

*How Is Your  
School District  
Performing?*



*A look at*  
**Northbridge**  
Public Schools

2004–2006



EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT AUDIT COUNCIL  
*Office of Educational Quality and Accountability*

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

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

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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:

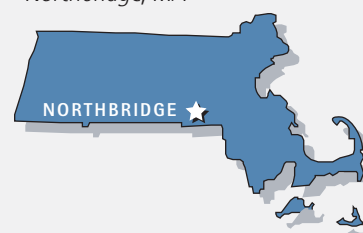
- Provide a comprehensive evaluation of each school district's performance;
- Publish annual reports on selected districts' performance;
- Monitor public education performance statewide to inform policy decisions; and
- Provide the public with information that helps the state hold districts and schools,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

In March 2007, the EQA conducted an independent examination of the Northbridge Public Schools for the period of 2004–2006. The EQA analyzed Northbridge 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 Northbridge 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

Northbridge, MA



### DISTRICT

*Population:* 13,182

*Median family income:* \$62,095

*Largest sources of employment:*  
Manufacturing; educational, health, and social services

*Local government:* Board of Selectmen, Town Manager, Open Town Meeting

### SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS

*School committee:* 9 members

*Number of schools:* 5

*Student-teacher ratio:* 13.7 to 1

*Per Pupil Expenditures:* \$9,614

*Student enrollment:*

Total: 2,629

White: 93.7 percent

Hispanic: 3.5 percent

African-American: 1.1 percent

Asian-American: 0.6 percent

Native American: 0.2 percent

Limited English proficient:

0.5 percent

Low income: 20.2 percent

Special education: 13.3 percent

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

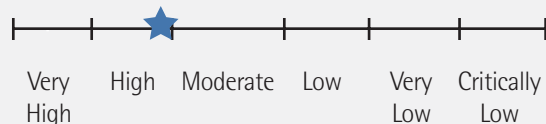
## EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT AUDIT COUNCIL ACTION

After reviewing this report, the Educational Management Audit Council voted to accept its findings at its meeting on October 24, 2007.

## MCAS Performance at a Glance, 2006

	DISTRICT	STATE
Average Proficiency Index	81	78
English Language Arts Proficiency Index	88	84
Math Proficiency Index	74	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 sub-groups 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 Northbridge participated at levels that met or exceeded the state's 95 percent requirement.

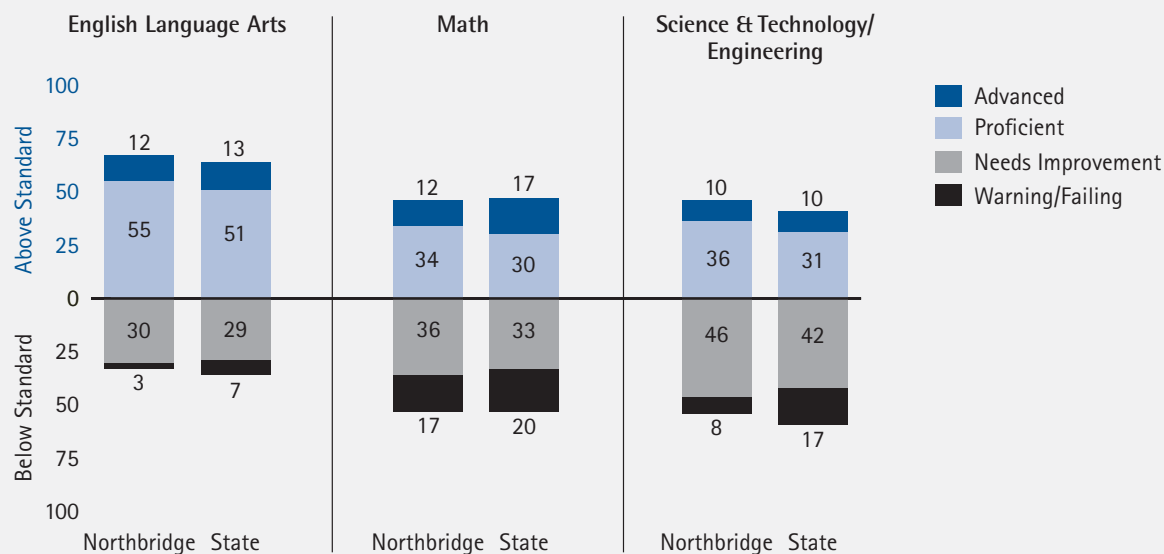
### 2. Are the district's students reaching proficiency levels on the MCAS examination?

On average, more than half of all students in Northbridge attained proficiency on the 2006 MCAS tests, slightly more than that statewide. Two-thirds of Northbridge students attained proficiency in English language arts (ELA) and less than half of Northbridge students attained proficiency in math and in science and technology/engineering (STE). Ninety-nine percent of the Class of 2006 attained a Competency Determination.

- Northbridge's average proficiency index (API) on the MCAS tests in 2006 was 81 proficiency index (PI) points, three PI points greater than that statewide. Northbridge's average proficiency gap, the difference between its API and the target of 100, in 2006 was 19 PI points.
- In 2006, Northbridge's proficiency gap in ELA was 12 PI points, four PI points narrower than the state's average proficiency gap in ELA. This gap would require an average improvement in performance of one and one-half PI points annually to achieve adequate yearly progress (AYP). Northbridge's proficiency gap in math was 26 PI points in 2006, two PI points narrower than

## NORTHBRIDGE SCORES COMPARED TO STATE AVERAGES, 2006

Percentage of students at each proficiency level on MCAS

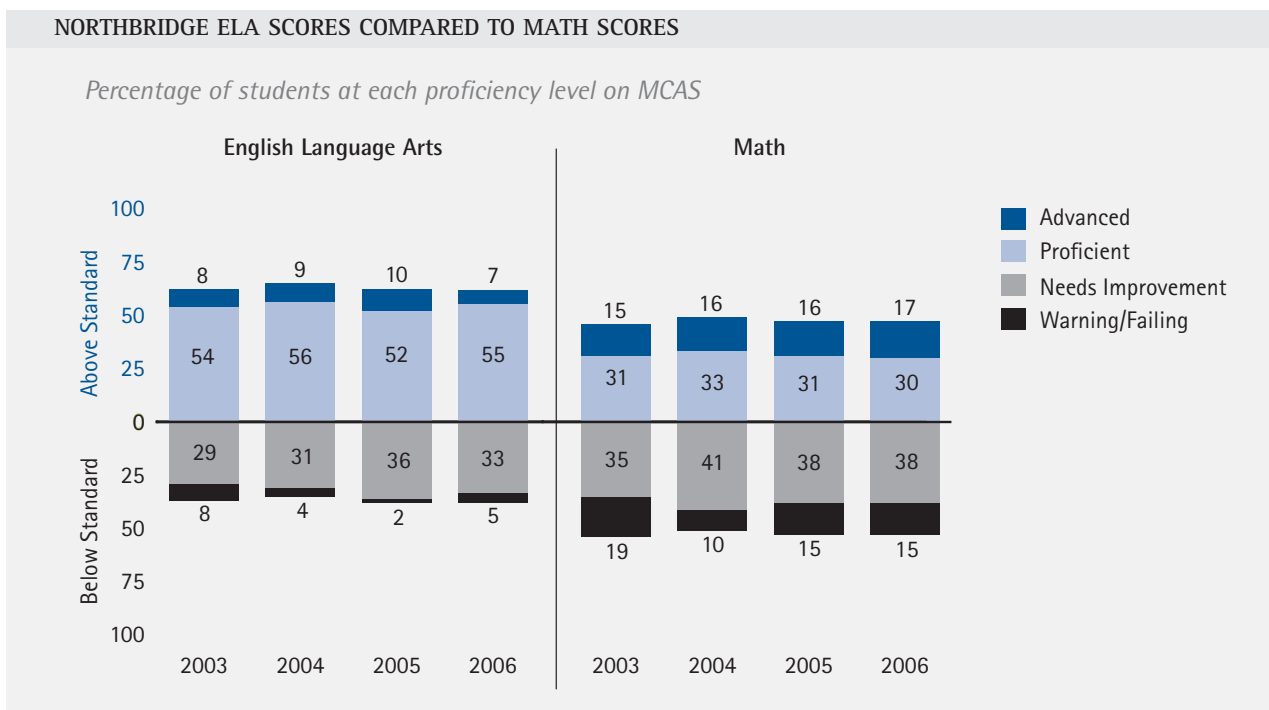


the state's average proficiency gap in math. This gap would require an average improvement of more than three PI points per year to achieve AYP. Northbridge's proficiency gap in STE was 22 PI points, seven PI points narrower than that statewide.

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

Between 2003 and 2006, Northbridge's MCAS performance showed slight improvement overall and in ELA, math, and STE, although the gains overall and in ELA and math were made between 2003 and 2004 and performance subsequently declined.

- The percentage of students scoring in the 'Advanced' and 'Proficient' categories rose by one percentage point between 2003 and 2006, while the percentage of students in the 'Warning/Failing' category decreased by four percentage points. The average proficiency gap in Northbridge narrowed from 23 PI points in 2003 to 20 PI points in 2006. This resulted in an improvement rate, or a closing of the proficiency gap, of 10 percent.
- Over the three-year period 2003-2006, ELA performance in Northbridge showed improvement, at an average of more than one-half PI point annually. This resulted in an improvement rate of 13 percent, a rate lower than that required to meet AYP.
- Math performance in Northbridge also showed improvement, at an average of nearly one PI point annually. This resulted in an improvement rate of nine percent, also a rate lower than that required to meet AYP.



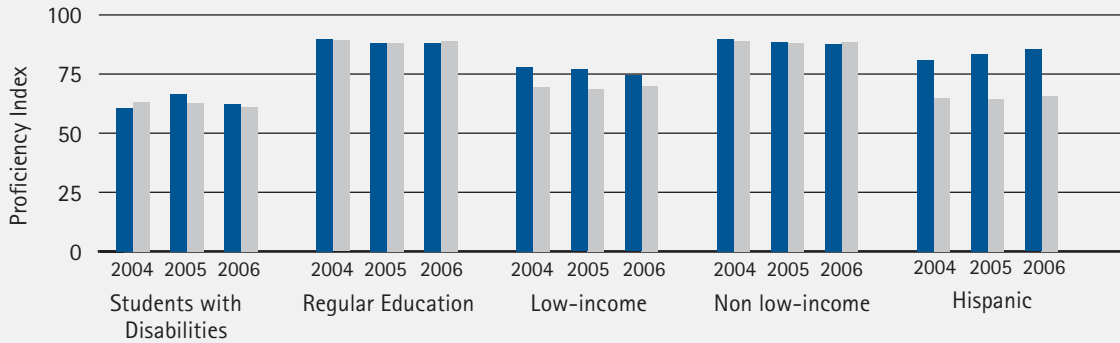
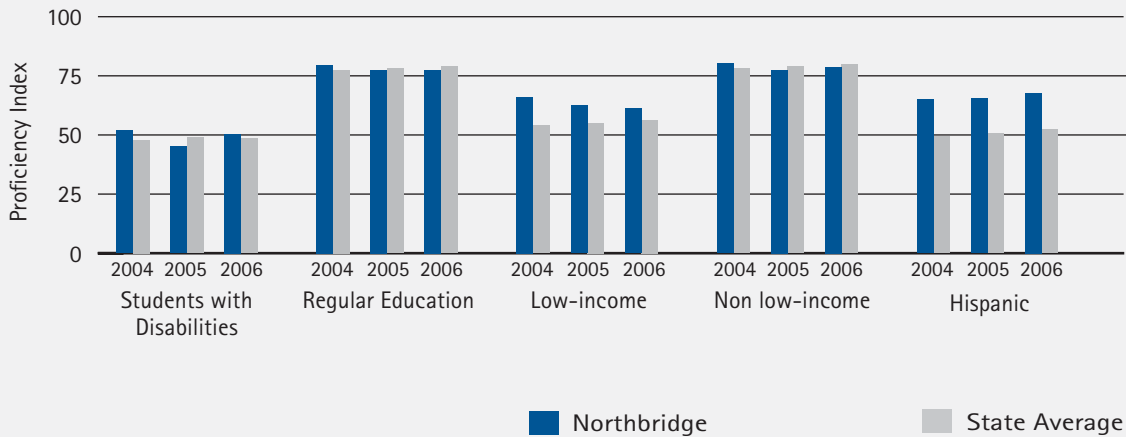
- Between 2004 and 2006, Northbridge had an improvement in STE performance, increasing by three and one-half PI points over the two-year period.

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

MCAS performance in 2006 varied substantially among subgroups of Northbridge students. Of the eight measurable subgroups in Northbridge in 2006, the gap in performance between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups was 24 PI points in ELA (regular education students, students with disabilities, respectively) and 29 PI points in math (non low-income students, students with disabilities, respectively).

- The proficiency gaps in Northbridge in 2006 in both ELA and math were wider than the district average for students with disabilities and low-income students (those participating in the free or reduced-cost lunch program). Less than two-fifths of the students in these subgroups attained proficiency.
- The proficiency gaps in ELA and math were narrower than the district average for regular education students, White students, and non low-income students. For each of these subgroups, more than half 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 Hispanic and female students were wider than the district average in math but narrower in ELA. For each of these subgroups, more than half the students attained proficiency.

## NORTHBRIDGE STUDENTS' IMPROVEMENT OVER TIME, COMPARED TO STATE AVERAGES

*English Language Arts**Math**5. Has the MCAS test performance of the district's student subgroups improved over time?*

The performance gap in Northbridge between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups in ELA narrowed from 36 PI points in 2003 to 26 PI points in 2006, and the performance gap between the highest- and lowest-performing subgroups in math narrowed from 45 to 28 PI points over this period.

- All student subgroups had improved performance in ELA between 2003 and 2006, although the pattern of change varied among subgroups. The most improved subgroups in ELA were students with disabilities and Hispanic students.
- In math, all subgroups in Northbridge with the exception of regular education students showed improved performance between 2003 and 2006. The pattern of change in math also varied among subgroups. The most improved subgroups in math were students with disabilities and Hispanic students.

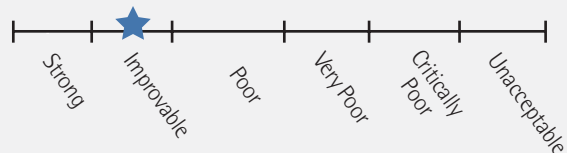


## Performance at a Glance

### 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. Northbridge received the following rating:

#### Performance Rating:



## WHAT FACTORS DRIVE STUDENT PERFORMANCE?

### Overall District Management

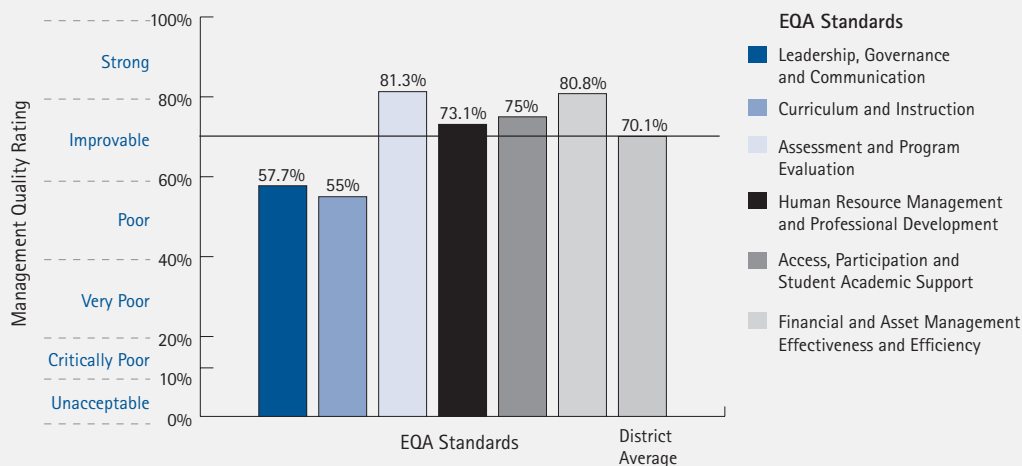
To better understand the factors affecting student scores on the MCAS tests, the EQA analyzes district performance on 67 indicators in six areas: leadership, governance, and communication; curriculum and instruction; assessment and program evaluation; human resource management and professional development; 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, Northbridge received an overall MQI score of 'Improvable' (70.1 percent). The district performed best on the Assessment and Program Evaluation standard, scoring 'Strong.' It was rated 'Poor' on the Curriculum and Instruction and Leadership and Governance standards. Given these ratings, the district performed as expected on the MCAS tests. During the review period, student performance declined in both ELA and math. On the following pages, we take a closer look at the district's performance in each of the six standards.

## A CLOSER LOOK AT MANAGEMENT QUALITY

*Northbridge, 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, Foxborough ranked among the 'High' performing school districts in the commonwealth, with scores that were 'High' in ELA and 'Moderate' in math.

### Leadership and Communication

The district experienced high turnover rates in leadership positions during the review period and implemented many changes in 2005-2006, including a new administrator evaluation process. The new evaluation procedure highlighted the leadership roles and responsibilities of administrators and called for more accountability through a goal-setting process that was to be piloted in 2006-2007.

Leadership meetings occurred on a regular basis, and communication between and within schools increased through grade K-12 task forces on curricular issues. The district emphasized the use of technology to increase communication by implementing the FirstClass Communications Platform for e-mail, web pages to make more information available to the public, and ConnectEd telephone services to address attendance issues.

Communication increased between the district and the town officials and included regular meetings between the finance committee, selectmen, and school committee members to address fiscal concerns in the community. The superintendent and chair of the school committee conducted an orientation for new school committee members to assist a smooth transition. Copies of budgets, the policy manual, and district and school improvement plans were shared at this meeting.

School committee members were aware of their roles and responsibilities and

## Performance at a Glance

### Ratings on Performance Indicators

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



### Areas of Strength

- School committee members were knowledgeable of their roles and responsibilities and advocated for the district.

### Areas for Improvement

- Communication of progress on all aspects of attainment of DIP and SIP goals in the district was broad and not specific since the goals themselves were not measurable.
- Annual performance reviews of administrators were completed only in the last year of the period under review, and the evaluations were not directly related to student achievement.
- The MCAS test data were disaggregated regularly for the special education subgroup but not for other district subgroups, such as low-income or minority students.
- The district safety plan had not been updated since 2000.

focused on the "big picture." The committee worked as a whole in order to keep all members informed and involved, suspending the subcommittee structure of the past. Members stated that they were presented information about assessment results along with updates on curriculum work in progress. The majority of the school committee members were parents, and they confirmed that the school improvement councils were very active in the governance of the individual schools.

## Planning

The long-range planning for the district started with the 2001-2006 Five Year Plan, which was in effect for the period under review, with the exception of a refocus of the district goals in the fall of 2005 under the supervision of the new superintendent. All of the School Improvement Plans (SIPs) were aligned with the District Improvement Plan (DIP), updated annually on the basis of general progress, and included school safety procedures, information on class size, time on learning compliance, extra curricular and enrichment needs and activities, projected facility needs, program evaluation, and plans for dissemination of the SIPs. Since the district and school goals were not specific or measurable, it was difficult to evaluate progress in quantifiable terms.

The district had a technology plan and a long-range curriculum plan that was not fully implemented, but it did not have a professional development plan, which slowed the district's progress in reaching its identified goals. The district made modifications to its instructional services in response to data analysis revealing the need for attention to math at the elementary and middle school levels. The district completed the grade K-12 math curriculum, added algebra to the middle school, and introduced Hands On Equations and RM software. It also scheduled the Title I program after school to provide more extensive math support.

## Curriculum and Instruction

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

### Aligned Curricula

The Northbridge Public Schools completed a major alignment of the district's curriculum to the state frameworks at all levels except the middle school level as a result of the five-year plan developed by the previous superintendent and the curriculum office in the fall of 2000. The alignment process was completed at the elementary level at the end of the 2005-2006 school year. In math and science, the alignment was fully dependent on the textbooks adopted by the district.

The textbooks purchased by the district were perceived to be in alignment with the state curriculum frameworks by the central administrators, principals, and teachers involved with the textbook review and the piloting process used to review and adopt published materials. The curriculum alignment was not completed at the middle school level by the conclusion of the review period. The curriculum was lacking in benchmarks, formative and summative assessments, and instructional strategies for use by teachers. The middle school principal estimated that the middle school curriculum alignment would be completed by the end of the 2007-2008 school year. At the high school level, the curriculum alignment was completed in the fall of 2006, about six months after the review period. The curriculum presented to the EOA team was a comprehensive mapping approach that lacked periodic benchmark assessments for use throughout the school year. This curriculum lacked a regular system of formative assessment that would serve to guide and inform instruction for students in each subject area throughout the 10 months of the school year.

## Performance at a Glance

### Ratings on Performance Indicators

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



### Areas of Strength

- The district completed a major effort to align its elementary and high school level curricula to the state frameworks, and was in the process of aligning its middle school level curriculum.

### Areas for Improvement

- The use of formative assessments to inform instruction at all district levels was not a common practice across the district.
- As the district completed curriculum writing in the 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 school years, the approach in use differed at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, impeding achievement of vertical alignment.

Central office curriculum leaders, the high school principal, and her department heads and teaching staff spent considerable time on the project of curriculum alignment and mapping in the district. EQA examiners noted that the process was somewhat disjointed and directed by different leadership approaches at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, and the curriculum did not appear to be unified throughout all levels. The EQA team also noted that the district did not employ the common practice of dating all curriculum materials as they were reviewed or completed, rendering it difficult for the EQA team to understand the sequencing of writing and revision in the district. The curriculum revision entered into a period of unclear long-term planning in 2005-2006, in that the original five-year plan was not replaced with a follow-up plan that included curriculum and professional development programs to complement the district's new curricular and instructional goals. The middle school principal shared with the EQA team a monthly curriculum update that he required of all teachers, and this helped him monitor instructional adherence to curriculum expectations.

Due to the restructuring at the elementary level, many grade K-4 teachers were displaced and three were teaching at new grade levels in 2006-2007. In the restructuring, the district created two grades K-4 elementary schools to replace the previous grades K-1 and 2-4 elementary structure, posing a new horizontal alignment challenge that the EQA team could not evaluate at the time of its review.

## Effective Instruction

Administrators informed the EQA team of a number of changes that increased instructional time during the review period. In the elementary teacher focus group, interviewees reported that ELA instructional time was increased from 90 to 150 minutes daily. Math instructional time was increased from 60 to 90 minutes. The high school implemented a double block in the humanities program for students who were struggling in ELA and social studies. In 2005-2006, the district decided to implement an Algebra I program for middle school students, based on their performance results on the Iowa Algebra Assessment Test. The district aimed to improve weak middle school MCAS math scores by offering algebra to eligible upper-level students at grades 7 and 8. The middle school implemented an enrichment block that rotated math and other subject areas through the extended homeroom to give students added support in tested core subject areas.

The EQA team visited 59 classrooms for periods of approximately 20 minutes per classroom, including 31 visits at the elementary school level, 15 at the middle school level, and 13 at the high school level. The data collected in these observations were very positive in the areas of classroom management and the classroom climate in which instruction took place.

## 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

District and school administrators used a variety of assessments, particularly for underperforming students, in addition to MCAS tests to measure educational progress and academic needs. Although assessments were employed most widely and effectively at the elementary grades, some progress was noted at the middle and high school levels as well. Benchmarks were established in both ELA and math at the elementary level, and local and norm-referenced criteria were used at regular intervals and at specific grade levels to monitor and analyze student progress. Assessment results were subsequently used to identify students needing additional educational support through Title I, targeted remediation, and special education services, as well as those who were ready for additional academic challenges. At the grades preK-4 level, student assessments included the Yopp-Singer Test of Phonemic Segmentation, Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory (ESRI), and the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), as well as cumulative assessments in math and literacy that were administered in the fall, winter, and spring of each year.

The middle school used Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI), Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI), the Iowa Algebra Aptitude Test (IAAT), which is a national, standardized, norm-referenced assessment, and performance tests from the Scott Foresman Mathematics Program Assessment Sourcebook. As a result of MCAS data analysis, a middle school task force had developed a schoolwide writing rubric, *Because Writing Matters*, designed to strengthen student literacy skills across the curriculum. At the high school, a variety of standardized assessments was used to evaluate student progress. In addition to MCAS tests, some students were given SRI and QRI assessments, and many others took PSAT,

## Performance at a Glance

### Ratings on Performance Indicators

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



### Areas of Strength

- The district had a formal school committee policy that addressed the expectations and responsibilities of both administrators and teachers regarding the collection, analysis, and use of student assessment results.
- During the review period, the district engaged in a number of external audits of its academic programs and delivery systems, including those performed by NAEYC, NELMS, and NEASC.
- Central office and school leaders complied with the district assessment policy regarding appropriate communication of student progress. Parents indicated that student achievement data were widely disseminated and readily available in the community.

### Areas for Improvement

- Although the district's aggregate MCAS participation rates exceeded the state's 95 percent requirement, special education student participation varied significantly, especially at the high school.
- Although district and school improvement plans were aligned on the goal of improving processes and procedures for program evaluation and accountability and substantial data were collected, there was little evidence of ongoing, systematic, internal program evaluation.

SAT, Advanced Placement (AP), and Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) tests. The high school had also developed common final examinations in all subjects. Neither the middle school nor the high school had developed formative assessments or local benchmarks as means of more effectively monitoring student academic progress throughout the course of the year. Although student assessment results were communicated to all appropriate staff and were used to varying degrees to improve curriculum and instruction as well as to inform some professional development activity, interviewees acknowledged that building administrators and staff still needed substantial additional data analysis training.

### Program Evaluation

Northbridge devoted considerable attention and resources to external audits of its program implementation and service delivery systems. In 2004, the district commissioned a review of its preK-K programs and received a full five-year accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) for its educational programs and services. The middle school was evaluated in 2005 by the New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS). Although the report did not address student achievement, it contained numerous commendations as well as specific recommendations that centered on teaming, pedagogical, and curricular issues. The middle school's SIP reflected its extensive efforts to implement the NELMS recommendations. In 2004-2005, Northbridge Public Schools commissioned a comprehensive evaluation of its special education program and services continuum. A detailed report was produced that reviewed the district's speech and language services, resource rooms, occupational and physical therapies, adapted physical education, integrated preschool, and use of paraprofessionals. As a result of the district's major elementary level reorganization that was implemented in 2006-2007, a follow-up special education evaluation was conducted in early 2007. During the review period, the high school was actively engaged in its re-accreditation review process with the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). An examination of NEASC progress reports and other pertinent correspondence indicated the high school made efforts to improve its academic programs, services, and assessment practices.

The district's internal assessments of its programs and services have been less formal and systematic than the external audits cited. For example, the district's curriculum revision plan called for regular and thorough reviews of existing curriculum, instruction, and assessment by the curriculum team. Although Northbridge's 2000-2007 curriculum documents clearly identified a specific content area revision sequence, the plan had not been followed consistently or implemented uniformly. In addition, there was little evidence that the district conducted assessments of the cost effectiveness of any of its programs based on student performance data. Further, the EQA examiners learned that, in general, the district was just beginning to disaggregate student achievement data.

## 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

Under the new superintendent's leadership, the district made every effort to hire new teachers who held appropriate certification. In 2005-2006, the new superintendent discovered that 26 teachers, some of whom were long-time employees, did not hold teaching certification. He met with the teachers' association and the teachers, and granted them a deadline of the end of the school year to make adequate progress in attaining appropriate certification. By the end of the 2006 school year, 20 teachers had attained certification and six others had resigned or were non-renewed. In 2006-2007, only two teachers were working on waiver.

The district also employed two long-time staff members as administrators who did not hold administrator or teacher certification. Although the job titles did not match a specific administrator certification, the roles they performed in the district were similar to the roles that required professional certification of some type, according to DOE regulations.

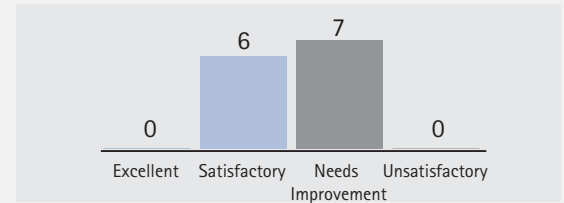
### Professional Development

Professional development was organized by central office through the collaboration of the administrative team which assessed the needs in individual schools. It consisted of a collection of activities rather than a focused, long-term plan. Full professional development days were school based.

## Performance at a Glance

### Ratings on Performance Indicators

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



### Areas of Strength

- The new superintendent checked for updated professional certifications and acted to remedy the lack of certification for 26 employees.
- The district provided ongoing and regular training in managing crises and emergencies to all staff members, and it installed the ConnectEd system in 2005-2006 in all school buildings so that administrators could better communicate with parents and staff in the event of school emergencies.
- In 2006, the new superintendent brought the district's teacher evaluation system into alignment with the requirements of the Education Reform Act.

### Areas for Improvement

- In 2005-2006, all elementary grade-level leader and middle school curriculum facilitator positions were eliminated, leaving teachers few opportunities for promotion.
- The mentoring of administrators was informal, and they expressed the need for more training in TestWiz, analysis of achievement data, and updated supervision and evaluation strategies.
- The former superintendent completed no evaluations of administrators in 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. In 2005-2006, the district's evaluation of administrators' performance was not aligned with the requirements of education reform.



Another 222 training sessions were held throughout the year, and most in-service professional development focused on "on-the-job data analysis" and implementing or piloting new textbook programs in math and science. Professional development offerings lacked sufficient focus on program assessments, research-based practices, the staff evaluation process, and using student achievement data to make data-driven decisions and write measurable achievement goals for School Improvement Plans.

The district had teacher induction and mentoring programs, but some of the mentors had not been trained, and mentor training had not been held since 2003-2004. The district also offered partial course reimbursement for teachers, and for attendance at conferences for teachers and administrators. Teachers were expected to share the information they gained when they returned to the district; interviewees said this was difficult because of the insufficient common planning time at the elementary and middle levels.

## Evaluation

The formal teacher evaluation form consisted of a checklist with little or no opportunity for written feedback. The superintendent improved the effectiveness of the evaluation process in 2006, with a side letter that allowed principals to make one unannounced classroom visit and use that experience to write one evaluation in an annual or alternating teacher evaluation cycle. It also established the responsibility of principals to create a specific improvement plan for teachers who were struggling or not meeting district expectations, based on prior classroom observations. A review of a sample of 37 teacher files revealed that evaluations in six files were not completed in a timely manner during the review period.

Supervision of instruction was accomplished through walk-throughs, conversations with teachers, and attendance at teacher meetings. The district did not have an established protocol for walk-throughs, and according to interviewees principals were not directly focused on their specific SIP goals in their walk-throughs.

## 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

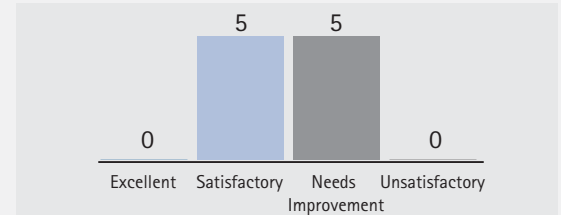
The district provided services to students who needed extra help in reading, math, and MCAS support in the regular classroom setting, as well as a few special services for those who needed additional help. Academic support teachers at the elementary school assisted with small group instruction within regular classrooms. All middle school students participated in the enrichment block, which provided math support for 58 minutes on two out of every seven days. High school students who failed or were in danger of failing MCAS tests had their ELA course supplemented by a semester of writing lab, assigned periods in the Academic Support Center, and referral to the Learning Academy. Although students could advance from these lower-level courses in order to accelerate their learning, the school did not define policies on the criteria for such transfers. During the review period, the number of staff who provided academic support services declined. After 2005-2006, academic support for math at the elementary and middle schools was limited to a 0.5 FTE position in each building. In the year after the review period, Title I services were provided in math after school for elementary and middle school students who could participate on a voluntary basis, and transportation was provided. The Academic Support Center at the high school was staffed for MCAS review after school and one evening per week.

Although the school did not enforce the 12-student maximum enrollment in Advanced Placement courses, enrollments were small. Performance on the exams was not strong despite the many requirements for entry to the courses: application, teacher recommendation, interview, and honors-level prerequisites.

## Performance at a Glance

### Ratings on Performance Indicators

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



### Areas of Strength

- The district offered a summer school and implemented retention policies designed to allow students to recover credit and graduate with their class. Dropout rates were low.
- Special education students were mainstreamed when possible. Services such as reading instruction, resource rooms, aides, co-teachers trained in special education, and a behavior program for middle school students supplemented inclusion.

### Areas for Improvement

- Less than half of all grade 4 students attained proficiency on the MCAS ELA test in 2006, the final year of the review period.
- The district provided supplemental services to all grade K-12 students in reading and math, although the amount of in-school time and staff dedicated to these services declined over the review period.

Special education students were mainstreamed at all levels. The elementary school had two inclusion classrooms. These classes were taught by two regular education teachers with the assistance of a special education teacher. When required by an Individualized Education Program (IEP), children were accompanied by an aide. Some intensive special needs students were mainstreamed for part of the day.

At the middle school, mainstream placements were supplemented with support in resource rooms. The middle school also had a reading teacher, social worker, and an off-site placement for students with behavioral issues.

The high school mainstreamed students with disabilities when possible, and when necessary these students were accompanied by an aide. The high school offered to special education students resource rooms as well as coursework such as Humanities 1 and 2 and Integrated Math that mirrored the regular education curriculum. In addition, the high school provided a two-year Living Skills program supplemented by an array of vocational offerings.

### Attendance

The district had attendance policies at every school level that administrators enforced. As a result, attendance rates were high at all levels except at the high school, where the rate averaged 91 percent and chronic absenteeism was high.

Teacher absence was high at the elementary schools, particularly in the "other" category. The new superintendent ended the practice of allowing teachers to take vacation days during the regularly scheduled school year.

### Discipline and Dropout Prevention

The district had implemented the Behavior: Uniform Management Policy (BUMP) that rigidly established disciplinary consequences for many infractions, but discontinued its use at the end of the review period in favor of a policy that allowed for more administrative discretion. Despite improvements in the application of discipline policies, the reported in-school and out-of-school suspension rates were still high. The district did not have a program in place to address recidivism.

The high school had a dropout prevention plan that involved a variety of school resources including the Learning Academy for academic support, guidance and adjustment counselors, summer school for credit recovery, and the possibility of combining work and school work with the addition of flexible online courses through Class.com.

## 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 prior superintendent developed the budget through a participatory process for each year of the review period. Principals and individual directors, with input from staff, prepared needs based budgets for submission to the superintendent. Meetings between the superintendent and the finance committee determined the town's allotment to the schools and resulted in the superintendent's adjustment of budget requests and the development of a budget based on available funds and prior year expenditures. The district allocated resources based on prior year expenditures with a percentage increase, without factoring in an ongoing analysis of student assessment data. The current superintendent prepared only a needs based budget for FY 2007 and requested \$900,000 from the stabilization fund, which was ultimately approved by the voters at the December 2006 special town meeting.

School committee members, principals, and appropriate staff received monthly budget reports. Central office personnel regularly reviewed and monitored expenditures to ensure that spending remained within budget limits. The district and the town maintained financial information on the same accounting system. The district did not encumber salary obligations but used purchase orders to encumber expenditures from all funds for goods and services. Adequate internal controls existed in the business office to ensure that the district adhered to procurement laws and processed payroll correctly.

### Performance at a Glance

#### Ratings on Performance Indicators

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



#### Areas of Strength

- During the review period, the superintendent and town officials annually signed a written agreement detailing the calculation of indirect charges levied on the school district by the town.
- The district developed a policy and procedures for the collection and expenditure of student activities funds based on a consultant's recommendations.
- The district followed state procurement laws, and it participated in cooperative purchasing and procured goods and services from state contracts.
- Each school had a crisis plan that the current superintendent reviewed with the police and fire departments, and the school buildings had systems in place to ensure student safety.

#### Areas for Improvement

- Northbridge's per pupil expenditure ranked below the state average during each of the years under review. The town's tax levy limit was at the maximum allowable, and the town's tax rate per thousand was the lowest among the Blackstone Valley communities.
- Central office administrators stated the use of funds from the school choice and tuition accounts to pay salaries was a routine practice and acknowledged that continued dependency on these unpredictable revenues to meet rising salary obligations was problematic.
- The district did not evaluate the cost effectiveness of its programs based on student performance data and needs.

## Financial Support

The district relied on Chapter 70 aid, which was the major source of funding for the school budget, and routinely used funds from the school choice and tuition accounts as well as grants to supplement the district budget. The district exceeded the net school spending requirement in each of the years of the review period. The tax levy was at the maximum allowable, and residential taxes amounted to approximately 90 percent of the amount raised through taxation. The town's tax rate per thousand, which had been lowered during the review period, was the lowest among the communities in the Blackstone Valley. Misinformation and confusion contributed to the failure of a \$1 million general government override in May 2006. The town began FY 2007 with an unbalanced budget, and all departments contributed funds to assist with the financial shortfall. The school department contributed \$56,292 from the school choice account.

## Facilities and Safety

With the exception of the high school, which was completed in 2002, the district schools were old, although they were in generally good condition, clean, and well maintained by an in-house staff of custodians and maintenance workers. Each building had systems to ensure student safety. The district did not have a formal, written, preventative maintenance plan but contracted outside vendors each year for boiler, HVAC, generator, elevator, and fire alarm preventative maintenance.

The district's five-year capital plan, which included projects by school, was reviewed and updated annually by the superintendent and director of operations. Due to lack of funding, projects were moved forward from year to year without resolution.

School buildings were locked and equipped with buzzer systems. The district safety plan had yet to be updated and reviewed with all town officials and regional safety service providers.

## CONCLUSION

The Northbridge Public Schools was considered to be a 'High' performing district, marked by student achievement that was 'High' in ELA and 'Moderate' in math as measured by the 2006 MCAS tests. More than half of Northbridge'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 'Improvable,' with its highest rating in Assessment and Evaluation, and the lowest in Curriculum and Instruction.

The Northbridge Public Schools has experienced a high degree of turnover among its leadership positions, with a new superintendent during the review period. The district operated on a Five-Year Plan for 2001-2006, but had not developed or fully implemented planning documents for professional development, technology, and curriculum services. Its District Improvement Plan and School Improvement Plans were aligned, but not specific nor measurable.

During the review period, Northbridge's tax rate was the lowest in the Blackstone Valley, its tax levy limit was at the maximum allowable, and its per pupil expenditure ranked below the state average. The district entered FY 2007 with an unbalanced budget after voters rejected an override vote in the spring of 2006. But at a December 2006 special town meeting, voters approved an expenditure of \$900,000 for the district from the stabilization fund, and Northbridge continued to rely heavily on unpredictable funds for necessary programs. The district is facing a significant funding reduction in FY 2008, and in preparation for an override vote the school committee has asked the superintendent to project the impact of a \$5 million reduction proposed by the board of selectmen. The district posted reports on its website, warning of the following hardships at all levels: increased class size and reduced offerings, increased special education referrals and out-of-district placements, inability to meet No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Massachusetts Department of Education regulations, limited transportation services, and further deterioration of the school facilities and grounds.

According to the district report card released subsequent to the EQA site visit, the district did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for all subgroups, in all grades, in ELA and math in 2006. In the final year of the review period, less than half the district's grade 4 students attained proficiency on the MCAS ELA test. The district reported a low MCAS participation rate among special education students, especially at the high school.

In 2005-2006, under the leadership of a new superintendent, the district began the transformation to meet the requirements of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993. Some

of these requirements included adherence to student learning time regulations and evidence of a complete written curriculum aligned with the state curriculum frameworks in ELA, math, and science, containing components such as content and skills at each grade, resources and materials, pace of the taught curriculum, and assessments and benchmarks. The EQA determined that the district also needed updated policies, a formative and summative assessment system, and wide participation in analysis of data from the MCAS tests and local assessments, so that the professional staff could make data-driven decisions.

Northbridge effectively implemented a number of assessments, especially at the elementary level, to measure student progress. These included the Yopp-Singer Test of Phonemic Segmentation, Ekwall/Shanker Reading Inventory, and the Developmental Reading Assessment. As a result of MCAS data analysis, a middle school task force had developed a schoolwide writing rubric, *Because Writing Matters*, designed to strengthen student literacy skills across the curriculum. Neither the middle school nor the high school had developed formative assessments or local benchmarks as means of more effectively monitoring student academic progress throughout the course of the year.

The district developed modifications to the core curriculum in math, science, and humanities to improve performance among special education and low-performing regular education students. The district provided support services for at-risk students, including the math enrichment block, the writing lab, the Early Intervention Team, the Academic Support Center, and the Learning Academy. However, budget reductions eliminated support staff positions during the review period.

The new superintendent established a deadline for the 26 employees without proper licensure to obtain it, and as a result 20 succeeded and the others resigned or were non-renewed. The district adopted a new administrator evaluation system that involved piloting a goal-setting process in 2006-2007. Some teacher mentors lacked appropriate training, and training had not been conducted consistently. Administrators lacked training in TestWiz, data-driven decision-making, and supervision and evaluation systems. The district's evaluation process was improved in 2006.

Overall, the district faces the challenge of implementing long-term plans for facilities, capital planning, curriculum and instruction, assessment, equity, professional development, and technology to keep pace with other school districts which adopted education reform policies sooner.

## 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

**MCPPPO:** Massachusetts Certified Public Purchasing Official

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

**MEPA:** Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment

**MPI:** Math Proficiency Index

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

**MUNIS:** Municipal Information System

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

**NCLB:** No Child Left Behind

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

**NRT:** Norm-Referenced Test

**NSBA:** National School Boards Association

**NSS:** Net School Spending

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

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

**PIM:** Performance Improvement Management

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

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

**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

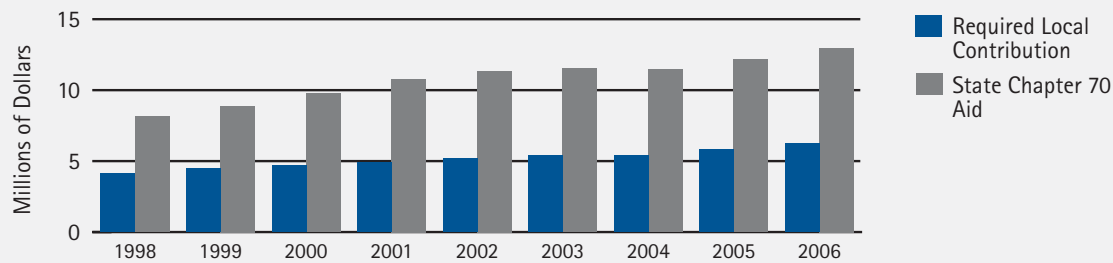
**STE:** Science and Technology/Engineering

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

## APPENDIX C: STATE AND LOCAL FUNDING, 1998–2006

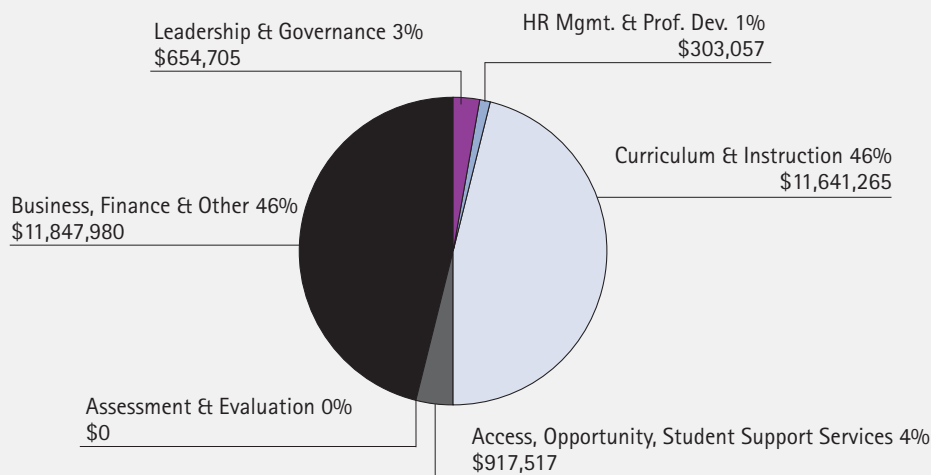
A school district's funding is determined in part by the Chapter 70 program — the major program of state aid to public elementary and secondary schools. In addition to supporting school operations, it also establishes minimum requirements for each municipality's share of school costs. The following chart shows the amount of Northbridge'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 \$18,155,625 to \$20,849,978; Chapter 70 aid increased from \$11,463,830 to \$12,970,825; the required local contribution increased from \$5,372,729 to \$6,253,429; and the foundation enrollment increased from 2,432 to 2,581. Chapter 70 aid as a percentage of actual NSS decreased from 63 to 62 percent over this period. From FY 2004 to FY 2005, total curriculum and instruction expenditures as a percentage of total NSS decreased from 65 to 62 percent.

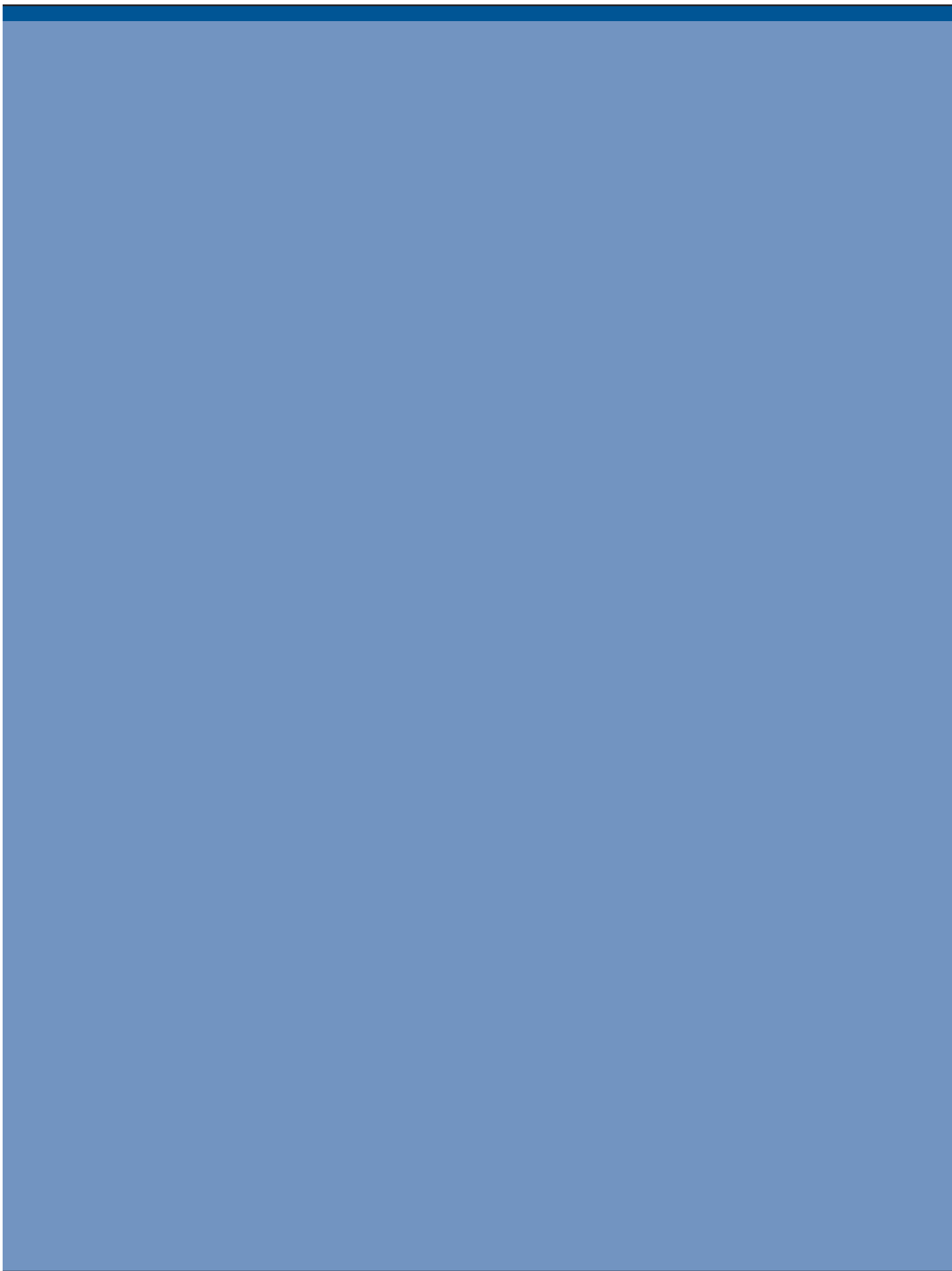
### WHERE DOES THE FUNDING FOR NORTHBRIDGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS COME FROM?



### HOW IS THE FUNDING FOR NORTHBRIDGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS ALLOCATED?

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





EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT AUDIT COUNCIL  
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