated that the district got \$800,000 more in Chapter 70 aid than its targeted aid; this was confirmed by a legislator) and from grants (especially Targeted Assistance and Foundation Reserve grants), and to use the state as a bogeyman for difficult decisions.<sup>13</sup> They point to inequities in the Chapter 70 formula and emphasize that the district's problems might help to get the formula revised. Finally, both school officials and town officials expressed the view that the other group has been either inattentive to the needs of children or inattentive to the needs of the towns: school officials developed budgets based on the needs of the district while town officials insisted on an "affordable assessment" (approximately 48.5 percent), based on a historical allocation of projected revenues.

The failure of the towns to approve district assessments resulted in the involvement of ESE in the fiscal affairs of the district. ESE, town, and school officials all reported that the commissioner has set a 1/12 budget taking effect each July to get the district through until a budget is approved either by the towns or by the commissioner; the commissioner has had to set the final budget each December since 2007. Interviewees reported that ESE fiscal oversight has included approval of major expenditures, and ESE officials reported that they have appointed a monitor for the fiscal affairs of the district who advises the commissioner. For example, in September 2010, ESE requested that the school committee postpone approving negotiated contracts with employees. School committee members and district administrators stated that the budget process is so intense and continuous they have little time and energy to devote to other important matters: one member said, "Until we solve this budget thing we'll never solve other school problems." Teachers reported that they feel unappreciated by the communities and that school committee conflict is demoralizing. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) report for Turners Falls High School of March 2010 also cited the anxiety and uncertainty surrounding budgets as a problem.

---

<sup>13</sup> According to the staff in ESE's Center for School Finance, however, ESE does not have the ability to provide more Chapter 70 aid to a district that is under ESE's fiscal control than to a district that is not.

Officials on both sides have begun working together to resolve the budget impasse. Town officials, school committee members, and administrators reported that a Gill-Montague Oversight Group has been formed including the superintendent, school committee members, and finance committee members from both towns, and because long-term fiscal sustainability is a major issue they have appointed a Technical Panel to prepare a long-range plan for fiscal sustainability. Its communications with ESE, as well as interviewees, indicated that the panel has studied the Chapter 70 aid formula and per-pupil expenditures of the district to help identify possible budget reductions. A school committee member stated that when this long-range plan is completed, possibly in November 2010, the town of Montague may be ready to approve its assessment. But the plan and its long-range fiscal projections are based on assumptions which may be difficult to achieve. The most recent published version of the projections (dated July 2010) assumed 3 percent annual increases in Chapter 70 aid and similar increases for town assessments and school budgets; one or more of these assumptions could prove overly optimistic, leading to the same fate for this plan as befell the 2008 “Financial Analysis and Five Year Plan,” which became obsolete with the arrival of the recession. Overall, however, the fact that these parties have been meeting and working together to resolve the problems in the budget approval process is a very hopeful first step.

**The percentage by which the district’s actual net school spending (NSS) exceeds the NSS required by the state is one of the highest in the state, contributing to the difficulty in getting assessments approved by the towns. Some areas of higher than average expenditures appear excessive when compared to expenditures by similar districts.**

End of Year (EOY) reports for fiscal year 2009 and fiscal year 2010 indicate three areas of expenditure with significant dollar and percentage increases for fiscal year 2010: Health and Medical (nurses) with a \$34,306 (14 percent) increase (coming one year after a \$31,565 or 15 percent increase); Choice and Charter Tuition with a \$131,235 (10 percent) increase; and Active and Retired Employee Insurance/Employer Retirement Contributions with a \$259,271 (11 percent) increase.<sup>14</sup>

The increase in expenditure for nurses occurred as a result of assigning a full-time nurse to each building regardless of size and having an extra nurse assigned to the middle/high school who is available to cover when necessary. The increase in choice and charter tuitions is a requirement when parents decide to remove their students from district schools. However, the review team found little evidence in interviews that the district is making a concerted effort to reverse this trend. But district officials were taking some encouragement from the increased enrollment in 2010-2011 in both the kindergarten and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, two transition points where parents make decisions concerning their children’s schools.

The bulk of the expenses in the third category that saw a significant increase in fiscal year 2010

---

<sup>14</sup> The figure for Active and Retired Employee Insurance/Employer Retirement Contributions reflects \$600,000 paid toward health insurance costs in fiscal year 2009 out of federal stimulus grant funds; other figures in this paragraph reflect only expenditures from money appropriated to the Gill-Montague Regional School Committee.

were for health insurance. In order to reduce rising health insurance costs the district had joined the Group Insurance Commission (GIC) in fiscal year 2009. After joining the GIC, the district's expenditures on health and dental insurance<sup>15</sup> dropped (from \$2,432,991 in fiscal year 2008 to \$2,330,028 in fiscal year 2009, a 4.2 percent decrease), but increased again in fiscal year 2010 (from \$2,330,028 to \$2,502,870, a 7.4 percent increase). The district attributed this increase to the addition of staffing and a 4 percent average GIC rate increase. However, future annual increases and the resulting amounts expended on health insurance are expected to be less than they would have been if the district had not joined the GIC. Table 14 below shows the history of increases and decreases for active and retired employee insurance<sup>16</sup> since fiscal year 2005.

**Table 14: FY05-FY11 Gill-Montague Expenditures for Active and Retired Employee Insurance**

Fiscal Year	Expenditures for Active and Retired Employee Insurance	Percent increase from the previous fiscal year
FY05	1,904,039	--
FY06	2,321,396	21.9
FY07	2,489,288	7.2
FY08	2,540,633	2.1
Gill-Montague joined the GIC beginning in FY09.		
FY09	2,499,552*	-1.6
FY10	2,707,700	8.3
FY11	2,807,225* **	3.7

\*FY09 expenditures include \$600,000 paid toward health insurance costs out of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) grant funds, and budgeted FY11 expenditures include \$255,967 toward health insurance costs from ARRA and education jobs grant funding; all other amounts in this table include only expenditures from money appropriated to the Gill-Montague Regional School Committee.

\*\*Budgeted.

Source: GMRSD End of Year Reports submitted to ESE; information from GMRSD director of business/operations

At the time the district moved to GIC it agreed to pay 90 percent of insurance coverage for its employees choosing the lowest cost plan from GIC, the health maintenance organization (HMO) option. This was an increase from the 85 percent paid by the district for HMO plans before

<sup>15</sup> Dental costs were covered by the district's previous health insurer but are not covered by the GIC.

<sup>16</sup> Active and retired employee insurance expenditures include, in addition to health insurance expenditures, which make up the great majority of the total, expenditures, e.g., for dental insurance, FICA/Medicare, life insurance, and unemployment insurance.

joining GIC.<sup>17</sup>

All other EOY expense functions for fiscal year 2010 appear to be within reasonable increase ranges. Some have been stable and some show a reduction.

The receipt of higher than usual amounts of state and federal grant funding, as noted in the first finding under Financial and Asset Management, may have skewed expenditures in some categories. From fiscal year 2007 to fiscal year 2010, increases in some of these categories were substantial: Administration from \$563,255 to \$758,755; Instructional Leadership from \$1,050,766 to \$1,256,125; and Transportation from \$517,612 to \$652,666. It is not clear whether the district can justify these increases in terms of their positive effects on student learning.

In general, Gill-Montague expenses are high. ESE data for fiscal year 2009 reveals that the district had per-pupil expenditures (\$14,433) that were higher than those of all ten communities shown on the ESE website as comparable in grade structure, district wealth, and enrollment, and higher than the state average (\$13,006). Broken down by categories, the district's fiscal year 2009 per-pupil expenditures were higher than the state average in administration (49 percent higher), instructional leadership (40 percent higher), other teaching services (39 percent higher), instructional materials (82 percent higher), guidance and psychology (50 percent higher), pupil services (34 percent higher), operations and maintenance (31 percent higher), and benefits (34 percent higher).<sup>18</sup> The district's per-pupil expenditures on teachers, professional development, and out-of-district special education placements were less than the state average. It should be noted that paraprofessionals (covered in "other teaching services") have been substantially cut in the proposed fiscal year 2011 budget.

There is a confluence of negative conditions in the district and in Franklin County that affect school district expenditures. A 2009 New England School Development Council (NESDEC) Franklin County study, an ESE study regarding school district consolidation, and a preliminary study by members of the Technical Panel shed light on the sustainability of rural and semi-rural regional school districts and pertain to the GMRSD. These reports make several points: school choice issues "hurt small school districts more rapidly than larger districts"; the loss of manufacturing jobs has brought significant poverty and many marginal incomes; barriers to regionalization, such as loss of local control, preclude the capture of economies of scale, particularly in administration and cooperative purchasing; and the foundation/minimum contribution formula does not mitigate requirements for towns in rural counties.

Nevertheless, in an analysis by ESE staff of September 17, 2010 (see Table 4 in Appendix D), Gill-Montague had higher in-district per-pupil expenditures than the median for six similar small

---

<sup>17</sup>ESE's database on health insurance identifies each district's highest percentage share of health insurance costs. Of the 160 districts in ESE's database, the median highest district share is 75 percent.

<sup>18</sup> A 2009 study identified administrative costs and costs for instructional leadership, other teaching services, pupil services, and benefits as the five largest sources of above-average district spending in Franklin County as a whole. Franklin County Schools: a 2020 Vision. Report to Franklin County Educational and Community Leaders via the Greenfield Community College Foundation, April 27, 2009, New England School Development Council (NESDEC)

communities<sup>19</sup> in all areas except professional development: administration (20 percent higher), instructional leadership (65 percent higher), teachers (5 percent higher), other teaching services (24 percent higher), instructional materials (133 percent higher), guidance and psychology (47 percent higher), pupil services (24 percent higher), operations and maintenance (37 percent higher), and benefits (23 percent higher). Total per-pupil expenditures exceeded the median for these districts by 28 percent.

Some of the higher-than-average spending in the district can be addressed, and some cannot. One result is clear—the actual net school spending (NSS) in fiscal year 2009 was 41 percent above the state requirement, one of the highest percentages in the state. In fiscal year 2010, actual NSS was 37 percent above required. And this higher-than-average spending in Gill-Montague contributes to the confusion around whether town officials, finance committees, and voters should support local assessments. However, a close analysis of the reasons for the above-average expenditures might add credibility to the district’s request for funds, while allowing it to reduce some of these expenditures.

**The district has few strategies for ensuring that student achievement and cost-effective use of resources are used as critical factors as it builds or reduces its budget.**

The budget process starts in the school district with a meeting of central office administrators, (superintendent, business manager, director of special education, director of curriculum, instruction, and professional development, and assistant to the superintendent for special projects) where they talk about district needs in an informal way; it was not clear that the turnaround plan or any other plan drives budget planning. The superintendent and the business manager reported that the next step is gathering information from principals concerning the needs of their schools. Principals, however, did not confirm that they were consulted at this point in the budget process. Nor did the reviewers receive or find any documents that indicated that data about student needs are used to decide where to direct budget funds. Central office administrators, when pressed during an interview concerning whether their decisions are based upon data, said that because they know their students they make their decisions with respect to the proposed budget after discussions around a table.

The next step in the budget process is the effort on the part of the two district towns to gather all possible information as to the amount of revenue that will be available for the coming year’s budget. The towns’ finance committees inform the superintendent of the amounts the towns feel they can afford as district assessments. This step in the process is important since the finance committees will only recommend this amount to town meeting for passage. And it is traditional in Gill and Montague that town meeting voters will only support budget assessments

---

<sup>19</sup> Comparisons were made to six K-12 districts of similar size to Gill-Montague (500-1,500 students) that are similar and/or are considered benchmark districts by the Technical Panel mentioned in the previous finding: Ayer, Mohawk Trail, North Brookfield, Pioneer Valley, Quaboag, and Ware. See also Table 12 under Leadership and Governance above.

recommended by the finance committee. From this point in the development of the district's budget, the constraining consideration is the information from the Montague and Gill town finance committees as to the amount of school assessment the towns can afford after all revenue sources are determined. Town officials, the superintendent, and school committee members confirmed this. When the process moves on to making cuts in the superintendent's proposed budget, principals reported that they were involved. However, in teacher focus groups on the elementary, middle school, and high school levels as well as in interviews with the teachers' association review team members were told that teachers are not generally a part of the budget process. And school committee members reported having insufficient information when approving the budget to make decisions with the least impact on student achievement.

Data about student achievement and areas of student need does not figure prominently in the budget process. The result of not using data about student achievement and student needs as the primary factor in budgeting is a budget built on perceptions of which allocation of limited funds will lead to increased student achievement without evidence to confirm those perceptions. Opposition then ensues with the superintendent and the school committee supporting a budget that is not founded on a solid understanding of how the money will be most effectively spent. Students are not well served in this process.

**The district makes limited use of regional strategies and inter-district collaboration to contain costs and/or acquire expertise it needs to meet student needs.**

Beyond participation in a regional oil/gas bid that has helped contain utility costs, the district makes limited use of educational collaboratives to purchase services or secure specialized services or expertise. As a result, it benefits from few economies of scale, has limited access to services and programming to address low incidence needs, and cannot easily access technical expertise that can help it address needs in fiscally-sound ways.

**Key Question 4: Has the district built the capacity to maintain continuous improvement on its own, without continued assistance from ESE targeted to the district?**

**The district has not yet built the capacity to maintain continuous improvement on its own without continued assistance from ESE targeted to the district.**

*Leadership Capacity:*

The Gill-Montague Regional School District (GMRSD) Leadership Evaluation, submitted to the state in November 2007, addressed leadership capacity in the district from four perspectives: leadership from the superintendent, leadership and support of curriculum and instruction, leadership from the school committee, and municipal leadership. It is useful to address the question of the district's capacity for continuous improvement from these same four perspectives.

The district now has stability at the superintendent level with the appointment of a permanent superintendent in July 2009. And, according to interviews with school committee members and town officials, the superintendent has their respect and is making some progress in addressing the so-far intractable budget issues. His submission of a level-funded fiscal year 2011 budget proposal was seen as an important gesture from the school side.

However, as this report points out, the superintendent has not yet effectively addressed the management of school district operations. There is no clarity regarding the overall plan that guides the district: there is a turnaround plan, a Strategic Vision, an entry plan, and one accepted and one draft School Improvement Plan. This is true in part because the superintendent directed his efforts during his first year toward working with the school committee and the town to solve the budget crisis. But, without his attention to creating the systems that will do the district's work of improving student achievement, the school district has been somewhat rudderless. Principals and schools are operating quite independently of the central office.

Does the **superintendent** have the capacity to lead the district in systematic progress toward improved student achievement? Perhaps with experienced mentoring from an individual with no prior connections to the district. ESE might well provide this assistance. In the absence of such assistance, the superintendent has received a range of guidance from his state Regional Assistance Director (RAD). However, there are limitations to this guidance. The RAD was the interim superintendent who immediately preceded the current superintendent, and he wrote the turnaround plan. The RAD has to work sensitively with the current superintendent since the superintendent has taken over work that he, the RAD, initiated. Also, the review team learned in interviews that the relationship between some local officials and the RAD is complicated by differences in perspectives about past decisions.

Regarding the second area of leadership, the capacity for **leadership and support of curriculum and instruction**, the findings under Key Question 3 delineate serious needs as far as

development of a complete aligned curriculum, the current use of effective instructional strategies in classrooms, and the use of data to inform instruction. Five years after the EQA report that led to the district's designation as "underperforming," these areas continue to be poorly understood and insufficiently addressed. Programs proliferate without evaluation as to their effectiveness; student support programs are initiated and then undercut. The three principals are working on their own to fill in the gaps. But only when central office direction moves from conceptualization to realistic management of implementation will there be significant progress. The capacity for leadership and support of curriculum and instruction is not yet in place. ESE has been providing some assistance in this regard, but the district has not yet done the necessary work to develop the internal capacity to attend to these critical matters. While this capacity is being developed, some continuing support from the state will be required.

Regarding **school committee leadership**, the school committee has made the necessary decisions to accomplish the reconfiguration of the elementary schools in the district, a key goal in the turnaround plan. However, closing the Montague Center School and bringing those students and the Sheffield students into the new Montague Elementary School has only seemed to exacerbate the district's difficulties. Some members of the school committee cannot get beyond the Montague Center School's closing, and parents are withholding their personal and financial support from the schools. As the review team was told in interviews and minutes also indicated, school committee meetings provide opportunities for some individual members to impede action with drawn-out debate and less than professional treatment of other members. Does this school committee have the capacity to lead the district out of its current dysfunctional state? Not as it currently operates.

*Financial capacity and municipal leadership:*

The district has depended on roughly one-and-a-half million dollars<sup>20</sup> per year in state and federal grants to fund several programs, initiatives, and positions. According to administrators and the superintendent's updates on the turnaround plan, examples include textbooks and instructional materials, coaches, reading specialists, and after-school programs. As noted above under Key Question 3, the towns do not have the capacity or the willingness to contribute many more resources to the district, so it is unlikely that the district can continue making progress without ESE support, at least for the short term.

Town and ESE officials expressed the view that the district's per-pupil cost has been high and that savings in some areas could be used to restore and improve programs. According to administrators, school committee members, and the superintendent's updates on the turnaround plan, the district has already taken several steps to reduce costs, especially by closing a school, joining the GIC, and bringing down special education tuition expenses, as discussed above under Key Question 1 in connection with the turnaround plan. Savings in special education costs are

---

<sup>20</sup> According to district documentation, state and federal grants for fiscal year 2011 total \$1,669,899. For fiscal year 2010 the total was \$1,466,628.



confirmed by ESE data showing a decrease in special education costs as a percentage of the budget from 32.6 percent in fiscal year 2005 to 21.2 percent in fiscal year 2009; this is close to the state rate of 20.0 percent. ESE data for 2009 showed a per-pupil cost of \$14,433 for the district, compared to a median per-pupil cost of \$13,201 for the 29 districts of similar size<sup>21</sup> and compared to the per-pupil cost statewide of \$13,006). The review team explored areas where the district's costs are high, especially administration and school leadership, clerical paraprofessionals/instructional assistants, benefits, and operations and maintenance. These areas were also identified in a report to the Gill-Montague Oversight Group's Technical Panel. Administrators reported that administration and leadership costs reflect 13 administrators, of whom 3 are funded in full or in part by grants. Eleven paraprofessionals have already been cut in the proposed fiscal year 2011 budget. Benefit costs have been high despite the district's savings from joining the GIC; and, the district covers high percentages for health insurance for its employees. Higher-than-average maintenance and utility costs were identified in ESE reports; these are due to the age and condition of the elementary schools. A custodial position was cut in 2010.

The review team discussed with district administrators further reductions in costs. It may be possible to reduce administrative and leadership staffing by 2-4 positions when contracts expire in 2011. The increase in the district's share of health insurance was part of the agreement with unions; to renegotiate the share at this time will be challenging. The district together with the towns is considering an energy audit with Siemens, which could result in energy-saving measures paid for by savings in utility costs; the short term savings would be minimal. Administrators noted that collaborative bids have helped control utility costs. District financial reports show that choice and charter charges to the district have exceeded \$1 million, and administrators reported that they are making efforts to keep pupils in the district. This year's kindergarten and sixth grade enrollments have grown, suggesting more pupils are choosing or remaining with the district in those transitional years, and further efforts to attract choice students back to the district could achieve savings. Through a process of program evaluation and budget prioritization the district should be able to identify other savings as well.

All in all, the district has already reduced expenditures in many areas, while costs are rising. For example, the fiscal year 2011 proposed budget was level-funded but as the superintendent pointed out, it required \$800,000 in cuts; the district needs 3-4 percent increases in the budget just to cover contractual obligations and inflation. The effect of its financial constraints has been a dependence on ESE and federal grants to fund programs and initiatives. As its financial situation now stands, the district would not be able to sustain continued improvement financially if ESE assistance were immediately removed.

---

<sup>21</sup>The 29 K-12 districts with 500-1500 students

**Key Question 5: Does the district have the resources needed to implement a turnaround plan effectively?**

**The district does not have the resources to fully implement the current turnaround plan without continued support from ESE. If it develops and implements a new District Improvement Plan that concentrates more on identifying student needs, evaluating and trimming programs, prioritizing expenditures, and building systems than on adding positions and programs, the district may then be able to reduce its budget and gain the confidence of the towns and the parents, leading eventually to the ability to dispense with the additional ESE resources it has benefited from in the recent past.**

As indicated under Key Question 1 above, the district has completed some action steps in the 2008 turnaround plan, including the elementary reconfiguration, joining the GIC, and the implementation of some programs and positions. However, it has not attained the goal of creating educationally sound and fiscally sustainable budgets.

Town and school officials have continued their attempts to reach the goal of creating educationally sound and fiscally sound budgets. As alluded to above under Key Question 3, recent projections in the Technical Panel report assumed 3 percent annual increases in state aid and town assessments and 2.5 percent increases in school budgets; school, town and ESE officials all indicated such increases were optimistic. However, the panel announced its intention to finalize a plan in November 2010. Some officials expressed hope that the plan would pave the way for Montague approval for the fiscal year 2011 district budget, although the plan's unrealistic projections may limit its usefulness.

Present budget constraints make it unlikely that the district can implement the current turnaround plan on its own. Administrators reported that some of the turnaround plan initiatives including math coaches, reading specialists, instructional materials and assessments, and after-school programs are funded by grants. The 2010 turnaround plan update included approximately 8 positions still needed to complete the goals of restoring and improving educational programs, in addition to at least 4 funded by ESE and ARRA grants.

In connection with the goal of reconfiguring elementary schools the turnaround plan included in its action steps the creation of an architectural study for the Sheffield building of Montague Elementary School, which according to the superintendent's update on the turnaround plan has been completed. But his Strategic Vision indicated that the cost of \$28 million is prohibitive; this renovation would clearly require Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) support and cannot be completed in the short term.

The district has relied on ESE grants to fund many of the programs and personnel listed in the turnaround plan, and would require additional support to continue them.

In the view of the review team, the district could arrive at a position where it has the resources needed to implement a turnaround plan effectively if it both develops a plan for guiding its turnaround that better targets the needs of the district and reallocates its resources. As stated

under Key Question 1 above, the expressed assumption of the current turnaround plan is that the district cannot effectively turn itself around without substantial state support, and many of its action steps involve adding personnel or programs for which the funding is not specified. Some of these action steps have not been completed. More importantly, the turnaround plan does not get at transforming the district into a coherent set of systems to address students' needs. The findings in this report are aimed at showing the district where the gaps are between GMRSD now and that coherent set of systems that address students' needs. As described under the first Leadership and Governance finding above, it is unclear at the moment which educational plan—the turnaround plan or the Strategic Vision—is providing direction for administrators and teachers, hindering the district from moving forward. The district does not yet have a plan that is a clear set of directions for the district and aims at the establishment of systems that will constitute a true turnaround.

As stated under the third Assessment finding above, the district has no systems or procedures in place to evaluate curricular or co-curricular programs and services in order to determine their strengths, weaknesses, and needs—or their cost-effectiveness. The absence of these systems and procedures may account for Gill-Montague having, as described in the second Financial and Asset Management finding above, higher per-pupil expenditures in virtually all areas than the median for comparable communities. As described in the third Financial and Asset Management finding above, the district does not use student achievement data and other data about student needs as the primary factor in budgeting, with the result that its budgets are not founded on a solid understanding of how the money will be most effectively spent. If the district evaluates its programs and services and bases its budget, as well as its improvement plan, on an understanding of student needs, the review team believes that it will be able to reallocate (and perhaps reduce) its budget in a way that will support the implementation of its new plan and help it gain the confidence and support of the communities, town officials, parents, and all other stakeholders. Described in the first Financial and Asset Management finding above, the recent activity of the Oversight Group and its Technical Panel is a promising first step toward solving the problems in the budget approval process. This activity should continue, for in the review team's view, though assistance from ESE targeted to the district needs to continue for the short-term, ESE cannot remain "at the table" indefinitely, and another year should not go by where the district and the towns do not arrive at a budget on their own.

## ***Recommendations***

### **Leadership and Governance**

**Gill-Montague needs a united, forward-moving, and civil School Committee that makes high-level decisions around student needs, while taking the lead to protect the district from the distractions of past wounds, political pressures, and personal and special interests.**

Divisions and distractions get in the way of effective district governance. Drawn-out debate, sometimes on matters more appropriately viewed as administrative rather than of a policy nature, and less than professional treatment of some members by others impede reasoned leadership focused on addressing the challenges that have caused Gill-Montague's designation as a Level 4 district and that continue to contribute heavily to the district's ongoing underperformance. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should provide governance assistance, in collaboration with the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) and Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS). The school committee and superintendent need to accept and make effective use of the assistance offered in order to rapidly and dramatically improve the district's governance practices.

**The district needs to develop one guiding, accelerated District Improvement Plan that provides direction for the district and its schools with prioritized strategies and resources of time, personnel, and funding allocated accordingly.**

During the review team's site visit, interviewees had differing opinions as to which of several plans is the one driving the school system. Some said it was the turnaround plan, some the Strategic Vision, others said both plans, and still others were uncertain. It is recommended that the superintendent, with the assistance of a representative from each of the various stakeholder groups and a representative from ESE, draft an accelerated DIP for presentation to and approval by the school committee. The accelerated DIP, which should focus primarily on immediate improvements to student achievement, could include items from the turnaround plan that have not been completed and incorporate ideas from the Strategic Vision—if they appear to be worthy of inclusion in the accelerated DIP once its vision, mission, goals, and objectives have been developed. The team drafting the accelerated DIP should provide such components for each of the objectives as action steps (with deadlines), resources needed, means of evaluation, person(s) responsible, and professional development.

In addition, the superintendent should direct each principal, working with her school improvement council, to prepare a School Improvement Plan. Each SIP must align with the DIP.

Upon adoption of the accelerated District Improvement Plan, the superintendent should conduct a series of meetings with the various stakeholder groups as well as the staffs in all of the schools to explain the contents of the accelerated DIP. The principals should share their SIPs with their staffs. In addition, the superintendent should provide the school committee and stakeholder groups with periodic updates on progress made toward attaining each of the accelerated DIP goals, as well as providing reports to ESE twice a year. Furthermore, the review team suggests

that the school committee report progress on attaining the accelerated DIP goals to the communities and include progress in the superintendent's annual evaluation. Similarly, the superintendent should consider including progress made on attaining the goals in the SIPs and contributions toward attaining the goals in the accelerated DIP as part of the evaluations of principals and central office administrators.

The development of an accelerated DIP, school committee approval of it, and then dissemination and explanation of it to the stakeholder groups should eradicate the uncertainty as to which plan is driving the school district. The development of the accelerated DIP and accompanying SIPs will also provide the structure for the development of systems to carry out the district's work.

**The superintendent should reduce the central office administrative staff, clarify the roles of remaining administrators to address the needs identified in this review, and develop a district and school administrative team that is capable of effectively and collaboratively implementing the accelerated District Improvement Plan.**

The number of central office administrators is now 7 as opposed to 4 in 2006-2007. Enrollment, on the other hand, declined by approximately a hundred students—about 9 percent—in the three years from 2006-2007 to 2009-2010.

Interviewees expressed awareness that Gill-Montague's administrative staff is appreciably larger than that of similar-sized districts and expressed concern about the number of administrators, especially at the central office, given the current economy and the financial constraints in Gill and Montague. The review team also learned in interviews that the increase in the number of administrators in the district in recent years is one of the factors contributing to the lack of financial support for the school department's annual budget.

The superintendent should consider a central office administrative restructuring that, in addition to the position of superintendent, includes positions focused on such functions as curriculum, instruction, and assessment; special education and student support services; and school finance and facilities management. Furthermore, the superintendent should monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the new school level administrative structure he has implemented.

A reduction in the number of administrators in the central office will reduce expenses and will be received favorably by the taxpayers.

## **Curriculum and Instruction**

**The district should rapidly develop and implement a comprehensive PK-12 curriculum document in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies that addresses both alignment to the new state frameworks and internal horizontal and vertical alignment. Once developed, the district has to ensure its effective implementation through supervision, professional development and coaching, appropriate resource allocation, and other means.**

The curriculum in place in the district is piecemeal. There are purchased published programs in place in elementary and middle school mathematics and in elementary ELA. There are curriculum maps for most courses at the high school, but none was available to the review team for middle school ELA. In those curriculum maps that exist, columns addressing Essential Questions and Assessment frequently lack full development. Vertical alignment is completed for elementary ELA, mathematics, and science and in process for the upper levels of ELA, but not yet planned for secondary mathematics and science. Furthermore, those pieces of curriculum currently in place do not constitute a complete curriculum. The district should have a comprehensive curriculum guide for each content area that specifies alignment with all indicators in the corresponding state framework and is aligned vertically from kindergarten to grade 12 and horizontally across grades and schools. The curriculum guides should include at a minimum objectives, resources, instructional strategies, timelines, and assessments. Only then will students, parents, and community members be assured that students have the benefit of participation in the full curriculum prescribed in the state frameworks.

**The district should provide its teachers with the professional development, coaching, and administrative supervision that will enable them to understand, practice, and effectively implement a variety of instructional strategies.**

The review team's extensive classroom observations indicated some instructional strengths, but there was limited evidence that instruction included a range of techniques. There was also limited evidence of students engaged in application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; of students articulating their thinking and reasoning; or of students working in pairs or small groups. These instructional characteristics, when present, indicate rigorous instruction with students actively engaged and learning with one another. The district should train teachers to implement a variety of instructional strategies, and then administrators and coaches should support them as they try out these strategies in their classrooms and eventually master their use. Only then will students have the opportunity to grow as active participants in their learning.

## **Assessment**

**The administrative team should address the many initiatives outlined in the Year of Assessment strategically and tactically. The team is encouraged to use a planning and monitoring tool appropriate to the complexity of the effort.**

Three findings in this report address a number of key issues related to the district's major initiative to improve the assessment of student achievement, the assessment of the district's academic and social curricula, the evaluation of its services, and, in general, the use of data to drive decision-making.

On the one hand, when examining the goals, plans, and conceptual framework of the initiatives that shape the Year of Assessment, the review team found that, indeed, the framework is solid and well-developed in the superintendent's Strategic Vision and there is an appropriate sense of urgency and interest on the part of school personnel in tackling issues of assessment. Leaders are committed to the vision of educating the whole child and support the innovative dual curriculum implemented in the district. The creation of school-based assessment teams, their initial training, and the introduction of the new MAP assessments are promising developments. The new MAP assessments promise to yield more useful and more complete data on students' growth and mastery in ELA and mathematics. The district has the capacity to collect and disseminate raw data effectively and many more people can analyze raw data and use data to make decisions about curriculum and instruction than was the case at the time of the last EQA review in 2005.

On the other hand, a meaningful number of interviewees said that they lack detailed knowledge about what they will be asked to do; when various components of the Year of Assessment will take place; and what this large-scale improvement effort means for their school and especially for their practice. In addition, the resources the review team found the district poised to allocate to the Year of Assessment appeared too few when balanced against the enormity of the effort. Questions were raised among the review team about the adequacy of the time the district plans to set aside for professional development to help school and classroom personnel throughout the year to gain new knowledge, develop new and intricate skills and practices, reflect on early experiments, share successes (and failures) with colleagues, and refine long-held professional views and habits. Essentially, the district is asking its staff to rethink basic assumptions about how they do their work and emerge at the end of three years in a changed paradigm of what constitutes good teaching and learning in the Gill-Montague Regional School District.

In addition, the review team had questions about the adequacy of the planning procedures and lack of planning tools for monitoring the many anticipated activities and gauging successes. Many teachers require capacity building in all of the domains needed to make the Year of Assessment effective: collecting, analyzing, and sharing assessment data, and using it for decision-making. Leaders, too, need support in learning how to analyze all kinds of raw data more effectively so that they have deeper and clearer pictures of the trends, strengths, weaknesses, and needs that exist at every level of the district. Leaders also need to sharpen their skills at linking the setting of budgetary needs, program priorities, and policy to assessment data.

Formats of reports and presentations need to be standardized, within reasonable parameters, and show trends over time and comparisons among cohorts, so that those reading or listening to them can clearly see the important points being communicated and can thus be assisted in using data well to make decisions.

At the end of the administrative team's meeting(s), it should have developed clear responses to the following questions:

- What are the primary and secondary action goals of the Year of Assessment?
- Who should be involved in meeting each action goal?
- What must happen in terms of milestones, events, meetings, professional development and capacity building to support each action goal?
- What products will be produced and shared along the way and at the end of the year, or at the end of another designated time period, and with whom will they be shared?
- What resources (time, money, professional development, knowledge, expertise, materials, etc.) are needed and where will they come from?
- Who will be responsible for implementation and for follow-up for each action goal?
- What should the schedule be for meetings of groups assigned to complete tasks and for professional development, and who should be engaged in those activities?
- Who will make sure that there is communication to all stakeholders and how will communication be structured so that it occurs regularly?
- How will the district evaluate the effectiveness of its efforts toward continuous improvement and make needed adjustments?

The review team believes that with careful planning and implementation the district can succeed over time in improving assessment: how it collects, analyzes, and distributes assessment data and uses it to make curricular and instructional decisions. With the improvement, these decisions will be better targeted to students' needs and so will result in changes in curriculum and instruction that will improve student learning.

**The district should weed out programs and services that have been determined to be less effective and/or not well aligned with district priorities through an ongoing monitoring process as well as through a rigorous cycle of review and evaluation.**

The district has no procedures for examining the strengths, weaknesses, cost-effectiveness, and improvement needs of its many programs and services and their delivery. The review team found numerous programs in the district, some that had been in place for a long time, but no evidence that the district regularly evaluates programs. In a time of tightening resources, this cannot continue.

The district should establish and carry out a systematic, thoughtful cycle of review and evaluation for curricular programs and key support services. This will allow it to gain an



understanding of the status of programs vis-à-vis district and school goals, state goals, and state-of-the-art practice. It will also gain insight into the effectiveness of its programs and services, which will allow it to focus its energies on those that work and to realize budget savings from eliminating those that do not.

## **Human Resources and Professional Development**

**The district should provide additional time for professional development and collaborative planning by restoring in-service half days or a comparable alternative, and make effective use of the time. Restoring time is a particularly critical need at the secondary level where the need for improved curriculum alignment and delivery is the greatest.**

The professional development plan supports teachers and administrators by providing professional development activities to assist them in improving student academic performance. The plan articulates the relationship between professional development and assessment, curriculum, and instruction with the intent of making available professional development in these three areas.

However, a dramatic reduction of in-service days jeopardizes the district focus during 2010-2011 on student assessment and other district initiatives. In interviews, principals and teachers indicated that they had had no input into making the change and expressed a concern about the sufficiency of number of in-service days. The district's ambitious plans to improve student achievement require substantial professional development to increase teacher capacity. An increase in the number of in-service days in the school calendar is essential for the accomplishment of those plans.

**The evaluation process should be revised to include goal-setting for all educators, consistent with the new statewide framework that will be established in spring 2011 by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.**

Teacher and administrator interviews and a review of the collective bargaining agreement reveal that most teachers are evaluated using a checklist. Under the contract, goal-setting is only permitted for teachers who do not meet the performance standards. Those teachers whose performance is found not satisfactory are required to set goals. But when teachers set and achieve goals in line with those of the district and school as well as their own needs, growth occurs. Since most teachers meet the performance standards, the district's evaluation process does not promote most teachers' growth and overall effectiveness. The Gill-Montague Regional School District and the Gill-Montague Education Association have agreed under the pending contract, whose ratification has been postponed at ESE's request, to establish a joint labor/management committee to address the teacher evaluation procedure and other related issues.

The teacher evaluation procedure should be strengthened by enabling teachers and principals to establish goals to improve teachers' performance. This will encourage growth by teachers with satisfactory performance through professional development activities under the professional

development plan, thus establishing a critical link between the evaluation process, the individual professional development plan and the professional development provided at the school and district levels.

## **Student Support**

**In connection with the program review recommended above and the analysis of student needs recommended below, the district should reallocate resources to restore those academic student support programs that are most likely to improve student achievement because they are systemic in nature, e.g., the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy, the special education co-teaching model, and ELA and mathematics coaching.**

Student support programs important for improving student achievement have been cut back and had their effectiveness diminished. Teachers perceived the high school's 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy, implemented in 2007-2008, and special education co-teaching model, implemented in 2009-2010, to be effective up until the 2010-2011 school year. Before 2010-2011, the teachers working within the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy and a percentage of the teachers working within the co-teaching model had common planning time with their colleagues. In the 2010-2011 school year, the common planning time for teachers in the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy was eliminated, and the effectiveness of the program has been diminished as a result. In addition, the number of special education co-taught classes was decreased to accommodate other scheduling needs, along with the amount of common planning time for the co-teachers. The high school, with the input and participation of curricular chairs, should consider planning the 2011-2012 master schedule to increase the number of co-taught classes and restore common planning time for both co-taught classes and the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy as much as possible. Doing so would assist the 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academy in easing the transition from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade and in preventing dropouts, and would allow more special education students to receive effective teaching in the least restrictive environment. Small schools can experience substantial scheduling challenges. That said, consideration might be given to staggered schedules for staff to facilitate common planning time for specific teams of teachers.

The literacy coach position has been eliminated and both mathematics coach positions are scheduled for elimination in June 2011. Coaching can provide important support for teachers for classroom instruction and the strategic use of data. The absence of coaching limits opportunities for elementary and middle school teachers to grow and develop. The district should review budgetary priorities relative to coaching and consider allocating funding to support coaching and the teacher development that it assists. Consideration might be given to establishing part-time positions through which highly effective educators devote part of their time to classroom teaching and part to coaching and coaching training.

The establishment, restoration, or elimination of district programs should be considered after the district has conducted a systematic, thoughtful review of programs and services as recommended above, and after all students needs are identified and prioritized, as recommended below.

## Financial and Asset Management

**The district needs to make more informed, cost-effective, and purposeful decisions about how its resources are spent and used to support the district's accelerated improvement plan.**

Per-pupil spending in Gill-Montague is high compared to the state average and to districts with similar demographics. A study of similar small districts prepared for this review by ESE revealed that Gill-Montague's in-district per-pupil spending in most budget categories is higher than in most of these districts as well: administration, instructional leadership, other teaching services, instructional materials, guidance and psychology, pupil services, operations and maintenance, and benefits. Some of the difference, such as the high spending on instructional materials, can be explained by Gill-Montague's access to extra state funding. Much of the difference, though, needs to be attributed to decisions made by the school committee and superintendent. Yet the review team saw no evidence that decisions about budget allocations are based on data about student needs. Nor did the team see much evidence that the district's turnaround or other plans drove budget decisions. There are several areas of rapidly escalating cost since 2007: administration, instructional leadership, and transportation. Costs escalated since 2008 for health and medical (nurses), and are higher than they would be for health insurance through the Group Insurance Commission if the district were covering lower percentages of health insurance for its employees.<sup>22</sup>

With information in hand about which expenditures are escalating most rapidly and which far exceed those statewide and in comparable districts, district leaders need to re-evaluate those expenditures and consider cost-effective alternatives that are in line with priorities of the accelerated District Improvement Plan.

A final note on the budget process: Although central office administrators said that principals are consulted about the needs of their schools in the development of the original proposed budget, interviews with principals did not support this assertion. Principals did report that they are involved when the time comes to make cuts in the proposed budget. The process should be expanded to include information on student needs from the beginning, including information gathered by central office administrators from principals and by principals from teachers. A more inclusive and data-driven budget development process, guided by priorities identified in the accelerated District Improvement Plan, will help the district make the best decisions to address student needs and also help it gain the confidence of parents, community members, and town officials.

---

<sup>22</sup> See footnote 17 above.

**The district needs to pursue much more aggressively regional and inter-district solutions to address the increasingly significant financial and educational needs created by its small size.**

Gill-Montague is a small school district serving communities of moderate wealth. Four schools—two elementary schools, one middle school, and a high school—enroll 1,085 students (2009-2010). At the same time, its overall per-pupil spending exceeds the state average by 11 percent<sup>23</sup> and exceeds the median for in-district per-pupil costs in similar small districts by 28 percent.<sup>24</sup> Its spending above required net school spending is among the highest in the Commonwealth<sup>25</sup>. These two realities—small size and high per-pupil spending—are connected. The need to capture economies of scale and address important student and staff needs has become critical.

Broken down by categories, the district's fiscal year 2009 per-pupil expenditures were higher than per-pupil expenditures for the state and similar small districts<sup>26</sup> in:

1. administration (49 percent above the state; 20 percent above similar small districts),
2. instructional leadership (40 percent above the state; 65 percent above similar small districts),
3. other teaching services (39 percent above the state; 24 percent above similar small districts ),
4. pupil services (34 percent above the state; 24 percent above similar small districts),
5. benefits, including health insurance (34 percent above the state; 23 percent above similar small districts),
6. guidance and psychology (50 percent above the state; 47 percent above similar small districts),
7. operations and maintenance (31 percent above the state; 37 percent above similar small districts), and,
8. instructional materials (82 percent above the state; 133 percent above similar small districts).

It is instructive to note that the first five categories had been identified in a 2009 study as the five

---

<sup>23</sup> In fiscal year 2009, Gill Montague spent \$14,433 per pupil; the state average was \$13,006.

<sup>24</sup>ESE's September 17, 2010 Financial Analysis: Gill- Montague FY09 (see Appendix D) identified six K-12 districts of similar size to Gill-Montague (500-1,500 students) that are similar and/or are considered benchmark districts by the Technical Panel of Gill-Montague's Oversight Group: Ayer, Mohawk Trail, North Brookfield, Pioneer Valley, Quaboag, and Ware. The report compared in-district per pupil expenditures. The median in-district expenditure for the seven districts in FY 09 was \$11,810; Gill-Montague's was the highest at \$15,134. See Table 4 in Appendix D.

<sup>25</sup> In fiscal year 2009, Gill-Montague's net school spending was 41 percent above required spending; in fiscal year 2010, after program reductions, its net school spending was still 37 percent above required net school spending.

<sup>26</sup> See Financial Analysis-Gill-Montague FY09 in Appendix D, cited above.

largest sources of above-average district spending in Franklin County as a whole.<sup>27</sup>

These eight areas can be the starting point for the district to pursue aggressively potential regional approaches to contain cost increases and/or address needs in more cost-effective ways. Sharing administrative, operations, support staff, and even teaching positions with neighboring districts is one option demanding serious consideration. Purchasing services and experts' time from regional educational collaboratives and state associations is another. A careful analysis of costs and needs could lead to the adoption of inter-district or regional approaches to delivering these and other services to Gill-Montague schools:

- building maintenance and repair,
- management of the school breakfast and lunch program,
- special education and regular transportation,
- purchasing,
- payroll,
- hardware purchase and maintenance,
- instructional coaching and other professional development,
- energy conservation, and
- legal assistance.

Regional organizations can provide these and other services. One resource designed to help identify regional practices that may work for Gill-Montague is a recent publication from a task force convened by the Secretary of Education to identify potential operational efficiencies.<sup>28</sup> Its promising practices guide describes practices districts in the Commonwealth have implemented to contain costs in three areas: human resource management, infrastructure management, and curriculum and instruction including technology. A number of the practices take advantage of regional approaches to achieve economies of scale and address unmet needs in areas that include some of the above. In addition, state associations including the Massachusetts School Business Officials (MASBO) and regional educational collaboratives including the Collaborative for Educational Services (formerly Hampshire Educational Collaborative) are prepared to expand services and are looking for willing partners.

---

<sup>27</sup> Franklin County Schools: a 2020 Vision. Report to Franklin County Educational and Community Leaders via the Greenfield Community College Foundation, April 27, 2009, New England School Development Council (NESDEC)

<sup>28</sup> A Promising Practices Guide to Improve Operational Efficiency and Achieve Cost Savings for Public School Districts, 2010, Secretary of Education, Executive Office of Education.

**The district should build upon the work of the recently created Oversight Group in financial analysis and planning to develop an ongoing process for developing consensus on proposed budgets that takes into account the towns' ability to pay as well as school needs.**

Since 2007 the district and its member towns have been unable to agree on a budget. This has required ESE to set budgets for the district, involving ESE in fiscal decisions, and has created uncertainty about what the district can commit to until well into the school year.

A Gill-Montague Oversight Group was recently created, composed of the superintendent and school committee and finance committee members from both towns. It has formed a Technical Panel that has been studying financial issues in the district and preparing a plan for long-term fiscal sustainability. The financial issues include high per-pupil spending compared to similar districts and the need to establish sustainable budgets that will not drain town reserves. Both issues have been major impediments to passing a budget. However, there are other impediments beyond the financial ones, such as the closing of Montague Center School. The Oversight Group could be a forum for working through these issues as well. An annual consensus among appropriate community leaders on the balance between school needs and affordability for the towns should help the towns support district budgets again, and the Oversight Group is a logical forum in which to develop a process for creating such consensus. Consensus will never be easy, especially after so many years of rejected budgets, but all other towns and districts in the state arrive at it.

Especially in the beginning, flexibility is essential on both sides because fiscal support from the state is insufficient to fill the gaps. For example, agreed-upon principles for the use of town reserves, growth and revenue sources, school excess and deficiency funds, and balances in circuit breaker and other revolving funds can help reduce the impact of current difficult economic times. Decisions as to who should be engaged in a consensus process are also critical, requiring the balancing of points of view and of political influence as well as the inclusion of financial expertise; it is likely that the active participation of an ESE representative or monitor in the first year or two would enhance the success of developing a process and reaching a consensus.

The district does not have the capacity to fully implement the existing turnaround plan or to maintain continuous improvement on its own. ESE support and grants have been essential to establishing budgets and funding new programs and services, especially those needed for improvement. However, as recommended above, the district must begin to make some hard decisions as to which of its many programs are effective and deserve continuing support. At the same time, however, the school committee must be clear that its responsibilities are to the students and not to the taxpayers. And with the current state of the economy, towns may have to dip into rainy day funds to break the deadlock. With the reallocation (and perhaps reduction) of the district budget in accordance with priorities set by its new accelerated District Improvement Plan and based on student needs, and with flexibility on the part of both the district and the towns, the review team believes that all parties can move beyond the impasses of the past few years and reach agreement on a budget.

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

---

The review of the Gill-Montague Regional School District was conducted from September 27-September 30, 2010, by the following team of educators, independent consultants to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Dr. John Kulevich, Leadership and Governance

Patricia Williams, Curriculum and Instruction

Dr. Linda Greyser, Assessment

Dr. Wilfred Savoie, Human Resources and Professional Development

Dr. Richard Smith, Student Support

Dr. George Gearhart, Financial and Asset Management

Richard Scortino, Financial and Asset Management

Dr. Charles Valera, Financial and Asset Management

Patricia Williams served as team coordinator.

## Appendix B: Review Activities and Site Visit Schedule

---

### Level 4 Review Activities

The following activities were conducted as part of the review of the Gill-Montague Regional School District.

- The review team conducted interviews with the following Gill-Montague financial personnel: Gill Finance Committee member, Montague Finance Committee member, Montague town administrator, Gill selectman, Montague Board of Selectmen chair.
- The review team conducted interviews with the following members of the Gill-Montague School Committee: chair and 6 members.
- The review team conducted interviews with the following representatives of the Gill-Montague Education Association: president, vice-president, member.
- The review team conducted interviews and focus groups with the following representatives from the Gill-Montague Regional School District central office administration: superintendent; assistant to the superintendent for special projects; director of curriculum, instruction, and professional development; director of business operations; director of grants and technology; director of early childhood education; interim director of special education.
- The review team visited the following schools in the Gill-Montague Regional School District: Montague Elementary (pre-K-5), Gill Elementary (K-6), Great Falls Middle School (6-8), Turners Falls High School (9-12).
  - During school visits, the review team conducted interviews with school principals and teachers.
  - The review team conducted 52 classroom visits for different grade levels and subjects across the 4 schools visited.
- The review team conducted interviews with ESE staff who were responsible for accountability monitoring.
- The review team reviewed the following documents provided by ESE:
  - District profile data
  - District Analysis and Review Tool (DART)
  - Data from the Education Data Warehouse (EDW)
  - District Turnaround Plan
  - District Progress Reports to ESE on the Turnaround Plan
  - ESE Monitoring Reports related to the Turnaround Plan



- Latest Coordinated Program Review (CPR) Report and any follow-up Mid-cycle Report
- Most recent New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) report
- Any District or School Accountability Report produced by Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) or ESE in the past three years
- Teachers' contract, including the teacher evaluation tool
- Reports on licensure and highly qualified status
- Long-term enrollment trends
- End-of-year financial report for the district for 2010
- 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
  - Montague Elementary and Gill Elementary School Improvement Plans
  - School committee policy manual
  - School committee minutes for the past year
  - Most recent budget proposal with accompanying narrative or presentation; and most recent approved budget
  - Curriculum maps
  - K-12 ELA, mathematics, and science curriculum documents
  - High school program of studies
  - Copies of data analyses/reports used in schools
  - Descriptions of student support programs
  - Program evaluations
  - Student and Family Handbooks
  - Faculty Handbook
  - Professional Development Plan
  - Teacher certification and qualification information
  - Teacher planning time schedules
  - Evaluation tools for central office administrators and principals

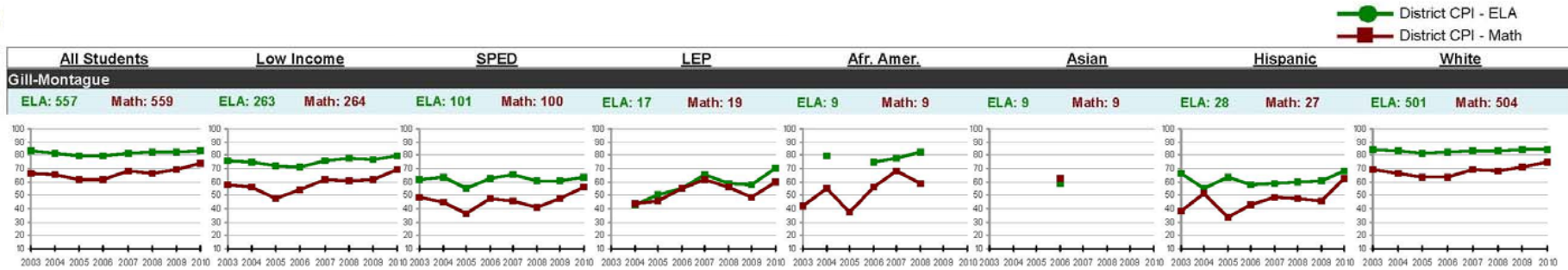
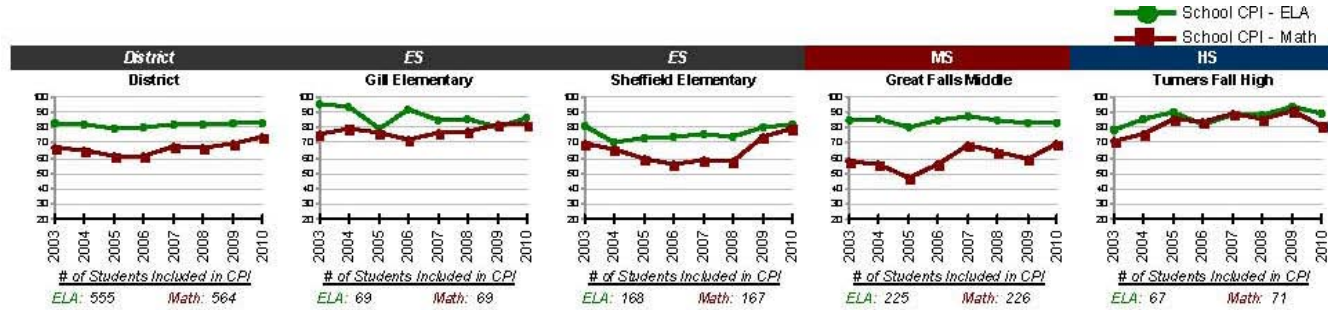
- Classroom observation tools not used in the teacher evaluation process
- Job descriptions for central office and school administrators and instructional staff)
- Teacher attendance data
- All administrator evaluations and certifications
- Randomly selected teacher personnel files
- List of administrative positions in central office from 2005-2006 to present
- Turners Falls High School 4 year graduation/dropout cohort: 2004-2008
- Budget Report Expenditures
- Minutes of school committee meetings related to elementary school reconfiguration
- School committee agenda and back-up information for September 28, 2010
- New teacher mentoring guide
- Administrative team meeting agendas
- Letter to Wulfson and Lynch from the Technical Panel of the Gill-Montague Oversight Group with attachments: July 1, 2010
- GMRSD Budget Report Expenditures: 9/23/10
- GMRSD FY11 Operating Budget: 6/30/10, voted on by school committee 7/22/10
- GMSRD Grants FY2011
- Financial Analysis and Five Year Plan for Gill-Montague by J. Singleton: 5/09
- Town of Montague Capital Projects Schedule: 2/28/10
- GMSRD Annual Financial Statements and Auditor's Report: 6/30/09

## Site Visit Schedule

The following is the schedule for the onsite portion of the Level 4 review of the Gill-Montague Regional School District, conducted from September 27-30, 2010.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
9/27 Introductory meeting with district leaders; interviews with district staff and principals; review of documents and personnel files; interview with union.	9/28 Interviews with district staff and principals; classroom observations (Great Falls Middle School, Turners Fall High School); classroom observations; teacher focus groups; review of personnel files	9/29 Classroom observations (Montague Elementary School, Great Falls Middle School): interviews with school leaders and coaches; parent focus group; school committee interviews	9/30 Classroom observations (Gill Elementary, Montague Elementary, Turners Falls High School): interviews with school leaders; team meeting; closing meeting with district leaders

# Appendix C: Gill-Montague CPI Trends 2003-2010 for Schools and Subgroups



# Appendix D: ESE Financial Analysis of Gill-Montague for FY09

## Memorandum

To: Eva Mitchell  
From: Sarah Carleton, Office of Planning and Research  
Date: September 17, 2010  
RE: Financial Analysis: Gill-Montague FY09

---

In response to your request for more information about finances for the Gill-Montague district and its review team, I have prepared the following analysis drawn from End-of-Year Reports.

### Overview

The towns of Gill and Montague have questioned why their regional school district costs more per pupil than similar districts. The Technical Panel of the Gill-Montague Oversight Group did an analysis of per pupil expenditures based on public data from the Department's website, comparing the district's expenditures per pupil to the state average and to selected districts. It concluded that district costs were particularly high in the areas of employee benefits, other teaching services, district administration and instructional leadership, operations and maintenance, instructional materials, and pupil services, but not in teachers.

This memorandum presents a more detailed financial analysis and uses a different methodology for comparing costs. Comparisons are made to K-12 districts of similar size (500-1,500 enrolled students) and to six districts in this size group that are similar and/or are considered benchmark districts by the Panel: Ayer, Mohawk Trail, North Brookfield, Pioneer Valley, Quaboag, and Ware. The comparisons are based on medians rather than averages to reduce the impact of high cost outliers. Costs for in-district and out-of-district pupils are analyzed separately because the cost drivers are so different. Structuring the analysis in this way produces results that sometimes vary from the Panel's, but raises more targeted questions for further discussion. Local data not available to the Department will be needed to answer those questions.

The most current financial data available to the Department is FY09 data, which is now very out of date. An analysis of FY10 data using the same methodology should be done as soon as it is available. Local data about FY10 and FY11 can be used in the meantime to update this analysis.

### Impact of district size and out-of-district expenditures on per pupil costs

The table below compares median costs per pupil for K-12 districts with between 500 and 3,500 enrolled students, separated into three size groups. Gill-Montague, with 1,085 students in 2010, falls in the middle of the lowest size group of 500-1,500 students. The table distinguishes between in-district and out-of-district costs because they vary by size in significantly different ways. For reference, the state *average* per pupil expenditure posted on the Department's website is \$14,438.

**Table 1: 2009 per pupil expenditures by district size**

	Median \$/pupil
<u>K-12 districts with 500-1,500 enrolled (N = 29 )</u>	
In-district pupils	12,341
Out-of-district pupils	14,986
All pupils	13,201
<u>K-12 districts with 1,500-2,500 enrolled (N = 47)</u>	
In-district pupils	10,778
Out-of-district pupils	25,633
All pupils	11,412
<u>K-12 districts with 2,500-3,500 enrolled (N = 42)</u>	
In-district pupils	10,779
Out-of-district pupils	31,497
All pupils	11,395

*Data is from 2009 End-of-Year Reports. Expenditures from all funding sources are included.*

Median in-district per pupil expenditure is about 15% higher for districts with 500-1,500 students compared to the two other size groups, probably because larger districts have more economies of scale. Median out-of-district per pupil expenditure is lower in smaller districts, but this is because they generally have a larger proportion of inexpensive choice and charter tuitions than of expensive SPED outside placements. Larger districts not only tend to have less choice students, but can support more SPED services within the district; their outside placements may be for the most high-needs, and therefore most expensive, SPED students.

Within its size group of 29 districts, Gill-Montague has the third highest expenditure per pupil for all pupils, behind Nantucket and Mohawk Trail. However, as shown in Table 2, while Gill-Montague's expenditure for all pupils is \$1,232 above the median its in-district expenditures are \$2,793 higher than the median. Out-of-district expenditures are \$4,068 below the median because a particularly large proportion of its residents choice out of the district, reducing the average cost of each student when compared to districts with less choice tuitions and more SPED out-placements.

**Table 2: 2009 per pupil expenditures comparison**

	In-district	Out-of-district	All pupils
Gill-Montague	15,134	10,918	14,433
Median for K-12 districts with 500-1,500 students	12,341	14,986	13,201
Difference (G-M minus median)	2,793	-4,068	1,232

Because the district's low out-of-district expenditures mask the true difference in cost for in-district pupils, the following analysis will focus primarily on in-district expenditures.

### Comparison of Gill-Montague with six similar districts

In the following sections, expenditure details from seven districts including Gill-Montague are compared by line item within expenditure categories with the highest differences to median costs. Some key characteristics of these districts are provided for reference in Table 3.

**Table 3: District enrollment and performance characteristics - 2009**

District	Enrolled	Percent of subgroups				CPI by subject	
		White	Low Income	SPED	LEP	ELA	Math
Gill-Montague	1,082	89.5	44.3	19.3	2.4	82.7	69.6
Ayer	1,202	74.9	23.5	19.5	3.2	85.6	77.5
Mohawk Trail	1,157	90.7	32.1	21.0	0.5	85.4	76.0
North Brookfield	652	96.0	25.9	15.9	0.2	86.2	75.5
Pioneer Valley	1,151	94.6	22.8	16.7	0.0	84.6	74.7
Quaboag	1,433	94.2	29.6	19.1	0.1	82.8	72.0
Ware	1,243	88.6	47.2	18.5	0.7	80.6	76.3

Table 4 shows in-district per pupil expenditures for the seven districts in the same categories used in the Panel's analysis. The median in each category is highlighted. A key figure in Table 4 is the median in-district per pupil expenditure which is \$11,810, yet lower than the median for the group of K-12 districts with 500-1,500 enrolled students (\$12,341), setting a more challenging standard for comparison. In the group, Gill-Montague and Mohawk Trail are high outliers in overall expenditures.

**Table 4: In-district per pupil expenditures by categories – 2009**

District	District Admin	Instruc-tional Leaders	Teacher s	Other Teaching Services	Prof Devel	Instruc-tional Mat'ls, Equip, Tech-nology	Guidance, Psychology	Pupil Services	Oper-ations & Maint-enance	Benefits	In-district Total
Gill-Montague	653	1,158	4,761	1,307	<b>109</b>	649	528	1,562	1,440	2,966	15,134
Ayer	604	736	<b>4,522</b>	661	76	<b>279</b>	349	1,166	936	2,111	11,440
Mohawk Trail	561	787	4,897	2,110	181	275	418	1,883	1,331	2,552	14,994
North Brookfield	<b>542</b>	638	4,693	654	138	244	318	1,118	1,058	<b>2,406</b>	<b>11,810</b>
Pioneer Valley	463	<b>702</b>	4,389	1,327	260	367	<b>360</b>	1,489	<b>1,053</b>	2,475	12,884
Quaboag	456	602	4,504	764	42	508	295	<b>1,257</b>	1,002	1,453	10,884
Ware	450	671	3,961	<b>1,055</b>	70	132	388	1,155	1,027	2,035	10,944
Median	542	702	4,522	1,055	109	279	360	1,257	1,053	2,406	11,810
Difference (G-M minus median)	111	456	238	252	0	370	168	305	388	560	3,325

Among the seven districts in Table 4, no single one has a cost structure putting it at the median for all categories, as indicated by the highlighted medians in each column. Therefore, the sum of the medians does not equal the median of total expenditures and this method does not define a single, consistent cost structure. The analysis is not intended to provide answers about what a district “should” spend, but it points to issues for further analysis at the district level using local data.

Consistent with the Panel’s conclusions, by this methodology Gill-Montague is significantly above the group’s median in employee benefits (\$560), instructional leadership (\$456), operations and maintenance (\$388), instructional materials, equipment and technology (\$370) and pupil services (\$305). In a notable difference from the Panel’s analysis, Gill Montague’s teacher cost is \$238 above the group median while the Panel found that the district was below the state average. The state average is driven by the largest districts, which may have higher pay scales.

The following sections break down each higher-cost category into line items. At this level of detail districts do not always report consistent expenditures; while comparison to medians is still useful, some careful interpretation is needed as well. Medians are calculated and discussed only for line items in which six or seven districts report costs.

### Employee benefits and fixed charges

Employee benefits, at \$560 above the group median, represent 17% of Gill-Montague’s total difference in costs. The Panel found a much higher difference when comparing to the state average, so the comparison to a more similar group of districts may be more realistic. The following table provides line item detail in this category.

**Table 5: 2009 per pupil expenditures - employee benefits and fixed charges**

District	Employer Retirement Contributions	Insurance for Active Employees	Insurance for Retired School Employees	Other Non-Employee Insurance	Rental of Equipment	Rental of Buildings	Other Fixed Charges	School Crossing Guards	Total
Gill-Montague	476	1,834	498	121		4	28	6	2,966
Ayer	249	1,446	<b>348</b>	20		49			2,111
Mohawk Trail	464	1,741	264	44	20		19		2,552
North Brookfield	212	1,569	540	76				9	<b>2,406</b>
Pioneer Valley	<b>447</b>	<b>1,507</b>	<b>456</b>	<b>58</b>	6				2,475
Quaboag	119	1,136	107	46	24	11	8	3	1,453
Ware	516	1,394		124					2,035
Median	447	1,507	402	58					2,406
Difference (G-M minus median)	28	327	96	63					560



The district’s retirement contributions are \$28 above median, which may reflect characteristics of its teaching staff (ages and salary steps.) The district has already addressed its especially high insurance costs for both active and retired employees (\$327 and \$96 above median) by switching to the General Insurance Commission’s plans, and finance data for 2010 should reflect savings. Other non-employee insurance, \$63 above median, might be researched to find out what drives higher costs in Gill-Montague.

### Instructional leadership

Instructional leadership costs in Gill-Montague (\$456 above median) may be higher because of the district’s focus for the last several years on its turn-around plan. Drawing reasonable conclusions about this category requires grouping expenditures in some line items, as districts may staff a function such as curriculum supervision and/or code similar positions differently. Of the six lines in this category only two are universally reported, district level curriculum supervisors and school leadership.

**Table 6: 2009 per pupil expenditures - instructional leadership**

District	Curriculum Directors (Supervisory)	Department Heads (Non-Supervisory)	School Leadership	Curriculum/Dept Leaders (School Level)	Instructional Coordinators (Non-Supervisory)	Admin. Technology (School Level)	Total
Gill-Montague	336	22	693	107			1,158
Ayer	273		448		47	15	782
Mohawk Trail	282	29	454		364	23	1,151
North Brookfield	170		468				638
Pioneer Valley	99		558	4		41	702
Quaboag	70		397	26	2	109	604
Ware	156		514		8		679
Median	170	25	468	26			702
Difference (G-M minus median)	166		225				456

Gill-Montague has the highest per pupil cost for district curriculum directors, \$166 above median, and has a few department heads in addition though most of the districts do not. The district is also \$111 above median for district administration (see Table 4), and there can be some overlap with instructional supervision in those positions. Mohawk Trail’s instructional leadership at the school level includes both school leadership (\$454) and instructional coordinators (\$364) for a total of \$818 per pupil, well above a district like North Brookfield (\$468) with school leadership only. Gill-Montague has the highest cost for school leadership (\$693), and also has school-level curriculum leaders (\$107). Mohawk Trail and Gill-Montague are spending \$800 to \$820 per student across school level instructional leadership positions that would include roles described as assistant principals, school-based curriculum specialists, or instructional coaches.

## Operations and maintenance

Operations and maintenance are \$388 above median. Custodial services and maintenance of grounds are above and below line item medians for a net of \$3 below median. Heating and utilities combined are \$183 above median, and the district could explore whether this is due to older buildings, less advantageous contracts, or other causes. Maintenance is \$165 above median, but this is more than offset by low expenditures for debt and capital over three years, addressed in a section below.

**Table 7: 2009 per pupil expenditures – operations and maintenance**

District	Custodial Services	Heating of Buildings	Utility Services	Maintenance of Grounds	Maintenance of Buildings	Building Security System	Maintenance of Equip	Extra-ordinary Maintenance	Network and Telecomm	Technology Maintenance	Total
Gill-Montague	316	358	355	101	253	2	28	29			1,440
Ayer	329	258	193	68	<b>88</b>		2				936
Mohawk Trail	377	282	<b>253</b>	107	282		<b>10</b>		14	6	1,331
North Brookfield	394	266	279	22	48		8	41			1,058
Pioneer Valley	395	202	263	<b>66</b>	56		71				<b>1,053</b>
Quaboag	298	368	236	19	72		6		2		1,002
Ware	<b>354</b>	<b>277</b>	216	18	123	8	30				1,027
Median	354	277	253	66	88		10				1,053
Difference (G-M minus median)	-39	81	102	36	165		18				388

## Instructional materials, equipment and software

Districts sometimes have considerable variation in expenditures for instructional materials, equipment, and software over several years for reasons such as grants received or allocation of funds to a one-time investment in new curriculum materials. In 2009 Gill-Montague was \$370 above the median; Table 8 demonstrates that the district made a considerable increase in allocations to this category between 2006 and 2007, and continued with significantly higher expenditures from 2007 to 2009. Over these years, however, allocations to individual line items varied widely, indicating a series of different investments.

**Table 8: Gill-Montague's per pupil expenditures for instructional materials 2006-09**

Description	2006	2007	2008	2009
Textbooks, Related Software/Media/Materials	32	35	4	151
Other Instructional Materials (Libraries)	180	140	145	126
Instructional Equipment	2	1	3	10
General Classroom Supplies	22	15	23	25
Other Instructional Services	3	326	446	207
Classroom Instructional Technology	22	86	21	46
Other Instructional Hardware (Libraries)	8		37	26
Instructional Software	41		79	59
<b>Total</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>602</b>	<b>759</b>	<b>649</b>

Table 9 compares expenditures in 2009 across the seven districts, but the line items cannot be interpreted as typical for every year based on Table 8's data. The Gill-Montague district administration could provide information about specific investments made from 2007 to 2009, and about 2010-2011. In particular line items, it may be useful to compare specific spending decisions with other districts that are high or low (e.g., Quaboag for Other Instructional Services.) Gill-Montague's 2009 expenditure for library materials is much higher than other districts in the group *and* has been fairly consistent for three years, while its 2009 textbooks expenditures were much higher than the previous three years. The other districts may well have made decisions about expenditures in 2009 that are different from previous years.

**Table 9: 2009 per pupil expenditures - instructional materials, equipment and technology**

District	Textbooks, Related Software/Media/ Mats	Other Instructional Materials (Libraries)	Instructional Equipment	General Classroom Supplies	Other Instructional Services	Classroom Instructional Technology	Other Instructional Hardware (Libraries)	Instructional Software	Total
Gill-Montague	151	126	10	25	207	46	26	59	649
Ayer	115	46	108	5	5				<b>279</b>
Mohawk Trail	<b>43</b>	13	<b>20</b>	133	<b>53</b>	11	1		275
North Brookfield	65	0	29	25	108	10	3	3	244
Pioneer Valley	31	39		140	44	8	1	105	367
Quaboag	17	25	<b>18</b>	143	285			21	508
Ware	20	<b>42</b>	10	<b>43</b>	3	10	2	1	132
Median	43	39	19	43	53				279
Difference (G-M minus median)	108	88	-9	-18	154				370

### Pupil services

Gill-Montague is \$305 above median in the pupil services category because of its relatively high expenditures for medical and health services, food services, and athletics. District policies,

contracts, and outcomes in these areas could be compared with lower-cost districts to determine if the additional expenditure achieves key results.

**Table 10: 2009 per pupil expenditures – pupil services**

District	Attendance and Parent Liaison Services	Medical/Health Services	Transportation Services	Food Services	Athletics	Other Student Activities	School Security	Total
Gill-Montague	1	283	574	465	200	14	25	1,562
Ayer	159	96	359	371	<b>148</b>	34		1,166
Mohawk Trail	1	205	1,043	<b>373</b>	190	72		1,883
North Brookfield	7	<b>120</b>	523	328	111	<b>28</b>		1,118
Pioneer Valley		232	<b>571</b>	411	238	37		1,489
Quaboag		103	732	312	95	15		<b>1,257</b>
Ware		83	534	407	115	16		1,155
Median		120	571	373	148	28		1,257
Difference (G-M minus median)		163	3	92	52	-14		305

### Teachers

While Gill-Montague spends less than the state’s average per pupil cost for teachers, small districts typically have lower teacher costs. Compared with the twenty-nine K-12 districts with 500-1,500 students Gill-Montague is \$148 above the median for teacher cost, and it is \$238 above the median of the seven districts in the comparison group. Several factors play into teacher cost, including salary schedules, age and experience of teachers, and class size. Information from other sources in addition to the End-of-Year Report can shed some light on these factors. The average teacher salary for every district is available on the Department’s website and shown in Table 11.

**Table 11: 2009 average teacher salaries**

Average teacher salary	
State	\$67,577
Gill-Montague	\$63,813
Ayer	\$57,670
Mohawk Trail	\$54,199
North Brookfield	\$58,437
Pioneer Valley	\$53,219
Quaboag	\$65,874
Ware	\$55,219

While the state average salary is higher than all districts in the group, only Quaboag has a higher average salary within it. Average teacher salary is determined by both a district’s salary schedule and where its teachers are on the steps and lanes of the schedule. A quick check on the relative salary schedules of the group was done using the Department’s public teacher contracts database

(<http://educatorcontracts.doemass.org>). Table 12 shows that Gill-Montague has the median starting salaries for the group. (FY10 salary schedules were used, except for Pioneer Valley and Quaboag for which only FY09 schedules were available.)

**Table 12: Starting teacher salaries**

District	BA starting salary	MA starting salary
Gill-Montague	37,578	40,555
Ayer	38,265	41,187
Mohawk Trail	33,114	35,242
North Brookfield	39,137	41,310
Pioneer Valley	34,065	35,619
Quaboag	36,621	38,661
Ware	39,726	42,134
Median	37,578	40,555

To address the question of student to teacher ratios (an approximation of class size), Table 13 shows ratios of all students to general education teachers of major and other subjects. The district would have to provide local data about class size because these ratios do not allow for special education students in self-contained classes and other similar considerations. Gill-Montague's ratios are slightly below the median ratios. A lower ratio means a higher level of staffing, and likely higher costs. The district's information about class sizes, staffing policies, teachers salary steps, and other aspects of staffing would be needed for a better understanding of higher teacher costs.

**Table 13: Student to teacher ratios - 2010**

District	2010 ratio of students to teachers of:	
	general education - major subjects	general education - other subjects
Gill-Montague	19.1	54.7
Ayer	19.7	63.3
Mohawk Trail	17.3	47.4
North Brookfield	16.9	67.1
Pioneer Valley	19.9	53.3
Quaboag	20.0	76.4
Ware	23.9	77.0
Median	19.7	63.3
Difference (G-M minus median)	-0.6	-8.6

### Other educational expenditures

The district and the towns of Gill and Montague have about \$1.4M of educational costs that are not tracked in the Department's per pupil data, for debt and capital expenses and for regional vocational-technical assessments. Debt and capital are not included in per pupil data because

these expenditures occur in arbitrary years, are long-term in nature, and may be offset by state subsidies. Regional assessments are tracked in the receiving district, but they are paid by towns as part of their educational appropriations.

Since debt and capital expenditures can be significant, expenditures by the seven districts in the comparison group from 2007 to 2009 were reviewed. To get a reasonable approximation of per pupil costs that allowed for the variability of these line items, the three-year average of debt and capital costs was divided by the three-year average of in-district pupils. The table below indicates that Gill-Montague spent considerably less than the median and as noted above, this more than offset a higher median cost for maintenance.

**Table 14: Debt/capital three year average expenditures**

District	Per pupil
Gill-Montague	584
Ayer	134
Mohawk Trail	1,992
North Brookfield	814
Pioneer Valley	2,494
Quaboag	2,277
Ware	1,241
Median	1,241
Difference (G-M minus median)	-657

### Conclusion

This financial analysis of Gill-Montague’s per pupil expenditures provides some information that could prompt further inquiry by the district about its higher costs. State data does not provide sufficient detail to indicate specific district policies and practices that may be more costly than other districts’, nor does it facilitate an evaluation of the impact of investments on outcomes except at the broadest level of student performance. The district’s own data, its evaluation of expected and actual results of investments, and discussions with other districts about particular expenditure areas may allow the district to make some decisions to reduce costs responsibly.

## Appendix E: Commissioner's November 23, 2010 Letter Ending Fiscal Control of GMRSD



### **Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education**

---

75 Pleasant Street, Malden, Massachusetts 02148-4906

Telephone: (781) 338-3000  
TTY: N.E.T. Relay 1-800-439-2370

Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.  
Commissioner

November 23, 2010

Emily Monosson, Chair  
Gill-Montague Regional School Committee  
35 Crocker Avenue  
Turners Falls, MA, 01376

Dear Ms. Monosson:

I was pleased to hear that your FY11 budget was recently approved at a district-wide meeting. I recognize the hard work and the compromise of the district officials, school committee and local municipal officials that precipitated this vote. Under the provisions of M.G.L. chapter 71, section 16B, and 603 CMR 41.07(5), local approval of your district budget ends my fiscal control of the Gill-Montague Regional School District.

I assure you, however, that my staff and I remain committed to continuing our involvement with district and town officials to ensure that the school district has the resources it needs to provide effective programs and services and to ensure that these programs and services are offered in a cost effective manner. We look forward to the results of the program and fiscal review of the district's operations currently being conducted by this Department, and we will continue to work with the district to assist in implementing the recommendations that may result from that review. My best wishes for continued success in all of your district endeavors.

Sincerely,

Mitchell D. Chester, Ed.D.  
Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

c: Carl M. Ladd, Superintendent  
Gill Board of Selectmen  
Montague Board of Selectmen  
Jeff Wulfson  
Christine Lynch