How Is Your School District Performing?

A look at

Grafton

Public Schools

2004–2006

EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT AUDIT COUNCIL

Office of Educational Quality and Accountability

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

The Office of Educational Quality and Accountability would like to acknowledge the professional cooperation extended to the audit team by the Massachusetts Department of Education; the superintendent of the Grafton Public Schools, Joseph F. Connors; the school department staff; and the town officials of Grafton.

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INTRODUCTION

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

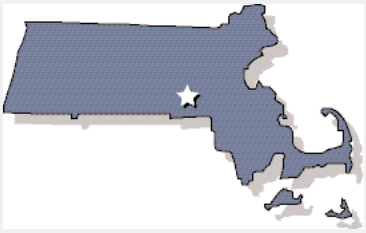
- Provide a comprehensive evaluation of each school district's performance;
- Publish annual reports on selected districts' performance;
- Monitor public education performance statewide to inform policy decisions; and
- Provide the public with information that helps the state hold districts and schools,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

In February 2007, the EQA conducted an independent examination of the Grafton Public Schools for the period of 2004–2006. This school district was selected for a site review. The EQA analyzed Grafton students' performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests and identified how students in general and in subgroups were performing. The EQA then examined critical factors that affected student performance in six major areas: leadership, governance, and communication; curriculum and instruction; assessment and evaluation; human resource management and professional development; access, participation, and student academic support; and financial and asset management effectiveness and efficiency.

The review was based on documents supplied by the Grafton Public Schools and the Massachusetts Department of Education; correspondence sent prior to the EQA team's site visit; interviews with representatives from the school committee, the district leadership team, school administrators, and teachers; numerous classroom observations; and additional documents submitted while the EQA team visited the district. The report does not take into account documents, revised data, or events that may have occurred after June 2006. However, district leaders were invited to provide more current information.

Putting the Data in Perspective

Grafton, MA



DISTRICT

Population: 14,894
Median family income: $66,396
Largest sources of employment: Manufacturing, retail trade, health care, and social assistance
Local government: Board of Selectmen, Town Administrator, Open Town Meeting

SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

School committee: 5 members
Number of schools: 5
Student-teacher ratio: 14.1 to 1
Per Pupil Expenditures: $8,422
Student enrollment:
Total: 2,675
White: 91.9 percent
Hispanic: 2.2 percent
African-American: 0.7 percent
Asian-American: 4.0 percent
Native American: 0.1 percent
Limited English proficient: 0.6 percent
Low income: 8.0 percent
Special education: 15.7 percent

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

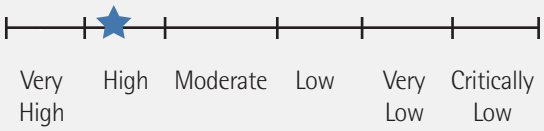
EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT AUDIT COUNCIL ACTION

After reviewing this report, the Educational Management Audit Council voted to accept its findings at its meeting on August 21, 2007.

MCAS Performance at a Glance, 2006

	DISTRICT	STATE
Average Proficiency Index	87	78
English Language Arts Proficiency Index	92	84
Math Proficiency Index	81	72

Performance Rating



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

HOW DID STUDENTS PERFORM?

Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) Test Results

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

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

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

On the 2006 MCAS tests in ELA, math, and STE, eligible students in Grafton participated at levels that met or exceeded the state's 95 percent requirement.

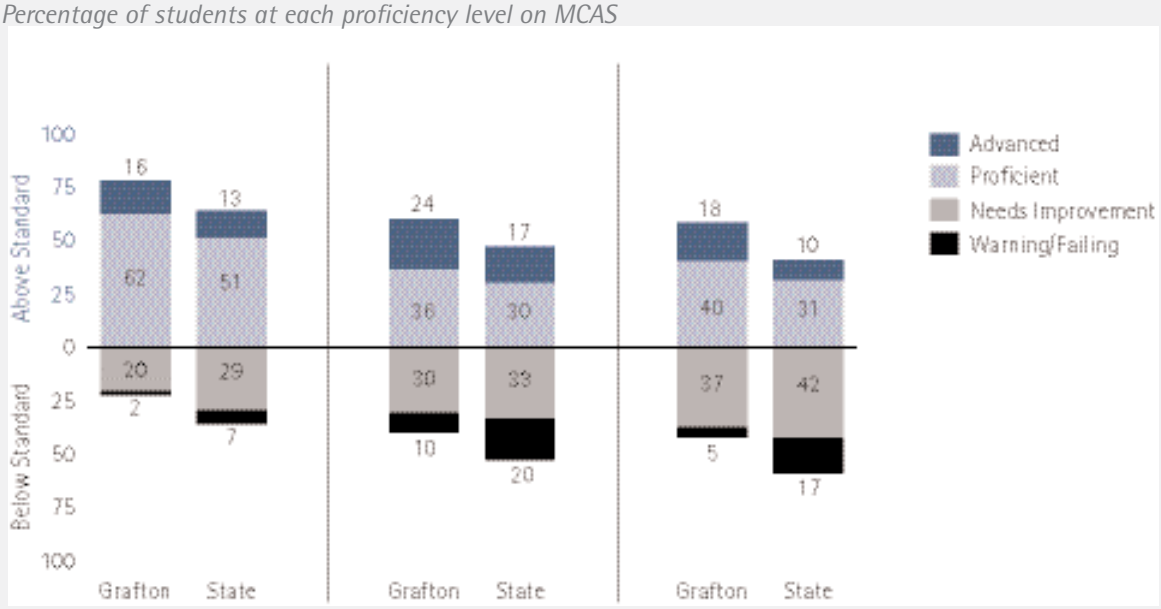
2. Are the district's students reaching proficiency levels on the MCAS examination?

On average, more than two-thirds of all students in Grafton attained proficiency on the 2006 MCAS tests, much more than that statewide. Nearly four-fifths of Grafton students attained proficiency in English language arts (ELA), three-fifths of Grafton students attained proficiency in math, and more than half of Grafton students attained proficiency in science and technology/engineering (STE).

- Grafton's average proficiency index (API) on the MCAS tests in 2006 was 87 proficiency index (PI) points, nine PI points greater than that statewide. Grafton's average proficiency gap, the difference between its API and the target of 100, in 2006 was 13 PI points.
- In 2006, Grafton's proficiency gap in ELA was eight PI points, eight PI points narrower than the state's average proficiency gap in ELA. This gap would require an average improvement in performance of one PI point annually to achieve adequate yearly progress

GRAFTON SCORES COMPARED TO STATE AVERAGES, 2006

Percentage of students at each proficiency level on MCAS



(AYP). Grafton's proficiency gap in math was 19 PI points in 2006, nine PI points narrower than the state's average proficiency gap in math. This gap would require an average improvement of more than two PI points per year to achieve AYP. Grafton's proficiency gap in STE was 16 PI points, 13 PI points narrower than that statewide.

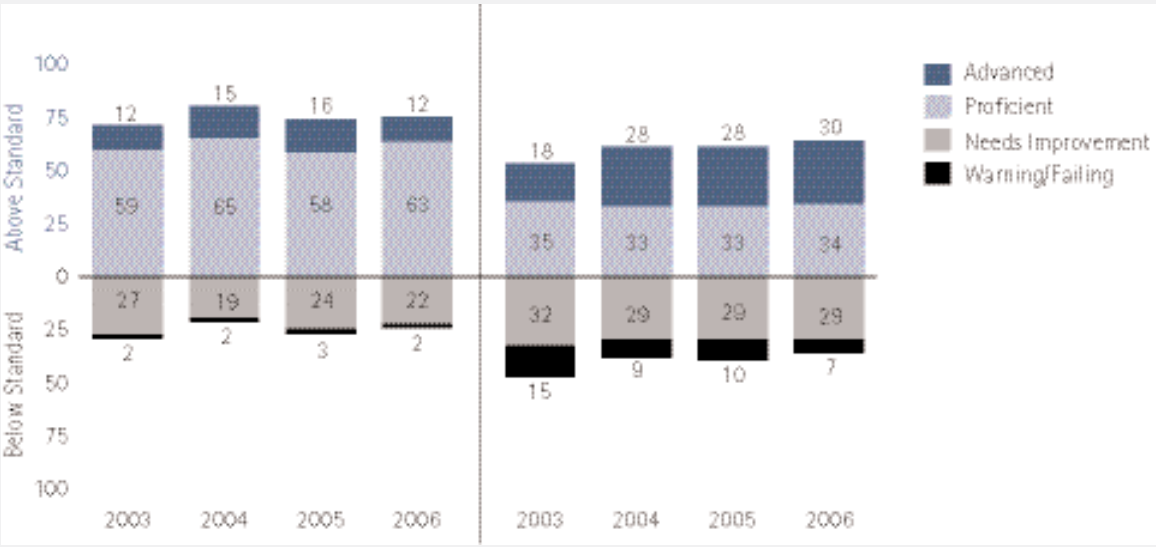
3. Has the district's MCAS test performance improved over time?

Between 2003 and 2006, Grafton's MCAS performance showed improvement overall, in ELA, and in math, and was relatively flat in STE. However, the gains in achievement overall and in ELA were made between 2003 and 2004, and overall achievement has been relatively flat and ELA achievement has declined since then.

- The percentage of students scoring in the 'Advanced' and 'Proficient' categories rose by nine percentage points between 2003 and 2006, while the percentage of students in the 'Warning/Failing' category decreased by five percentage points. The average proficiency gap in Grafton narrowed from 18 PI points in 2003 to 13 PI points in 2006. This resulted in an improvement rate, or a closing of the proficiency gap, of 30 percent.
- Over the three-year period 2003-2006, ELA performance in Grafton showed improvement, at an average of approximately two-thirds of a PI point annually. This resulted in an improvement rate of 19 percent, a rate lower than that required to meet AYP.
- Math performance in Grafton also showed improvement, at an average of approximately two and one-half PI points annually. This resulted in an improvement rate of 33 percent, higher than that required to meet AYP.
- Between 2004 and 2006, Grafton had relatively flat STE performance, increasing by less than one PI point

GRAFTON ELA SCORES COMPARED TO MATH SCORES

Percentage of students at each proficiency level on MCAS



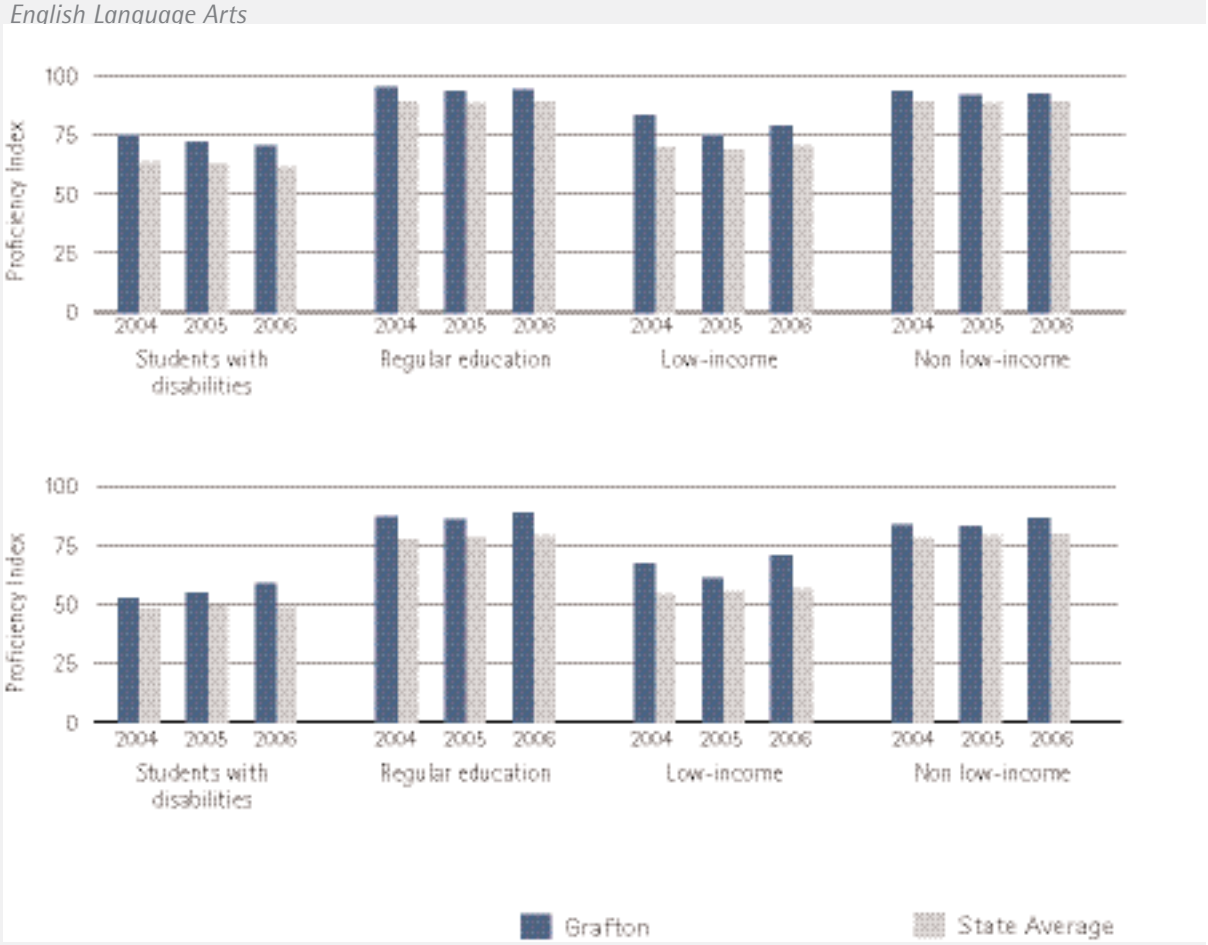
annually over the two-year period; this resulted in an improvement rate of 10 percent. And, the percentage of students attaining proficiency in STE declined by one percentage point.

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

- MCAS performance in 2006 varied substantially among subgroups of Grafton students. Of the eight measurable subgroups in Grafton in 2006, the gap in performance between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups was 24 PI points in ELA and 38 PI points in math (Asian students, students with disabilities, respectively).
- The proficiency gaps in Grafton in 2006 in both ELA and math were wider than the district average for students with disabilities and students participating in the free or reduced-cost lunch program. For these subgroups, less than half the students attained proficiency.
- The proficiency gaps in ELA and math were narrower than the district average for regular education students, Asian students, and non low-income students. For each of these subgroups, approximately three-quarters or more of the students attained proficiency.
- The proficiency gap for male students was wider than the district average in ELA but narrower in math, while the proficiency gaps for White students and female students were wider than the district average in math but narrower in ELA. For these subgroups, more than two-thirds of the students attained proficiency.

GRAFTON STUDENTS' IMPROVEMENT OVER TIME, COMPARED TO STATE AVERAGES

English Language Arts



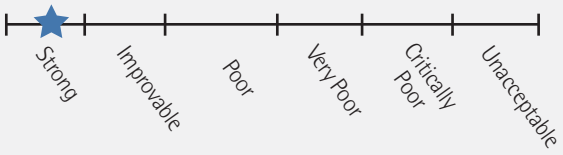
5. Has the MCAS test performance of the district's student subgroups improved over time?

- The performance gap between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups in ELA narrowed from 30 PI points in 2003 to 27 PI points in 2006, and the performance gap between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups in math narrowed from 41 to 34 PI points over this period.
- In Grafton, all student subgroups except Asian students and students with disabilities had improved performance in ELA between 2003 and 2006, although the gains were made between 2003 and 2004. The performance of Asian students declined and the performance of students with disabilities was relatively flat. The most improved subgroups in ELA were regular education students and low-income students.
- In math, all subgroups in Grafton showed improved performance between 2003 and 2006. The most improved subgroups in math were low-income students and students with disabilities.

Performance at a Glance

Management Quality Index

The Management Quality Index is a weighted average of the district's performance on 67 indicators that measure the effectiveness of a district's management system. Grafton received the following performance rating:



WHAT FACTORS DRIVE STUDENT PERFORMANCE?

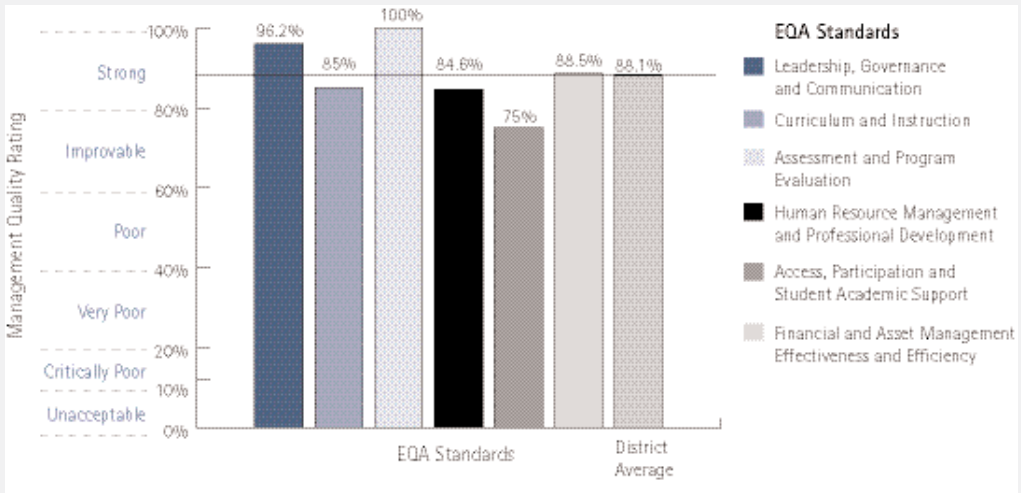
Overall District Management

To better understand the factors affecting student scores on the MCAS tests, the EQA analyzes district performance on 67 indicators in six areas: leadership, governance, and communication; curriculum and instruction; assessment and program evaluation; human resource management and professional development; access, participation, and student academic support; and financial and asset management effectiveness and efficiency. Taken together, these factors are a measure of the effectiveness — or quality — of a district's management system. A score of 100 percent on the Management Quality Index (MQI) means that the district meets the standard and performed at a satisfactory level on all indicators. However, it does not mean the district was perfect.

In 2006, Grafton received an overall MQI score of 'Strong' (88.1 percent). The district was rated highest on the Assessment and Program Evaluation and Leadership and Governance standards, scoring 'Strong.' It was rated lowest, 'Improvable,' on the Access, Participation, and Student Academic Support standard. Given these ratings, the district is performing as expected on the MCAS tests. Over the review period, student performance declined slightly in ELA and improved in math. All subgroups improved in math during the review period. On the following pages, we take a closer look at the district's performance in each of the six areas.

A CLOSER LOOK AT MANAGEMENT QUALITY

Grafton, 2004–2006



Leadership, Governance, and Communication

Ultimately, the success or failure of district leadership was determined by how well all students performed. As measured by MCAS test performance, Grafton ranked among the 'High' performing school districts in the commonwealth, with scores that were 'Very High' in ELA and 'High' in math.

Leadership and Communication

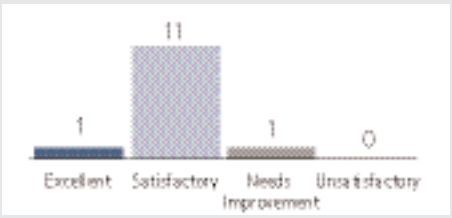
The leadership of the Grafton Public Schools consisted of the superintendent and the five-member school committee. Despite many changes in school committee membership, principals, union leadership, town officials, and the makeup of town committees, the superintendent continued to build a collaborative culture focused on district improvement. The town elected three new members to the school committee during the period under review. While the committee did not have a formal mentoring program in place, veteran members offered their support via telephone, face-to-face meetings, and e-mail. Newly elected members met with the superintendent as soon as possible following their election to the committee and reviewed the duties associated with the position. The superintendent provided each member with a policy manual, the list of issues currently being addressed by administration, pertinent district information, copies of the past year's superintendent weekly updates, and answered any questions the new member had.

The school committee had subcommittees in the areas of negotiations and policy that met on a regular basis and shared information with the entire committee. A school committee member also served on each of the district strategic planning action committees that reported to the full committee on an annual basis regarding the attainment of goals in the strategic plan. The school committee also established defined timelines for the ongoing review/revision of the policy manual. The superintendent delegated the lead-

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

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



Areas of Strength

- All administrators and staff members met on a regular basis at both the administrative and building levels to review available data, and address areas of strength and weakness.
- The superintendent worked closely with the school committee, town officials, and administration during the development of the budget, addressing the goals in the strategic plan and SIPs pertaining to the financial needs of the district and each building.
- A review of all administrative files showed superintendent-authored summative evaluations for all 11 administrators employed by the district during the review period.
- The school committee evaluated the superintendent on an annual basis for the entire period under review.

Areas for Improvement

- Staff members made use of aggregate data but did not assess the needs of subpopulations, with the exception of the special education subgroup at the middle school.

ership of each school and program to the assigned administrator, and the district practiced site-based management. The full administrative team met biweekly with agendas set by the superintendent with input from administration. In addition, the central office team also met as a separate entity on a weekly basis. The district website provided a great deal of information and included updated notices of importance issued by the office of the superintendent, as well as links to all five district schools. The school committee, the superintendent, and all the unions in the district worked collaboratively with the entire community in its quest to provide a challenging education to the entire student body.

Planning and Governance

The district developed systems for analyzing data, aligning curriculum and instruction, and providing professional development programs, and scheduled time to build capacity in its efforts to move the strategic plan forward. The district began strategic planning in 2002 and produced a three-year plan, which it updated in 2005 to serve the district through 2010. The strategic plan served as the District Improvement Plan (DIP). It contained both the mission and vision statements of the district. These statements were prominently posted in the school buildings and published in many documents such as student handbooks. The school committee formally reviewed the plan two times per year and discussed its components on approximately six other occasions during the year. With the exception of one school, each School Improvement Plan (SIP) mirrored the strategic plan (DIP), and administrators reviewed and addressed the information within each document during budget preparation. The district posted the strategic plan on its website and made it available in a brochure format.

The district analyzed MCAS data on a regular basis, as well as the results of elementary quarterly exams and middle and senior high school midyear and final exams. The superintendent provided the school committee and the community at large with an annual district report outlining the MCAS results and describing the achievements of the district and its schools. While the district regularly reviewed aggregate assessment data, the only use of disaggregated data addressed the middle school special education population. Members of the teaching staff had five full days and four half days for professional development activities in areas such as curriculum, assessment, review of data, and differentiated instruction. Faculty meetings focused on school programming and afforded staff members the opportunity to meet by grade level and in small groups. In addition to faculty meetings teachers also had regularly scheduled meetings to discuss curriculum and other items.

Curriculum and Instruction

The Grafton Public Schools performed effectively in the areas of curriculum development and instructional practice — essential elements of efforts to improve student performance.

Aligned Curricula

Guided by the strategic plan (DIP) and three School Improvement Plans, the district made significant progress in reviewing, revising, documenting, and communicating its curriculum, during the period under review. An exemplary curriculum planning council, established in 2002, oversaw curriculum development, documentation, adoption, and choice of instructional materials. In addition, the district focused on curriculum coherence through horizontal and vertical alignment and alignment with the state frameworks of curricula in all tested content areas and at all grade levels. By the end of the review period, the district had collaboratively documented curricula that contained all key components: objectives, resources, instructional strategies, timelines, measurable outcomes, and sometimes assessments.

Effective Instruction

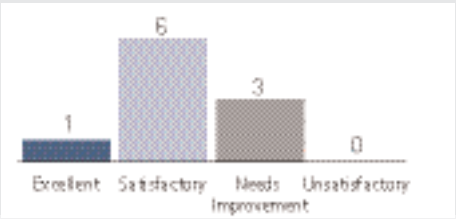
Through a distributed leadership model, principals, assistant principals, teachers, and teacher-leaders at each school collaborated to introduce differentiated instruction and heightened accountability as two strategies to ensure effective instruction. A third strategy, to integrate technology more fully into classroom instruction, was more difficult to achieve with the inequitable availability of computers and up-to-date educational technology at all schools.

The director of curriculum and staff development and the elementary school principals worked with consultants, teachers, and grade-level leaders to

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

In this area, districts are rated on 10 performance indicators. Grafton received the following ratings:



Areas of Strength

- During the period under review, the district documented its curricula in all tested content areas and at all grade levels and aligned them with the state frameworks.
- The district used multiple tools and strategies to improve instruction during the period under review, including principal walk-throughs, curriculum meetings for grades, teams, and departments, professional development, summer workshops, and early release time for in-service. The district attained stronger results at the elementary level than at the secondary level.
- The district used formative and summative assessment data from multiple assessments to improve instruction and to allocate instructional time in the tested core content areas.

Areas for Improvement

- Although teachers could describe how to differentiate instruction, random classroom observations revealed little differentiation in use and evidenced more teacher-centered, rather than student-centered, instruction.

incorporate differentiated instruction into elementary teachers' practice, early in the review period. Through an ongoing process, the district more recently introduced differentiated instruction at the middle school and at the high school. Classroom observations indicated that the implementation of differentiated instructional strategies was not yet widespread at any school but was more consistent at the elementary level.

During the period under review, the district emphasized accountability by instituting teacher-designed quarterly exams and benchmarks at the elementary level and common midyear and final exams at the middle school that echoed the high school's summative testing format. These assessments focused teachers and the school community on students' progress in meeting measurable goals and objectives. They also helped teachers better understand and act upon achievement trends and strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum. District and school-based leaders worked with teachers to use data analysis as a tool to improve both curriculum and instruction. Although teachers improved their data analysis skills, teachers from each school stated that they did not all have sufficient training to analyze and use data well, and relied on school leaders for data analysis.

The director of curriculum development, principals, assistant principals, and many teacher-leaders exhibited fluency in their knowledge and use of assessment data, including MCAS results, to improve student achievement. The district largely focused its data analysis on item analysis, grade-level, or subject-level achievement data and did not regularly examine subgroup achievement data such as for special education and low-income students. These were the district's lowest achieving subgroups. When the middle school failed to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets, it analyzed achievement data for its low-achieving subgroup, made changes, and met its target in 2006. Although MCAS results were stronger in Grafton than in the state overall, Grafton's MCAS proficiency index, in general, remained relatively flat during the period under review. According to data from the Merrimack Education Collaborative (MEC), the percentage of Grafton students who attained overall proficiency on the MCAS tests was 60 percent in 2003, 69 percent in 2004, 66 percent in 2005, and 69 percent in 2006.

Assessment and Program Evaluation

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

Student Assessment

Grafton had a solid assessment program during the review period. The district conducted continuous data collection and analysis using various student assessments. A committee analyzed the MCAS data and noted general strengths and weaknesses to help improve instruction. While the district made aggregate AYP, only the middle school disaggregated subgroup data and took targeted steps to close the district's subgroup achievement gaps. All administrators were trained in using TestWiz. The district's director of curriculum, the curriculum planning council, department chairs at the high school, team leaders at the middle school, and grade-level leaders at the elementary schools analyzed data and planned ways to improve teaching and learning.

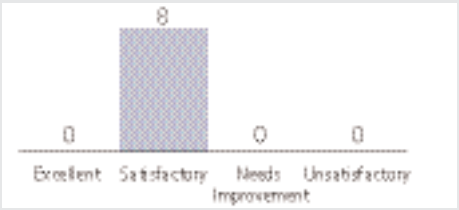
Interviews and documents revealed that district personnel analyzed results from common midyear and final exams at the secondary levels for strengths and weaknesses. The elementary schools had offered professional development training in order to create their own benchmark quarterly exams that they analyzed to inform instruction, and they were in the process of creating benchmark report cards. The secondary levels had not created benchmark assessments.

Ninety-eight to 100 percent of students took the MCAS tests, exceeding the state's required 95 percent participation rate. The high school encouraged but did not mandate that students take PSATs, SATs, and Advanced Placement (AP) exams. Students took English language learner (ELL) and special education tests as appropriate. The elementary schools used the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) at grade 2, the Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation, and the Qualitative Reading Inventory. They replaced the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills with the DRA.

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

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



Areas of Strength

- The district and school leadership had a formal system for using assessments and local benchmarks, including a curriculum planning council to approve curriculum and assessment instruments on a rotating five-year cycle.
- The elementary schools had developed their own quarterly benchmark exams to measure teaching and learning and were developing standards-based report cards.
- During the review period, the achievement gaps of the low-income and disabilities subgroups narrowed, particularly at the middle school.
- The district continuously collected and analyzed local assessment and MCAS test data to improve curriculum and instruction and to use staff and resources most effectively. It used multiple methods for disseminating results to parents.

Areas for Improvement

- The middle and high schools needed more professional development on creating benchmarks to use as formative assessments.

The elementary levels used well-documented quarterly benchmark exams tied to a reporting system. The secondary schools used common midyear and final exams and analyzed the data but did not yet tie them to specific benchmarks. The district used information attained from the elementary quarterly exams and the secondary midyear and final exams to plan future instruction. Interviewees at the elementary level said that they changed instruction midyear according to analysis of the exam results. Teachers, committees, and curriculum leaders in the district used data also to prepare reports for the central office, school committee, parents, and community members. The staff at the various levels used the data generated by the tests to inform the purchase of materials, such as manipulatives at the elementary level.

The district analyzed MCAS data at all levels and looked for strengths and weaknesses to improve instruction. The entire faculty used information generated by TestWiz to analyze the types of questions that required more instruction. The middle school was the only level to disaggregate data thoroughly to evaluate subgroup needs. As a result, the middle school offered extra math classes, math tutoring during and after school, and half-year math and ELA remediation. For two of the years under review, the middle school made AYP in the aggregate but failed to make it for the low-income and special education subgroups. After the school focused on analysis of aggregated and disaggregated data and altered targeted services, the middle school closed the achievement gap between the subgroups and made AYP.

Based on documents and interviews, the secondary schools used common midyear and final exams. Teachers and administrators analyzed results to adjust for weaknesses in the curriculum. They looked at patterns of scores from different teachers to determine if some teachers had better strategies that they could share with respective departments or teams. They had not yet developed benchmark exams and were scheduled to participate in professional development with the same consultant who had provided training at the elementary level. Documentation from the elementary schools demonstrated well-developed quarterly benchmark exams. The district used appropriate special education and ELL testing.

The district kept all stakeholders informed of progress by providing data to staff to analyze, by informing parents serving on school councils, by making report cards more informative at the elementary level, and by using PowerSchool at the secondary levels. Parents could log into PowerSchool to learn of their child's progress, or be contacted by the web-based phone calling system. The district was learning to use an automated grading and analysis system (Scantron) to correct, report on, and correlate data from several locally-made benchmark assessments, and to highlight patterns of strengths and weaknesses.

Human Resource Management and Professional Development

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

Hiring Practices and Certification

In 2005-2006, Grafton had 76 non-professional status teachers. Many teachers who applied for employment had a few years of experience, and Grafton was able to hire them with respect to experience at the appropriate step. Principals went through resumes and chose candidates for interviewing. They formed an interview team with teachers, who then interviewed the candidates and made a recommendation to the superintendent. The superintendent then interviewed the recommended candidate and made the offer of a contract.

Grafton had a strong mentor program for any teacher who was new to the community, as well as a two-day induction program in the summer. Likewise, the superintendent mentored new administrators. All principals were fairly new in their positions and were promoted from within the school district.

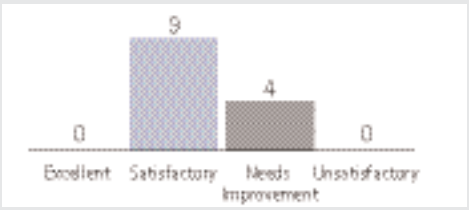
Professional Development

The director of curriculum and staff development was a permanent member of the curriculum planning council and was responsible for closely connecting the strategic plan (DIP) and School Improvement Plans (SIPs) to curriculum revision and the ongoing training that staff needed in the district's professional development plan, in order to build capacity for staff to participate in district efforts. The district goals focused on continuous training in data

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

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



Areas of Strength

- Teacher certification was updated and well tracked. Despite the district's high number of new teachers, only nine teachers were working on waiver in 2006-2007.
- Mentors and mentees highly rated the ongoing training they had received. The superintendent met frequently with new principals to mentor them, and interviewees also rated this highly.

Areas for Improvement

- The district's evaluation procedure for teachers' performance did not align with all the requirements of the Education Reform Act.
- Although the professional development program focused on data analysis, not all levels of the school district had the same access to in-depth or ongoing training.
- Supervision practices were vague, lacked consistency from school to school, and did not necessarily focus on fidelity of implementation with respect to stated district goals.

analysis to align the curricula, to develop quarterly assessments for use as a formative assessment, and to develop exit criteria in each grade and subject area. Teachers had eight days available for ongoing in-service, which was a mix of district, site, and programmatic activities. They also had a pool of $25,000 per year available to take university or college courses. The district also made funds available for teachers to attend various trainings and workshops during the year, and for teachers to develop professional development projects, write curriculum, and form study groups. Alignment of all professional development with the district's strategic plan was expected and was monitored by the director of curriculum and staff development.

Evaluation

The district's evaluation procedure for non-professional status teachers aligned with Department of Education (DOE) requirements, since it was an annual summative evaluation based on classroom observations which used the Principles of Effective Teaching as indicators. In contrast, the district's evaluation procedure for professional status teachers did not align with the DOE requirements, since it called for a summative evaluation once in four years. According to the DOE, principals need to complete summative evaluations based on classroom performance at a minimum in alternating years. The superintendent annually evaluated administrators based on mutually agreed upon goals, using criteria in the written evaluations that aligned with the Principles of Effective Leadership. The superintendent wrote evaluations that were informative, instructive, and promoted professional growth, and could serve as a model for the principals that he mentored. Neither the administrative contracts nor the teacher contracts directly linked performance to increased student achievement.

Access, Participation, and Student Academic Support

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

Services

The district provided a wide variety of educational services and supplementary programs at all grade levels designed to meet learning needs and improve academic achievement, and implemented or expanded a range of special education supports, including early intervention programs before and after school and summer remedial programs. The districtwide use of summative assessments helped to identify students performing below grade level. Although the district's proportions of limited English proficient (LEP), transient, and homeless students remained very low, it endeavored to provide these populations with a full range of appropriate programs and services.

The district's two primary subgroups, special education and low-income pupils, were substantially underrepresented in all advanced and accelerated academic programs in grades 8-12. Although the district permitted students who did not meet qualifying criteria and prerequisites to elect honors and Advanced Placement classes, very few chose to do so. The district presented little evidence that school leadership had initiated formal policies or practices to increase subgroup representation in these rigorous courses in order to close the achievement gap.

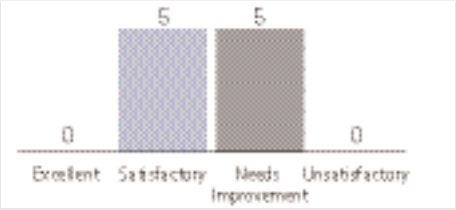
Attendance

Student attendance rates in the district steadily declined throughout the review period. The rate fell from 95.8 percent in 2004 to 95.1 percent in 2005 and reached 94.8 percent in 2006. The high school attendance rate was 94.0

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

In this area, districts are rated on 10 performance indicators. Grafton received the following ratings:



Areas of Strength

- District schools increasingly used formative and summative assessments to identify students not meeting academic expectations. A similar process at the secondary level (grades 6-12) resulted in the implementation of criterion-referenced midterm and final common assessments in all subject areas.
- Administrators and staff were very pleased that their student suspension, retention, and dropout rates were historically very low, and that they remained substantially below state averages throughout the period under review.

Areas for Improvement

- During the review period, the district's aggregate student attendance rate steadily declined. A similar pattern was apparent in the increased number of students chronically absent at both the elementary and secondary levels.
- Much of the district's analysis of disaggregated data focused on grade-level and departmental results rather than subgroup performance.

percent in 2006. A similar pattern was seen in the data regarding the percentage of students chronically absent from school across all grade levels. Disaggregated analysis of attendance data revealed considerably higher absenteeism rates among special education and low-income students.

Discipline, Retention, and Dropout Services

Suspension rates in the district remained substantially below state averages during the period under review. Between 2004 and 2006, Grafton's out-of-school suspension rate averaged 2.6 percent, compared to the state average of 5.9 percent. During that same period, the in-school suspension rate averaged 3.1 percent, compared to a state average of almost four percent. In addition, retention rates at all grade levels, as well as the high school dropout rate, remained well below state averages. The administration presented little evidence to examiners that it analyzed disciplinary and/or dropout data in any regular or systematic manner.

Financial and Asset Management Effectiveness and Efficiency

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

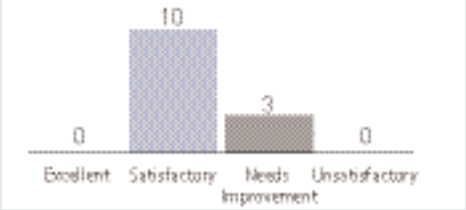
Budget Process

The school committee policy on the budget process designated the superintendent to prepare the district's budget in consultation with the administration, town administrator, and the finance committee. The superintendent used a "bottom up" budget development process that included all relevant stakeholders. The development of the budget started in August with the distribution of the budget booklet that outlined the parameters for recommended increases in the discretionary accounts for each school and administrative function. In order to provide equity, the superintendent based each budget line item on a per pupil cost allocation. He stated that the budget was "connected" to the goals contained in the strategic plan (DIP) and the SIPs. The budget took into consideration increasing student enrollment. Each of the principals and administrators presented their budgets to the superintendent followed by presentations to the school committee. The school committee voted the preliminary budget followed by a public hearing in January. The superintendent recommended a final budget to the school committee for its approval. Meetings with town officials followed school committee approval prior to the town meeting held in May. The budget included a five-year capital plan that was part of the town's capital plan submitted to the town administrator. The budget did not include funding from state and federal grants or from other fund sources. The superintendent stated that starting with the FY 2007 budget, information on state and federal grants would be included along with other fund sources.

Performance at a Glance

Ratings on Performance Indicators

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



Areas of Strength

- The superintendent stated that the town provided adequate financial resources to meet the educational needs of Grafton students, although the district was concerned that enrollment had been increasing every year and was projected to continue to increase in the future.
- The budget process was "bottom up" with all stakeholders involved in its development. The town voted the budget as presented by the superintendent for the past three years.
- Visits by the EQA examiners noted that each school was well maintained and conducive to learning. The schools had adequate security systems.

Areas for Improvement

- The district accounting system used antiquated financial software that did not adequately meet the needs of the town or the school system.

Financial Support

The Town of Grafton annually provided the necessary financial resources to ensure that the students received quality education that focused on the improvement of student achievement. The voters at the annual town meetings supported the superintendent's recommended budget. The principals/administrators, teachers, committee members, and town officials confirmed the adequacy of the budget. The budget increased by 21.5 percent over the past three years. The per pupil cost in FY 2005 for regular students was $5,838, compared to the state average of $7,421. In addition to the budget, the school system received $257,000 in foundation reserve (pothole) money and $638,806 in circuit breaker funds. During the period under review, the district received substantial increases in Chapter 70 funds.

The town allocated 60 percent of the town budget to the school system and 40 percent to the town. The school system exceeded the net school spending (NSS) requirements for the period under review. The town had a balance of $2,882,657 in the stabilization account (6.8 percent of the general fund) and $2,384,172 in free cash for FY 2005. The town had used part of these funds to support the annual town budget.

Facilities

All five schools were in good condition. The Grafton Elementary School was constructed in 2002, the South Grafton School in 1975, and the North Elementary School had been renovated in 1975. The high school was renovated in 1993. At the high school it was necessary to improvise the available space to accommodate the increasing student enrollment. The suggested timeline for a new high school will necessitate using portable classrooms for an extended period. The superintendent and the director of building and grounds met periodically to develop yearly maintenance projects. The town annually approved the district's capital maintenance projects. Each of the facilities had adequate custodial staff and districtwide maintenance personnel who kept the facilities well maintained.

Safety

The district had a crisis/safety plan in place that the superintendent of schools, the administrative team, and the police and fire chiefs reviewed on an annual basis. Regular drills occurred annually, and all new staff members received appropriate training and information. All of the schools had adequate security systems that included a buzzer system and camera monitoring system at the middle and high schools. A walk-through of the schools by the EQA examiners revealed the schools to be clean, well lit, well maintained, and conducive to promoting student achievement.

CONCLUSION

During the review period, the Grafton Public Schools were considered a 'High' performing district, marked by student achievement that was 'Very High' in ELA and 'High' in math on the MCAS tests. More than two-thirds of Grafton's students scored at or above the proficiency standard on the 2006 administration of the MCAS tests. The EQA gave the district a Management Quality Index rating of 'Strong' with its highest ratings on the Assessment and Program Evaluation and Leadership and Governance standards, and its lowest on the Access, Participation, and Student Academic Support standard.

In 2006-2007, Grafton experienced the highest percentage increase in student enrollment of all kindergarten through grade 12 school districts in the state, and its enrollment has increased by 729 students between 1995 and 2005. The New England School Development Council projected that Grafton's school enrollment will increase by 802 students in the next 10 years. Grafton, therefore, faces a continuing space issue in its public schools, which are overcrowded at all levels. The Facilities Needs Study for Grafton recommended building a 1,000-seat high school on town-owned land in south Grafton. The town submitted a "statement of interest" to the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA), the first step in applying for school building assistance, and is expecting a response during or after the summer of 2007. Grafton is not experiencing a declining or level-funded budget, and in fact, received substantial increases in Chapter 70 funds, and the budget increased by 21.5 percent. Grafton's rapid population growth afforded the school district foundation reserve money for unexpected enrollment, including $257,000 in FY 2006.

The school committee, the superintendent, and all the unions in the district worked collaboratively with the community to provide a challenging education to the entire student body. Despite many changes in school committee membership, principals, union leadership, town officials, and town committees, the superintendent continued to build a collaborative culture focused on district improvement. He delegated the leadership of each school and program to the assigned administrator, and the district practiced site-based management. The strategic plan, covering the period from 2005 to 2010, contained both the vision and the mission statements of the district and served as the District Improvement Plan. All but one of the School Improvement Plans mirrored the strategic plan (DIP). The district developed and improved systems for communication, collaboration, analyzing data, aligning and implementing curriculum, instruction, and support initiatives, and providing professional development programs.

Development of participatory roles on leadership committees for teachers increased their involvement in change efforts, enhanced communication with central office, and facilitated collaboration on goals in the DIP. Through continuous training, teachers and administrators

learned to develop elementary benchmark assessments, collect and analyze student achievement data, write curriculum benchmarks, create common benchmark tests, align the curriculum, and use differentiated instruction using groups, tasks, or materials. The district expected all professional development to align with its strategic plan. The goals focused on continuous training in data analysis to align the curricula, to develop quarterly assessments for use as formative assessment, and to develop exit criteria in each grade and subject area. The director of curriculum and staff development, a permanent member of the curriculum planning council, closely monitored the connections between the strategic plan and SIPs, training needs, curriculum revision, and the professional development plan, in order to build capacity for staff participation in district efforts.

The district emphasized accountability by regularly analyzing MCAS data, the results of elementary quarterly exams and middle and senior high school midyear and final exams, and appropriate special education and ELL testing. These assessments focused teachers and the school community on students' progress in meeting measurable goals and objectives. They also helped teachers comprehend and act upon achievement trends and strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum.

The district focused its data analysis on item analysis, grade-level, or subject-level achievement data and did not regularly examine subgroup achievement data for the lowest achieving subgroups, special education and low-income students. While the district made aggregate AYP for two of the years under review, the middle school had failed to make AYP for the low-income and special education subgroups. Only the middle school disaggregated subgroup data and took targeted steps to close the achievement gaps of its subgroups, offering extra math classes, math tutoring during and after school, and half-year math and ELA remediation. The effort enabled the middle school to close the achievement gap between the subgroups and make AYP.

An exemplary curriculum planning council developed a coherent curriculum aligned both horizontally and vertically and with the state curriculum frameworks. The curriculum contained all key components: objectives, resources, instructional strategies, timelines, measurable outcomes, and sometimes assessments. The superintendent prepared the district's budget in consultation with the administration, town administrator, and the finance committee, per school committee policy, using a "bottom up" approach that included all relevant stakeholders. Budget decisions reflected the goals contained in the strategic plan and the SIPs, and took into consideration increasing student enrollment. To provide equity, the superintendent based each budget line item on a per pupil cost allocation. The school system annually exceeded the minimum net school spending (NSS) requirements, providing the necessary financial resources to ensure that the students received quality education that focused on improvement in student achievement.

APPENDIX A: EQA'S DISTRICT EXAMINATION PROCESS

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

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

Data-Driven Assessment

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

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

Standards-Based Examination

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

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

APPENDIX B: EXPLANATION OF TERMS USED IN EQA REPORTS

ABA: Applied Behavioral Analysis

ADA: Average Daily Attendance

ALT: MCAS Alternative Assessment

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

ATA: Accountability and Targeted Assistance

AYP: Adequate Yearly Progress

CAP: Corrective Action Plan

CBM: Curriculum-Based Measures

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

CMP: Connected Math Program

CORI: Criminal Offender Record Information

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

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

CRT: Criterion-Referenced Test

CSR: Comprehensive School Reform

DCAP: District Curriculum Accommodation Plan

DIBELS: Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills

DIP: District Improvement Plan

DOE: Department of Education

DPDP: District Professional Development Plan

DRA: Developmental Reading Assessment

ELA: English Language Arts

ELL: English Language Learners

EPI: English Language Arts Proficiency Index

ESL: English as a Second Language

FLNE: First Language Not English

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

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

FTE: Full-Time Equivalent

FY: Fiscal Year

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

GASB: Government Accounting Standards Board

GMADE: Group Math Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation

GRADE: Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluation

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

IEP: Individualized Education Program

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

IPDP: Individual Professional Development Plan

IRIP: Individual Reading Improvement Plan

ISSP: Individual Student Success Plan

LASW: Looking at Student Work

LEP: Limited English Proficient

MASBO: Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials

MASC: Massachusetts Association of School Committees

MASS: Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents

MAVA: Massachusetts Association of Vocational Administrators

MCAS: Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System

MCAS-Alt: Alternative Assessment — a portfolio option for special needs students to demonstrate proficiency

MCPPO: Massachusetts Certified Public Purchasing Official

MELA-O: Massachusetts English Language Assessment-Oral

MEPA: Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment

MPI: Math Proficiency Index

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

MUNIS: Municipal Information System

NAEYC: National Association for the Education of Young Children

NCLB: No Child Left Behind

NEASC: New England Association of Schools and Colleges

NRT: Norm-Referenced Test

NSBA: National School Boards Association

NSS: Net School Spending

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

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

PIM: Performance Improvement Management

PQA: Program Quality Assurance — a division of the DOE responsible for conducting the Coordinated Program Review process

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

QRI: Qualitative Reading Inventory

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

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

SEI: Sheltered English Immersion

SIMS: Student Information Management System

SIOP: Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol

SIP: School Improvement Plan

SPED: Special Education

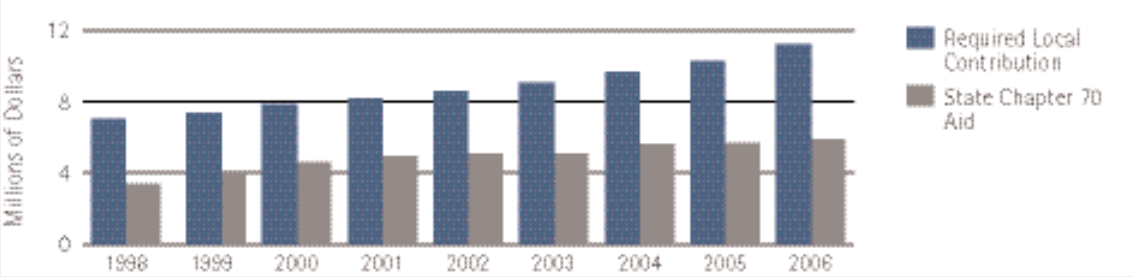
STE: Science and Technology/Engineering

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

APPENDIX C: STATE AND LOCAL FUNDING, 1998–2006

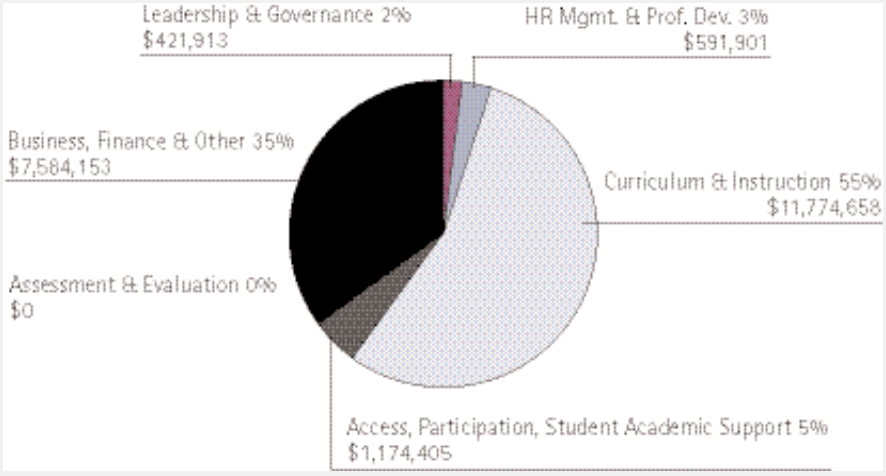
A school district's funding is determined in part by the Chapter 70 program — the major program of state aid to public elementary and secondary schools. In addition to supporting school operations, it also establishes minimum requirements for each municipality's share of school costs. The following chart shows the amount of Grafton's funding that was derived from the state and the amount that the town was required to contribute. The district exceeded the state net school spending (NSS) requirement in each year of the review period. From FY 2004 to FY 2006, NSS increased from $17,356,397 to $20,133,416; Chapter 70 aid increased from $5,599,191 to $5,916,246; the required local contribution increased from $9,676,932 to $11,239,997; and the foundation enrollment increased from 2,308 to 2,426. Chapter 70 aid as a percentage of actual NSS decreased from 32 to 29 percent over this period. From FY 2004 to FY 2005, total curriculum and instruction expenditures as a percentage of total NSS reported in the End of Year Pupil and Financial Report remained at 70 percent.

WHERE DOES THE FUNDING FOR GRAFTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS COME FROM?



HOW IS THE FUNDING FOR GRAFTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS ALLOCATED?

FY05 Expenditures By EQA Standards (With City/Town Charges)



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