



Massachusetts Department of  
ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY  
EDUCATION

## **Somerville Public Schools District Review**

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Review conducted January 30 – February 2, 2012



This document was prepared by the  
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Commissioner

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# Overview of District Reviews

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## ***Purpose***

The goal of district reviews conducted by the Center for District and School Accountability (CDSA) in the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) is to support districts in establishing or strengthening a cycle of continuous improvement. Reviews consider carefully the effectiveness, efficiency, and integration of systemwide functions using ESE's six district standards: **Leadership and Governance, Curriculum and Instruction, Assessment, Human Resources and Professional Development, Student Support, and Financial and Asset Management.**

District reviews are conducted under Chapter 15, Section 55A of the Massachusetts General Laws and include reviews focused on “districts whose students achieve at low levels either in absolute terms or relative to districts that educate similar populations.” Districts subject to review in the 2011-2012 school year include districts that were in Level 3<sup>1</sup> (in school year 2011 or school year 2012) of ESE's framework for district accountability and assistance in each of the state's six regions: Greater Boston, Berkshires, Northeast, Southeast, Central, and Pioneer Valley. The districts with the lowest aggregate performance and least movement in Composite Performance Index (CPI) in their regions were chosen from among those districts that were not exempt under Chapter 15, Section 55A, because another comprehensive review had been completed or was scheduled to take place within nine months of the planned reviews.

## ***Methodology***

To focus the analysis, reviews collect evidence for each of the six district standards (see above). The reviews seek to identify those systems and practices that may be impeding rapid improvement as well as those that are most likely to be contributing to positive results. The district review team consists of independent consultants with expertise in each of the district standards who review selected district documents and ESE data and reports for two days before conducting a four-day district visit that includes visits to various district schools. The team holds interviews and focus groups with such stakeholders as school committee members, teachers' union representatives, administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Team members also observe classes. The team then meets for two days to develop findings and recommendations before submitting the draft of their district review report to ESE.

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<sup>1</sup> In other words, as Level 3 is defined, districts with one or more schools that score in the lowest 20 percent statewide of schools serving common grade levels pursuant to 603 CMR 2.05(2)(a).

# Somerville Public Schools

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The site visit to the Somerville Public Schools was conducted from January 30 – February 2, 2012. The site visit included 34.5 hours of interviews and focus groups with over 75 stakeholders ranging from school committee members to district administrators and school staff to teachers' union representatives. The review team conducted focus groups with 8 elementary, 10 middle school, and 11 high school teachers. The team also conducted visits to a representative sample (8) of the district's 11 schools: Brown K-6, East Somerville (1-8), Healey (K-8), Kennedy (PK-8), Argenziano School at Lincoln Park (K-8), West Somerville (PK-8), Winter Hill Community (K-8), Somerville High (9-12). Further information about the review and the site visit schedule can be found in Appendix B; information about the members of the review team can be found in Appendix A. Appendix C contains information about student performance. Appendix D contains finding and recommendation statements.

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

Somerville is a city two miles north of Boston that occupies just over four square miles. With a population of 75,754 (as of the state 2010 census), Somerville is the most densely populated community in New England. With immigrants from all over the world, it is one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the country. In 2011-2012 almost one-third (31 percent) of its English language learners had been in the Somerville school district for fewer than two years. In 2011-2012 the students in the district were 37.5 percent white, 38.7 percent Hispanic/Latino, 13.0 percent African-American and 9.2 percent Asian. Low-income students comprised 69.3 percent of the students in the district, compared to 35.2 percent statewide.

Somerville has a mayor as its chief executive, and a board of aldermen is the city's legislative branch. The Somerville School Committee has 7 elected members and two ex officio members, the mayor and the president of the board of aldermen, with full voting rights. The superintendent of schools has been in place since 2005. He works with a leadership team that includes an assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and assessment, a human resources and diversity administrator, a finance director, a director of student services, a director of operations, and an elementary curriculum coordinator. The position of elementary curriculum coordinator was added in the 2011-2012 school year.

Somerville has 11 schools organized primarily as K-8 elementary schools with one high school. The schools are: Capuano Early Childhood Center (PK-K), Brown Elementary (K-6), East

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<sup>2</sup> Data derived from ESE's website, ESE's Education Data Warehouse, or other ESE sources, as well as the City of Somerville's website, at <http://www.somervillema.gov/about-somerville>.

Somerville Elementary (1-8), Healey Elementary (K-8), Kennedy Elementary (PK-8), Argenziano Elementary School at Lincoln Park Elementary (K-8), West Somerville Elementary (PK-8), Winter Hill Community (K-8), Next Wave Junior High (6-8), Full Circle High (9-12), and Somerville High (9-12). Two of the 11 schools (Next Wave Junior High and Full Circle High) are small and serve primarily special education students. Somerville is ranked as a Level 3 district since three of its elementary schools and its high school are Level 3 schools.

Somerville’s school enrollment decreased every year from 1999 to 2010, from 6,437 to 4,842. There were small increases in the student population in 2011 and 2012, to 4,855 and 4,877. Approximately 450 Somerville students attended charter schools in 2011, and at the time of the site visit there was a proposal for an additional charter school. The percentage of school-aged Somerville residents attending public school was 90 percent in 2010-2011, approximately the statewide percentage of 91 percent.

**Table 1a: Somerville Public Schools  
Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity & Selected Populations  
2010-2011**

Selected Populations	Number	Percent of Total	Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity	Number	Percent of Total
Total enrollment	4,855	100.0	African-American/Black	654	13.5
First Language not English	2,523	52.0	Asian	466	9.6
Limited English Proficient*	875	18.0	Hispanic/Latino	1,847	38.0
Special Education**	1,038	21.1	White	1,814	37.4
Low-income	3,317	68.3	Native American	7	0.1
Free Lunch	2,731	56.3	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	5	0.1
Reduced-price lunch	586	12.1	Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	62	1.3
<p>*Limited English proficient students are referred to in this report as “English language learners.”  **Special education number and percentage (only) are calculated including students in out-of-district placements.  Sources: School/District Profiles on ESE website and other ESE data</p>					

**Table 1b: Somerville Public Schools  
Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity & Selected Populations  
2011-2012**

Selected Populations	Number	Percent of Total	Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity	Number	Percent of Total
Total enrollment	4,877	100.0	African-American/Black	634	13.0
First Language not English	2,515	51.6	Asian	447	9.2
Limited English Proficient*	789	16.2	Hispanic/Latino	1,886	38.7
Special Education**	1,058	21.4	White	1,828	37.5
Low-income	3,378	69.3	Native American	5	0.1
Free Lunch	2,804	57.5	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	4	0.1
Reduced-price lunch	574	11.8	Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	73	1.5
<p>*Limited English proficient students are referred to in this report as “English language learners.”  **Special education number and percentage (only) are calculated including students in out-of-district placements.  Sources: School/District Profiles on ESE website and other ESE data</p>					

As Table 2 below indicates, the district’s total expenditures in fiscal year 2011 were \$96,860,440. In both fiscal year 2010 and fiscal year 2011, the amount of actual net school spending was above the required amount, and this was estimated to be true again in fiscal year 2012. In fiscal year 2011 the amount of expenditures from revolving funds and grants was \$12,974,191.

**Table 2: Somerville Public Schools  
Expenditures, Chapter 70 State Aid, and Net School Spending  
Fiscal Years 2010-2012**

	FY10		FY11		FY12
	Estimated	Actual	Estimated	Actual	Estimated
Expenditures					
From local appropriations for schools					
by school committee	47,759,033	47,462,734	48,677,466	48,115,125	50,421,183
by municipality	36,576,534	35,106,212	38,431,939	35,771,124	33,839,917
Total from local appropriations	84,335,567	82,568,946	87,109,405	83,886,249	84,261,100
From revolving funds and grants	---	11,916,505	---	12,974,191	---
Total expenditures	---	94,485,451	---	96,860,440	---
Chapter 70 aid to education program					
Chapter 70 state aid*	---	20,185,320	---	19,006,095	19,108,128
Required local contribution	---	47,404,010	---	48,121,353	48,819,464
Required net school spending**	---	67,589,330	---	67,127,448	67,927,592
Actual net school spending	---	71,887,810	---	73,514,274	73,491,019
Over/under required (\$)	---	4,298,480	---	6,386,826	5,563,427
Over/under required (%)	---	6.4%	---	9.5%	8.2%
<p>*Chapter 70 state aid funds are deposited in the local general fund and spent as local appropriations.</p> <p>**Required net school spending is the total of Chapter 70 aid and required local contribution. Net school spending includes only expenditures from local appropriations, not revolving funds and grants. It includes expenditures for most administration, instruction, operations, and out-of-district tuitions. It does not include transportation, school lunches, debt, or capital.</p> <p>Sources: FY10, FY11 District End-of-Year Reports, Chapter 70 Program information on ESE website (retrieved April 23, 2012).</p>					

## Findings

### Student Achievement

**In recent years student performance in the district has been low and flat, the proficiency gap with the state has increased, and student growth overall has not shown meaningful change.**

Over the last four MCAS test administrations, from 2008 through 2011, the percentage of district students scoring proficient or higher showed little variation, whether in English language arts (ELA) or in mathematics.

**Table 3: Percent of Somerville Students Scoring Proficient or Higher in ELA and Mathematics 2008-2011**

	2008	2009	2010	2011
ELA	50%	51%	51%	52%
Mathematics	41%	41%	42%	40%

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

In ELA, the district's percentage of students proficient or higher was 50 percent in 2008 and 52 percent in 2011. It varied by only one point up or down each year. In math, the district's percentage proficient or higher was 41 percent in 2008 and 40 percent in 2011, varying by only one or two points each year. The percentage of students achieving proficiency in math was approximately 10 percentage points below that in ELA. And, as can be seen from Tables C1 and C2 in Appendix C, the gap between the Somerville proficiency rate and the state proficiency rate in both ELA and math has increased since 2009 (from 16 to 17 percentage points in ELA and from 14 to 18 percentage points in math).

Interviews with teachers, principals, district administrators, and school committee members revealed a deep frustration that, despite their efforts, student achievement has not improved in recent years. District administrators reported encouragement in what they saw as improvement in student growth. However, while there may be some pockets of improved growth, Table 4 below shows that over the last four MCAS test administrations, from 2008 to 2011, the district's median student growth percentiles (SGPs) have been in the moderate range (40-59.9) and have varied little.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Please see the footnote on the first page of Appendix C for information on student growth percentiles. Student growth percentiles are a measure of student progress that compares changes in a student's MCAS scores to changes in MCAS scores of other students with similar performance profiles. Thus if a student is low-performing his or her growth is compared to that of other students across the state who are similarly low-performing.

**Table 4: Somerville Median Student Growth Percentiles in ELA and Mathematics  
2008-2011**

	2008	2009	2010	2011
ELA	43.0	42.0	47.0	47.0
Mathematics	47.0	43.0	45.0	45.0
Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website				

In ELA, the district’s median SGP was 43.0 in 2008 and 47.0 in 2011. In mathematics, the median SGP was 47.0 in 2008 and 45.0 in 2011. Only a difference from year to year of 15 points in median SGP is considered educationally meaningful (probably not due to chance); these slight changes up and down are not. .

The challenge here is to understand what the factors are that contribute to this flat student performance. Somerville is a district that has strengths to build upon. It has more than average resources, specifically a higher than average spending level per in-district pupil. This is reflected in low student to staff ratios for both administrators and teachers. In addition, over recent years there has been relative stability in administrative staffing. The same superintendent has been in place; and, until recently, few principalships have changed. The report findings that follow investigate the possible causes for the flat performance.

**Grade by grade, on the 2011 MCAS, the district had high percentages of students scoring Warning/Failing in math as compared to the state. Though the percentage of Somerville students scoring Warning/Failing in ELA was also higher in each grade than the state percentage, the difference between the district and state percentages was not as great.**

Table 5 below compares percentages of students with 2011 Warning/Failing MCAS scores in Somerville and in the state.

**Table 5: Percentages of Somerville Warning/Failing Scores Compared to State 2011 Mathematics**

Grade	Somerville	State
All grades	25	15
3	20	10
4	21	11
5	33	15
6	23	16
7	37	22
8	34	21
10	11	7
Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website		

At every grade level, Somerville has a higher percentage than the state of students at Warning/Failing on the 2011 Math MCAS; at Grade 5 the percentage of students receiving Warning/Failing was more than twice the state rate.<sup>4</sup> As is seen on Table 6 below, Somerville had higher percentages of students receiving Warning/Failing on the 2011 ELA MCAS than the state; here too Somerville’s students in Grade 5 received Warning/Failing scores at more than twice the state rate.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In a comparison of 2011 math performance with three other districts of similar sizes and similar percentages of low-income students, Somerville had a higher percentage of students from all tested grades scoring Warning/Failing in math (25 percent) than the Malden Public Schools and the Revere Public Schools (19 percent and 16 percent Warning/Failing respectively), and a lower percentage than the Salem Public Schools (27 percent).

<sup>5</sup> In ELA, Somerville again had a higher percentage of students from all tested grades scoring Warning/Failing in 2011 (13 percent) than the Malden Public Schools and the Revere Public Schools (12 percent and 8 percent respectively), and a lower percentage than the Salem Public Schools (15 percent). (See preceding footnote.)

**Table 6: Percentages of Somerville Warning/Failing Scores Compared to State  
2011 ELA**

Grade	Somerville	State
All grades	13	8
3	17	9
4	18	12
5	19	9
6	13	9
7	9	6
8	9	6
10	6	3
Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website		

However, the gap between the district’s ELA Warning/Failing rate and the state’s is not as wide as the math gap, with the differences decreasing to only three or four percentage points in grades 6, 7, 8, and 10.

As findings later in this report indicate, there has been no consistent math program in K-8 for a number of years. There is a district program for kindergarten through grade 5 and an adopted textbook series for grades 6-8, but interviewees revealed that in both cases the program or textbook was not consistently in use. Because of wide variations as to what is taught in math K-8, it is not possible to have a system of formative assessments to monitor student progress. This means that teachers have no measure of their students’ learning against standards. In addition, according to interviews, there is very little in the way of a program of tiered instruction in math for at-risk students. The absence of a consistent delivered math curriculum is a hindrance to the improvement of student mathematics achievement.

### **Leadership and Governance**

**Some subcommittees of the school committee discuss, review, and sometimes vote on educational and personnel matters that should be informed by expertise in the field of educational leadership and would best be handled by the superintendent. The superintendent would then present his decisions to the school committee for informational purposes and might choose to seek input from the public or from the school committee before making these important decisions.**

The school committee policy book, actions of some subcommittees, and actions of the school committee as a whole demonstrate several instances of the school committee and its

subcommittees taking on responsibilities that would be better managed by the superintendent.

Outdated school committee policies result in subcommittees taking on responsibilities that would be best handled by a superintendent, as the one hired by the school committee to be the chief instructional leader of the district, with the prerequisite expertise. School committee members noted during the review that in their official business there were long-standing policies that appeared to be vestiges from before the Education Reform Act of 1993. Several school committee members stated that they have no jurisdiction over much of what they discuss, for example, rearranging the organizational chart, approving job descriptions, creating timelines for the search process, and voting on certain hires. As an example, school committee policy GCF provides for interviewing by the school committee of all administrators over the rank of assistant principal. The school committee has taken some steps to address the inconsistency between existing policies and expectations for governance practices under the Education Reform Act. For example, until recently, the committee voted on principals, but the committee stopped voting after a principal who was appointed by the superintendent received insufficient school committee votes.

Subcommittee members have committed a significant amount of time to discussing or voting on matters that may be before them as the result of outdated school committee policies or as the result of some confusion about which responsibilities should be taken on by the superintendent. Several examples follow. The Educational Programs and Instruction subcommittee often votes on informational items that could be brought to the committee as a whole under the Superintendent's Report, as they do not require a vote from the school committee. Examples of subcommittee and school committee voting on educational matters include the 2010 School Improvement Plans, taking the responsibility in the fall of 2011 of determining how many languages the district should offer based on a requested parent survey, and making decisions on professional development in October, November, and December 2011 and January 2010. Decisions about School Improvement Plans, curriculum and instructional changes, and professional development are typically made by an educational leader who reports the information to the school committee as a whole during a public meeting, without the need for subcommittee involvement or a vote.

The Personnel subcommittee also makes decisions best made by the superintendent. For example, this committee has discussed principal hiring processes, for instance in its November 2011 meeting, and approved job descriptions, for instance in November of 2009. It also conducts administrator interviews, as in August 2011, and has approved contract amendments for an individual, as in the fall of 2009. The subcommittee sometimes votes in executive session rather than before the public, as in November 2009, and sometimes discusses individuals in executive session without proper notification to the individual, as in the fall of 2011.

The superintendent has done some work with the school committee to help them clarify their role. For example, in a school committee meeting of the whole on May 17, 2010, the committee was discussing the future of the Healey School. The minutes report, "[included] the legal references as to the School Committee's authority regarding this process. [The superintendent]

reported that the School Committee does not make programmatic decisions to be implemented by faculty. The School Committee does not develop, it accepts a recommendation from a group, for instance, the High School Curriculum Committee presents the Program of Studies for the School Committee to review and accept.” But more work is needed to update and clarify school committee policies and practices to make the best use of the time of school committee members and the superintendent. All parties involved would benefit from the thoughtful assignment of responsibilities based on the principles of the Education Reform Act, such as the superintendent having the lead responsibility for personnel and educational programs.

As Somerville is a district that has not seen a significant increase in student achievement scores in several years, it is important that the superintendent have the appropriate authority to improve student achievement. At the same time, as developing updated policy for the district is an area that belongs to the school committee, members need the time to refocus on this very important task and then follow these policies put in place for the benefit of the district as a whole.

**The district and staff have identified so many priorities that the key focus areas for improving student achievement are not shared districtwide, thus reducing the potential impact of the staff’s and schools’ collective efforts. For example, literacy is an understood priority at the elementary and high school levels, but there was little evidence that literacy was a priority at the middle school level.**

In interviews, the administrators and teachers of Somerville could not identify a small number of essential foci on which the important districtwide reform work in Somerville is based. Instead they listed a wide range of foci, many of them not overlapping. The District Improvement Plan (DIP) is a wide-reaching document containing five primary goals and 31 strategies. Only a few of the strategies were described by the staff as being “key focus areas” for the district, and different staff named different strategies as the basis of the district’s improvement work. All of the strategies named in interviews came from only two of the five goals in the DIP, “Goal 1: Achieve and sustain the highest levels of student achievement,” and “Goal 2: Enhance and sustain safe and healthy learning environments.”

Pertinent to the first two goals were key foci named by the superintendent: student safety and student learning. Many administrators, including a central office administrator and principals, named literacy as the focus area, which is one of the strategies under Goal 1. Every elementary principal agreed that balanced literacy is a focus at the elementary level. Elementary principals also named formative assessment, walkthroughs, and the use of coaches as important foci. Elementary principals all said that their Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) were instrumental in determining their focus of work this year to include such areas as balanced literacy, writing, best practices in literacy, students becoming proficient or advanced on MCAS, reading and writing across the curriculum, and math. Elementary teachers also cited literacy as a goal, particularly with respect to balanced literacy, readers’ workshop, and reading comprehension. They also cited assessment to improve instruction, the Investigations math program, project-based learning, TERC assessments, the new Massachusetts curriculum standards, and building instructional leadership teams as key priorities.

At the high school, curriculum leaders and administrators reported that literacy is a focus area, as well as ELA, math, school-wide assessments, and critical thinking. High school teachers also cited literacy as a focus, along with bullying, the Aspirations program, critical thinking, E-portfolios, the new Massachusetts curriculum standards, and Skills Plus.

Middle school teachers expressed unawareness of the district's focus, stating that each school's Instructional Leadership Team decides on its own focus. The named foci at the middle school level in various schools included vocabulary, looking at data, math, and ELA.

Coaches and department heads working at the elementary and high school level listed the widest range of focus areas for the district, including literacy, and also including strategies that overlapped and added to the focus areas named by other interviewees: developing common mid-year and final assessments, demonstrating critical thinking when reading and writing; meeting proficiency requirements in math; and standards-based instruction. The group also named other focus areas such as inspiring a quest for learning; writing K-8; college and career readiness, credit recovery; educating the whole child; offering a wide range of activities beyond the classroom; introduction of coaches to promote instruction; professional development; creating strong partnerships; greater coherence classroom to classroom; Investigations; completing curriculum documents; looking for a new curriculum in middle school math; the transition from grade 8 to 9; integrating technology; differentiating instruction; and using data to inform instruction.

The district teachers' association leadership reported the district focus to be literacy, and also articulation between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade, the grade 8 to 9 transition, and the teaching of career units in grades 6, 7, and 8. The association is also working towards the development of one to three innovation schools in Somerville. Its leaders are interested in exploring a school that is completely run by teachers with no principal and a shared decision-making model.

None of the staff interviewed named District Plan goals 3-5 as key district goals, or discussed any of the strategies as key to the district's improvement. The goals not identified as key were "Goal 3: Maintain a highly effective workforce, Goal 4: Maintain efficient and effective facilities operations, and Goal 5: Monitor the East Somerville Community School reconstruction project and maintain the East Somerville Community School at temporary locations at the Edgerly and Cummings Schools." Some of the strategies under these goals, particularly Goal 3, have a direct impact on student achievement—for instance "Increase diversity among staff and developing greater multicultural understanding" or "Strengthen alignment of Professional Development program and new teacher mentoring program with District and School improvement goals."

None mentioned the goals listed in the booklet, "New Teacher Orientation 2011-2012, Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment," which identifies five goals that the Somerville Public Schools will achieve by 2012, including to: Develop a universal, safe, enriching extension for the school day initiative in order to ensure all students have time for a full educational experience; Create a groundbreaking, exciting middle school instructional program; Increase inclusion opportunities for special education students; Establish a foreign language program before high school; and Develop greater multicultural understanding and increase staff diversity.

There are numerous written goals, and staff at all levels do not share a common understanding of what the district's focus is this year. The District Improvement Plan has so many initiatives that its potential as a guiding document for schools and as a plan that can have an impact on student learning has been reduced. Clear, concise direction can unite staff in working toward common goals with the greatest impact.

**The collective bargaining agreement between the Somerville Teachers Association and the Somerville School Committee is in many places unclear and outdated, leading to confusion on the part of both teachers and administrators as to what can and cannot occur in many day-to-day situations in the district.**

The Agreement between the Somerville Teachers Association and the Somerville School Committee has not been thoroughly revised for many years. For example, there is a reference to some language that was put into the agreement in the late 1960's. "All NDEA, NSF and other college courses in the teacher's subject area (excluding University Extension courses) taken after September 1, 1967, taken with prior approval of the superintendent or his/her designee, shall be recognized for credit beyond the bachelor's and master's degree for salary purposes." These opportunities no longer exist and have not been in place for decades.

Because of the lack of updating and the lack of clarity that exists in the agreement, the agreement is not reflective of the practices that are followed in the district. The review team found several instances where a person or group reported that they do not follow a particular part of the agreement any more. Some examples follow.

One item that the review team received varying information on was whether a principal, who was not doing a formal evaluation, could write notes when visiting a classroom for a short period of time. Principals stated in a leadership interview that they were not allowed to write anything when they are in classrooms, except when they are doing formal evaluations. Union leadership expressed a different point of view. The union leaders also stated that it would be reasonable for the administrator to take notes and share those notes with the teacher. The perception of the superintendent was that if a principal stays in a classroom for fewer than 20 minutes, that principal is not allowed to write anything, but can leave the room and write as much as he wants. Although not in the collective bargaining agreement, he stated that this practice has been in place. The review team found that this was not clearly understood, as different people, including a variety of teachers and administrators, had different ideas as to what could and could not be done in classroom visits other than formal observations.

Another item that causes confusion is the transfer policy for teachers. The collective bargaining agreement with teachers states, "On the fifth day after the positions have been posted, the remaining open positions shall be filled as follows: "If three (3) or more candidates who possess the certification specified by the principal for a vacancy have applied in a timely manner for a voluntary transfer to an open position, the principal must select from among those candidates." Principals expressed different points of view about whether this policy is still enforced, based on their experience. When the superintendent was asked about this item, he said that he found four years ago that the policy was out of date and not in alignment with current law. The teachers'

union president disagreed with that position. Overall, the review team found that there was a lack of clarity among administrators and teachers about whether this part of the contract was being or should be honored.

Another example of unclear language appears in the Agreement between the School Committee of Somerville and the Somerville Teachers Association, Unit A, Article XII, C, 1. This article in the Unit A agreement directs what should be done in a Unit B contract that no longer exists. It states, “When the employer decides to fill a vacancy in Unit A, or the former Unit B (SAA and principalships) as a promotional position, the vacancy shall be adequately publicized as far in advance as possible and the superintendent shall post it as either a temporary or permanent position. In the case of a Unit B position, such posting shall take place after completion of other personnel actions in Unit B, including lateral transfers to the same or comparable positions, demotions, excessing, or layoffs, but excluding promotions within Unit B, which shall be posted.” This language may be interpreted differently from how it was originally intended. The Unit A agreement contains language that has an impact on other agreements, i.e. Unit B, which is now the Somerville Administrators Association (SAA), but has not been revised to reflect the change. Further, each agreement should be independent of the other, rather than attempting to dictate the conditions of another agreement.

A collective bargaining agreement that is unclear and open to numerous interpretations is problematic to all who must adhere to it. Both the superintendent and the union president indicated that parts of the agreement are not followed. Unclear rules can lead to mistrust and confusion on the part of teachers and administrators. This mistrust and lack of clarity lead to different interpretations and, in the end, have an impact on what can be done to improve student achievement.

## **Curriculum and Instruction**

**Classrooms typically demonstrate several important elements essential to creating a climate conducive to learning. Positive student–teacher relationships were observed, teachers were well prepared and delivered content to students in a clear way, and there were opportunities for small group work or guided practice. Techniques that advance students to higher performance levels were not as frequent—such as through high-level tasks, activities that promote higher-order thinking, demonstration of high expectations, differentiation of learning activities, and wait time to make sure students at all levels master the next level of content.**

The review team conducted 81 classroom observations, 34 at the elementary level, 19 at the middle level, and 28 at the high school. Team members used an Instructional Inventory form with 35 indicators, which they scored either Observed or Not Observed. Although not all indicators are expected to be seen in a single observation, the observed indicators together provide a description of overall classroom practice. On the inventory, indicators are organized into two categories—organization of the classroom and instructional design and delivery.

### *Organization of the classroom*

Many of the important building blocks for effective instruction were in place. Significant strengths included:

- Students and teachers demonstrated positive and respectful relationships in 91 percent of the classes visited;
- Teachers were prepared, and materials were readily available in 99 percent of classes visited; and
- Teachers communicated academic content with clarity and accuracy in 81 percent of the visited classes.
- In 90 percent of all classes observed, students behaved according to rules and expectations. However, this was true at the middle school level in only 74 percent of observed classes.

However, although administrators in interviews emphasized the requirement for a learning objective in all classrooms, review team members found that learning objectives were communicated to students (clearly posted, explained, or referenced during the lesson) in only 62 percent of classrooms visited.

Further, high expectations for students were much more evident in the lower grades than in subsequent grade levels. Teachers set high expectations for learning and conveyed those to students in only 64 percent of observed classes. And there was a range in the frequency of observation of high expectations: they were seen in 79 percent of observed classes at the elementary level, 63 percent at the middle school level, and only 46 percent at the high school.

### *Instructional Design and Delivery*

The district's modal teaching was observed to be direct, whole-group instruction, followed by time for guided or independent practice, and small group learning. Elementary classrooms usually included direct instruction and guided practice. Middle school classrooms usually included direct instruction and small groups. High school classrooms usually included much direct instruction and some guided practice.

- Direct, whole group instruction was observed in 70 percent of classrooms visited, including 79 percent at the high school level, 68 percent at the elementary level, and 63 percent at the middle school level;
- There was some time for guided practice (students practicing together with teacher) in 58 percent of observed classrooms—74 percent of elementary, 53 percent of middle level, and 43 percent of high school classrooms;
- Independent practice (student has full responsibility for completing the task) was observed at some point in 44 percent of the classrooms visited.
- Small group/pair learning (students work together without direct instruction) was observed in 40 percent of classrooms for some portion of the observation. This was the

case in 32 percent of elementary, 58 percent of middle school, and 36 percent of high school classrooms.

Independent or group activities did not necessarily result in differentiated instruction. Students were observed participating in different or tiered activities based on academic readiness in only 21 percent of classes visited. Different activities based upon academic readiness were observed in 32 percent of elementary classrooms, 18 percent of classrooms at the middle school level, and 11 percent at the high school. The team did not see strong evidence that the district's focus on the analysis of MAP test results and consequent action planning resulted in differentiated instruction in classrooms.

Higher order tasks were observed much more frequently at the elementary level.

- Students examined, analyzed, or interpreted information in 59 percent of observed classrooms overall.

This breaks down to 74 percent of elementary, 63 percent of middle level, and only 39 percent of high school classrooms.

- Students evaluated/reflected on their own thinking, progress, and approach with 25 percent frequency overall, but in 38 percent of elementary, 26 percent of middle, and 7 percent of high school classrooms.
- Students generated questions (clarifying or new) related to the goals of the lesson in 20 percent of the classes visited, with approximately the same frequency at all grade levels.

Instructional pacing was a strength at the elementary school level only.

- Teachers used wait time to allow for responses in 74 percent of elementary, 63 percent of middle level, and 29 percent of high school classrooms (56 percent of the total number of classrooms observed).
- In 85 percent of classrooms overall, the lesson was paced in a way that allowed all students to be engaged. However, this indicator was observed in only 68 percent of middle school classrooms.

The team also made observations of the student activity set up during the classroom observation. Students used various means, orally or in writing, to represent their ideas and thinking in 42 percent of classrooms observed: 41 percent of elementary classrooms, 63 percent at the middle level, and 29 percent at the high school. This was a strength at the middle school level.

While the team observed strengths in instruction at all levels to build upon, the team found variations in the quality and rigor of instruction across the district. The team learned that expectations for students' learning are not always high, classroom work is infrequently differentiated to address student needs, opportunities for higher-order thinking are limited, and most instruction is teacher-directed. Students could use more opportunities to have their specific needs addressed through guided practice or in small groups.

**The district has made some progress in developing and more consistently delivering common K-12 curricula for English language arts and mathematics.**

Curriculum development and implementation are at varying stages at the high, middle, and elementary levels in the district, reflecting past efforts to implement common curricula across classrooms and schools.

*High School*

The high school has so far done the most work to write and implement a district curriculum. As part of its effort to meet the requirements of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), the high school has focused over the last several years on the development of curriculum binders. The result is sixty-six binders in all, one for each required course. These binders include the topics to be covered in a course, related learning outcomes aligned to the state standards, and a list of detailed activities and common mid-term and final exams. Social studies binders revealed efforts to make activities student-centered; and reading and writing activities and assessments are linked to the new Massachusetts curriculum standards. The English department is revising curriculum to include poetry and to ensure that every genre is represented in light of the new standards.

Department heads reported that these binders represent a significant step forward since prior to their development teachers had much less direction about what to teach in their courses. They also reported past practices of some teachers ignoring curriculum guides and teaching the course as they pleased. Next steps in curriculum development at the high school include developing formative assessments throughout the curricula to provide teachers with data on student progress. In addition, the recent NEASC report included a recommendation for the creation of essential questions that promote higher order thinking within the teaching of each topic. A high school administrator reported that teachers are now meeting by grade levels to further develop curriculum, but that progress on this work is slow. There is an urgent need for the work, and the scope of the work is significant; yet administrators report that limited teacher time is an obstacle for getting the work done in a timely manner.

*Kindergarten through grade 8*

At the time of the review, district curriculum for ELA and mathematics in grades kindergarten through 8 was not fully developed. The district uses a mix of textbooks, basal readers, and instructional programs, some newly introduced and some that had been in place over a long period. While the district may in the past have selected an instructional program for all students, teachers still exercised authority as to whether to implement the selected program or not. According to interviews with district level administrators, work is underway to update, focus, and enforce a common curriculum across elementary and middle school grades and schools. The intention was to have the district at that point at the beginning of the 2012-13 school year.

*Kindergarten through grade 8 Math*

According to interviews, the district adopted the Investigations program for mathematics instruction for grades K-5 ten years ago and trained teachers accordingly. At that point, teachers

had been using Scott Foresman Addison Wesley (SFAW) texts for elementary math instruction. While Investigations was the official adoption, SFAW texts remained in the schools, in part because of the recognition that to prepare students for the MCAS the Investigations program would need some supplementing, and interviewees reported that some teachers continued to use them for the major portion of their instruction, resulting in inconsistencies. There was little administrative intervention to prevent teachers from relying mostly on SFAW. Teachers have been making individual decisions concerning what to teach in elementary math, with no uniformity with respect to using Investigations math or SFAW. Although the district produced a math pacing guide in 2008 indicating that teachers were to use Investigations Unit Assessments as common formative assessments to measure student achievement, Investigations was not and still is not consistently used throughout the elementary classrooms. At the time of the review, because of the inconsistency in the use of the Investigations program, the district was unable to use the unit assessments in Investigations for formative assessment information, the expectation specified in the math pacing guide. To address this matter, the director of curriculum K-8 is now working with math teachers in grades 3-5 to develop appropriate formative assessments, based on the implementation of the single program Investigations. And there has been some clarification with principals and teachers to reinforce this.

In grades 6-8, teachers have been teaching math using the MacDougall-Littell series. This series represents a shift from the conceptually oriented Investigations program adopted by the district for use in grades K-5. The curriculum coordinator for grades K-8 is currently working with a team of middle school teachers to develop curriculum and deepen the instruction by selecting a middle school math text to replace the current one. The curriculum coordinator reports that they are striving to better align math practices between the elementary and middle school levels and to ensure that all eighth graders have taken enough algebra to prepare them for the high school. Then, over the summer, math teachers 6-8 will do what their counterparts in grades 3-5 have been doing during the school year. They will develop formative assessments appropriate for the newly selected text.

A key focus for math instruction at the middle school level has been the district's five-year effort to ensure all students learn algebra by 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The review team heard considerable discussion concerning this matter. The rationale for this has been that if all students come into the high school knowing algebra, high school math teachers will have the opportunity to properly prepare students for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade MCAS math assessment. Currently, all middle school students have some exposure to algebra (with the curriculum varying widely by school); but the high school still has identified the need to teach a full year of algebra at three levels – skills, basic, and honors. It is unclear whether the curricular requirements for all students will ensure sufficient preparation for the grade 10 MCAS.

#### *Kindergarten through grade 8 ELA*

In English language arts, the district is in transition to districtwide implementation of the instructional model balanced literacy, which had previously been implemented in some schools. To support implementation, the district has provided extensive professional development. In

addition, the director of curriculum K-8 has this year been working with elementary ELA teachers to develop balanced literacy units for implementation in classrooms. These will serve as curriculum models for teachers. Focus classrooms are also being established to serve as exemplars of effective implementation of balanced literacy. In the future teachers will be able to visit these classrooms to inform their own practice. Some effort has also been directed to the introduction of balanced literacy in grade 6, and the plan is to extend the model through grade 8. Prior to this, elementary teachers have been teaching English language arts through the use of a basal reader. Interviewees reported variation in the level of implementation of the balanced literacy, with some teachers still relying on the basal readers. One administrator mentioned that it was a difficult transition from the basal readers to balanced literacy, from whole class instruction to using interactive read-alouds, saying also that teachers' reliance on the basal readers had meant that there was not a clear connection to the core content in the curriculum frameworks. The plan, though, was to have completed the transition by 2012-2013.

In summary, there has been inconsistent curriculum delivery to Somerville students in English language arts and mathematics, especially at the elementary and middle levels. Inconsistency in curriculum implementation prevents the district from ensuring that students have the instruction needed to meet state standards and learn what they need to know and be able to do at each grade level. In K-5 math, the inconsistency in the use of Investigations has meant the inability to use Investigations unit assessments as formative assessments; the middle school math series that has been in use, MacDougall-Littell, has not fit well with Investigations; there is wide variation across schools in the algebra curriculum; and in ELA the district has not yet completed the transition from basal readers to balanced literacy. The district is working to address all of these areas. At the high school level, the most work has been done to make the curriculum more consistent, but much work remains to be done.

## **Assessment**

**The district is developing a powerful student information system with the potential to provide teachers with rich data for making instructional and assessment decisions. However, the system as it currently exists is limited by the amount of assessment information available, by variation in the emphasis principals place on data analysis, and by missed opportunities to use existing data through collaborative action plans and tiered instruction.**

Currently available on the Somerville student data system is a range of student assessment information. The system includes current and previous MCAS scores; Measurement of Academic Progress (MAP) results; Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS); Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA); and Massachusetts English Language Assessment – Overview (MELA-O). Each principal and teacher has online access to the information that pertains to his or her school or classroom. In addition, an MCAS Data Analyst produces reports from the database. Principals receive Class Reports for each classroom in their building and teachers receive a report for their own students. This may be a full report of recent

MAP testing results, or, as for teachers in the fall, MCAS results for students they taught the previous year as well as those for students in their current classrooms. And each of these reports has a color-coded system for delineating each child's strengths and challenges.

The district also is beginning to take advantage of the data system's capability to provide analysis of its raw data. Supported by this data analysis, the district will have the information needed to make data-based decisions. The MCAS data analyst invites queries to the database for which she crunches the numbers and provides data-rich answers. For example, the Title I Director, committed to making the best use of the after-school tutoring program, asked for information on which formats had proved most effective in the previous year's tutoring program. The specific questions were what size group was most effective, what length of session worked the best, and who the most effective tutors were. The analyst was able to produce information from the database that indicated that groups of 5-6 led by paraprofessionals and lasting approximately 12 weeks produced the best results. As a result, in the current year, tutoring groups were developed by the principals and the director of the after-school tutoring program that follow that pattern as much as possible. In another instance, a K-8 principal with some special education students included in mainstream classes and some in substantially separate classes asked what the data showed regarding the effectiveness of one or the other setting. The answer produced was that both settings were equally effective. A further instance occurred when the district requested and received an analysis of the SGPs for students at each proficiency level.

#### *Limited amount of assessment information*

However, the usefulness for teachers of the student information system as it now exists is limited by the scant amount of assessment information available in the district. For grades 3-8, the MCAS provides summative information annually. The DIBELS provides formative assessment information, but only in grades kindergarten, 1, and 2 as well as progress monitoring for struggling students in higher grades. At the K-8 level, the district is analyzing the MAP results and creating collaborative action plans to address students' needs shown by the analysis. However, MAP testing occurs three times per year with the final administration occurring in the late spring and so is not useful for making instructional decisions about student needs. The state standards regarding formative and benchmark assessments include the expectation that they occur 4 to 8 times per year.

The district is addressing the limitations of its current assessment system in several ways. At the K-8 level in 2011-2012, some classrooms are using the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment to determine student instructional and independent reading levels. Also in the 2011-2012, teachers in grades 3-5 are developing common end of unit assessments in mathematics; similar assessments will be developed for grades 6-8 during summer 2012. In addition, the district and its teachers are developing common units for ELA K-8 with accompanying assessments. Results from the end of unit assessments currently under development will become part of the student assessment database in the 2012-2013 school year. At that point, at the K-8 level, principals and teachers will have a richer array of assessments on which to make instructional decisions. At the high school, the student assessment system includes an MCAS

history of each student's testing as well as grade 10 ELA, math and science assessment results as each becomes available. In a separate effort, departments now have common summative assessments for midterms and finals for all courses. However, these assessments for a course such as algebra that is taught at 3 levels and in two formats vary by level. And in social studies, for example, there is a bank of common items that must be included at all levels for a course such as American History. Beyond those common items, however, social studies midterms and finals will vary as to content.

High school teachers and administrators report that departments discuss the MCAS and common assessment results and make curricular adjustments. The English department has begun work on developing formative assessments for periodic use to determine student progress in courses. In general, though, the development of common formative assessments for courses is only at the discussion stage, and the high school summative assessment results are not included in the student information system.

The heart of the work in every classroom, school, and district is the improvement of student achievement. And that work is best accomplished when those facilitating it have an understanding of students' overall achievement and their regular progress or lack of progress. A district needs a rich database of assessment information so that individuals at all levels—district, school, and classroom—have access to data to make instructional decisions.

#### *Variation in principals' focus on data analysis*

Teachers and coaches reported in interviews that the extent to which K-8 principals focus on data varies substantially from building to building. Some use professional development time to analyze MCAS results with teachers; some meet individually with teachers around assessment results; however, some direct little attention to assessment data, whether MCAS or MAP; and some rely on the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) to focus on data. At the high school, department heads report playing a more direct role in working with their departments to review and analyze MCAS and common assessment results. Frequently curriculum decisions follow this data review at the high school. For example, biology teachers increased their coverage of human physiology based on MCAS results. And math teachers pressed for inclusion of algebra at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade so that freshmen could then take geometry.

#### *Use of collaborative action plans optional for teachers*

In 2011-2012 for the first time, with increased availability of coaches and a newly appointed Director of Curriculum K-8, the district administration saw an opportunity for coaches and teachers to use grade level meetings to analyze MAP test results. The product of these meetings was to be a collaborative action plan to address student needs documented by the assessments. As the process is described in a memo from the K-8 curriculum director to the teachers, this action plan belongs to the teachers. Coaches do not play a role in overseeing its implementation. In addition, there is no formal mechanism for forwarding the action plan to the principal. The action plans present an opportunity for a teacher to design instruction around understandings gleaned from MAP data analysis. In practice, however, teachers may or may not design or implement instruction to address student needs revealed in MAP test results.

### *Little use of tiered instruction*

Finally, there is little in place in the district for implementation of tiered instruction at levels two or three in either ELA or math. Under tiered instruction, teachers use assessment data to determine which students need interventions beyond those available in the regular classroom to address the needs that data reveals. Reading teachers in K-8 schools are working with individual students with reading needs. But there is no systematic plan for determining which students need instruction beyond the Tier I classroom instruction and for delivering student interventions to address those needs. There is even less tiered instruction in math. In classrooms observed by the review team, there was little evidence of classroom practices that ensured students received instruction tailored to their level of need. The district recognizes the need to structure such instructional opportunities, but does not yet have a systematic plan to do so.

### *Conclusion*

The Somerville district has in place some of the elements of a strong assessment system—a database for collection of information, an analyst to interpret the data, up-to-date data entry, and easy access by appropriate staff. At the same time, however, the amount of formative assessment information available to teachers K–12 is limited. This is unfortunate since periodic formative assessment information enables teachers to shape and target their instruction. In this district, teachers have a relatively small amount of information with which to make instructional decisions in the course of a school year. DIBELS information is confined to grades K-2; MAP testing is at grades 3-9 but it only provides teachers with usable information on student progress twice a year (September and February). As a result, teachers have limited opportunities to adjust their instruction based upon an understanding of student needs. Limited formative assessment information leads to teachers making instructional decisions that are not sufficiently guided by data, a result to which the variation in principals’ focus on analyzing data and the optional nature of the collaborative action plans contribute.

## **Human Resources and Professional Development**

### **Principals and department heads assume limited authority for monitoring classroom instruction.**

When questioned in interviews, district-level administrators, principals, and coaches reported that it is the principal or high school department head who is responsible for monitoring instruction. The team learned that the superintendent has communicated to principals that they are the district’s instructional leaders and should spend half of their time in classrooms. Yet, unfamiliarity, past practices, and other obstacles interfere with an administrator’s performance of that role.

Principals and high school department heads agree that they are the instructional leaders in their buildings. Several reported they had been thoroughly oriented to this role during the National Institute for School Leaders (NISL) training principals attended soon after the superintendent arrived seven years ago. However, they also reported in interviews that the role is still somewhat

new to them. They discussed their need for support in that role and describe themselves as relying heavily on the coach provided by the district, who accompanies them on classroom visits and helps them structure the teacher conferences that follow. (They also reported that putting teachers on improvement plans is a relatively new phenomenon in the district, but is becoming a more common practice for teachers who need it.)

As of the 2011-12 school year, the district had six full time coaches, 3 in ELA, 3 in math. It is clear to the teachers and coaches that they are teacher colleagues and members of the same bargaining unit. Teachers work with them on a voluntary basis. They are working with teachers to improve instruction, but they do not play a supervisory or monitoring role.

The role of an administrator as instructional leader is played out largely in the formal evaluations that occur at a minimum twice a year every other year. This occurs because there is genuine confusion in the district among administrators and teachers as to the role an administrator plays when making a brief visit to a classroom. Teachers and principals indicate that a principal or department head in a classroom for fewer than 20 minutes plays a limited role. Although not in the contract, administrators adhere to a firmly established practice that they are not allowed to take notes. The superintendent confirmed this in an interview. They must wait until they have left the room to write anything down. Department heads and high school teachers report that department heads frequently look for an excuse to be in a classroom, whether to deliver something or to ask a question. As well teachers K-8 report that administrators visit classrooms for various reasons, such as looking for group work, or student engagement, but that the feedback after these visits is a “short, informal conversation.” Nothing is written down. This minimizes the importance of an administrator’s presence in classrooms. The constraints imposed upon these brief visits undercut the extent to which administrators directly and effectively monitor classroom instruction.

Monitoring classroom instruction to ensure the implementation of district programs and texts has not been an administrative practice for a number of years, although this is changing. For years K-8 administrators did not use their authority as instructional leaders to monitor teacher implementation of a mandated district math program. The director of curriculum K-8 is now working with teachers toward the use of formative assessments based on the implementation of the single program Investigations, with some clarification with principals and teachers to reinforce this. At the high school, department heads also report past practices of some teachers ignoring curriculum guides and teaching the course as they pleased. Now however, intensive curriculum work at the high school has led to the establishment of specific curriculum expectations that department heads report monitoring.

A missed opportunity mentioned in the Assessment finding above is that there is no administrative monitoring of teachers using collaborative action plans to drive their instruction toward student needs identified by data. In some schools, the plan is explicitly not shared with the principal, although this is not true in all schools. However, responsibility for implementation of the action plans falls strictly to teachers, with no administrative oversight—no opportunity for a principal to observe and monitor teacher use of the MAP data and the action plan to address

student needs. In a letter to the superintendent, the teachers' association presented questions about the use of the blank form provided by the district to the grade level teams for recording their collaborative action plans—five questions concerning the purpose of the form, its implementation, who retains the written form, and how the form will be used. The superintendent in his written response to the association clearly indicated that use of the form is not required and that the action plan remains with the teacher. Given this understanding of the use of the collaborative action plans, administrators do not have the opportunity to monitor teacher instruction designed in response to the analysis of assessment data.

Steps are being taken to train principals as instructional leaders and to use the teacher evaluation system to improve some teachers' instruction. However, administrators in the district face a challenge in providing teachers with leadership to improve their instruction. Past practice and expectations for principals' instructional monitoring limit supervisory effectiveness.

**The teachers' collective bargaining agreement is not adequate to clarify professional responsibilities in a new era of collective accountability for student learning.**

The SEA collective bargaining agreement has been in effect for decades (it expired in 2010, but was extended under an MOU) and contains long-standing articles that have not been updated each time the agreement is renegotiated. For example, Article XV section C references courses taken after September 1, 1967, and Article XXIX, section B was written in 1987, twenty-five years ago. Outdated articles such as these call into question the currency of the agreement.

In addition, some of the key collective bargaining agreement language dealing with instruction is ambiguous. Article V, J in the agreement requires non-professional-status teachers to have written lesson plans, but is silent about whether professional status teachers have to develop them as well. In interviews with district leaders, the review team learned that some professional status teachers interpret this silence to mean they have a choice as to whether to write lesson plans. The silence may be purposeful. But by its silence the agreement builds in opportunities for wide variation in teacher preparedness. This ambiguity is an unnecessary distraction to both management and labor.

Each school and program has its own way of planning and supervising lessons. In a review of evaluation documents, it was observed that some professional status teachers write lesson plans, but others do not. In the Center for Vocational and Technical Education department at the high school, there is a published anthology of model lesson plans for each Vocational and Technical discipline. There is no similar document for other departments. All district teachers are under the same collective bargaining unit, but they have different rules depending on their professional status or their assignment. The ambiguous language in the current agreement creates a wide variation in lesson planning and that leads to large variations in how instruction takes place in Somerville's schools, classrooms, and programs. The language of some articles, such as compensation/benefits and annual voluntary transfers, is followed. But the language in others, such as transfers resulting from shifting student populations, is not. The instructional context in the district has changed over time as new state-mandated requirements have taken shape and as a

new population of students has enrolled in the Somerville schools. The language of the collective bargaining agreement, however, is decades old, written at a different time and for a different era.

**School district policy GCF inappropriately provides for the school committee to interview principals and district administrators.**

The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 removed school committees from involvement in most hiring decisions beyond the hiring of superintendent and the district business manager. Although the superintendent indicated that he alone makes hiring decisions and that the school committee does not try to influence that decision, the practice of school committee members interviewing finalists for administrative positions raises concerns.

Providing for the superintendent to bring administrative finalists before the school committee for a pre-employment interview creates tension and role confusion for the superintendent, the school committee, and a potential pool of candidates. The school committee hires and evaluates the superintendent, and the school committee has a set of policies that the superintendent is compelled to follow. Within that set of policies the superintendent is required to bring finalists for principal positions before the elected body for a pre-employment interview (Policy GCF-II; 4) and to bring finalists for district administrator positions before it for interviewing if “required by law or requested by the School Committee” (Policy GCF-III; 3). If he does not comply and exercises what is in most cases his legal authority to hire without bringing candidates to a political body for interviews, he is insubordinate. If he complies with the policy, he is abdicating his exclusive right to hire while still taking responsibility for the results.

In the school committee minutes of August 29, 2011, there is a record of the personnel subcommittee’s interviews for a vacant administrative position. The minutes show that two finalists were interviewed. The minutes do not reflect the questions that were asked of the finalists or the responses they made to individual school committee members. The minutes do show that both candidates had positive reactions from the school committee members conducting the interview (both were “highly qualified” and school committee members were “very impressed” with both). This official evidence of the school board passing some kind of judgment on the qualifications of two finalists for an administrative position raises questions pertinent to best practices in hiring, for instance about the standards used as a basis for the questions and about an official record of the interview. The practice of requiring finalists for administrative positions to appear before the elected school committee before being hired by the superintendent has the potential to create distractions and deter qualified candidates, and it yields no clear “value-added” component to promoting student achievement in the district.

**The district’s practices for recruiting and selecting educators do not systematically focus on attracting and retaining well-qualified staff with skills and experiences aligned with district needs.**

Although the human resource selection function is well organized and supervised by qualified central office staff, the actual hiring is done by hiring managers who may or may not be hiring staff whose backgrounds, skills, and levels of experience are compatible with overall district needs.

Interviews with administrative staff established a clear need for teachers with certain strengths: multi-lingual capacity, training for teaching ELL students, ability to differentiate instruction, and proven success in teaching low SES students, as well as a deep understanding of how students learn and thorough training appropriate for the specific vacancy. School Committee Policy GCF states, “It is the responsibility of the Superintendent, and of persons to whom he/she delegates this responsibility, to determine the personnel needs of the school district and to locate suitable candidates. . . . The Superintendent also is responsible for developing and implementing appropriate personnel procedures designed to ensure the selection and appointment of the best qualified candidates available to professional staff positions.” However, according to information gained in interviews, system priorities such as those listed above are not regularly included in recruitment practices. These strengths already exist in many potential candidates for positions in the Somerville schools, but the district does not screen or interview candidates to determine their levels of competency in these areas. With no common descriptors of competency in the selection process, this model of selection leads to wide variations in instructional styles, instructional capacity, and ability to assess student learning.

The many educational needs of a changing population of incoming students are not reflected in districtwide recruitment and selection strategies for teacher candidates. While the applicant procedures meet the standards of acceptable human resource operations in school districts, district needs for particular qualifications may or may not be connected to the recruitment process. This hinders the district’s efforts to have patterns of recruitment and hiring that are responsive to the changing needs of the district as well as individual schools.

**Professional development in the district is robust. There is a missed opportunity because professional development has limited connection to performance evaluations, and the improvement of performance after participation in professional development events is not tracked.**

The array of professional development activities and events in the Somerville School district is replete with opportunities for earning credits for lane changes, for learning new approaches to instruction and supervision, and for participating in learning communities. Some opportunities are job-embedded and some involve workshops offered outside the district. The district allocates four full days per year for professional development beyond the school day plus 22.5 hours distributed throughout the year.

A number of the district’s professional development initiatives are in literacy. It has hired a consultant to help staff learn new methods of teaching balanced literacy. The intent is to adopt a “train the trainer” model and build internal capacity for “job-embedded” professional development in the elementary schools. The high school has its own professional development committee and professional development plan, but teachers in interviews suggested that most professional development takes place among teachers during regular department meetings. The review team was told of plan by the administration and the teachers’ association to form a joint committee to address professional development issues.

As a result of its numerous professional development opportunities, the professional development costs in the district in fiscal year 2010 were about 1½ times the spending on professional development across the state both when calculated per teacher and when calculated per student. The district approved 275 workshop days outside of the district from September 2010 through January 2011; there was no record of focus for these workshops. The business manager indicated in an interview that there are substantial costs for substitute teachers to free up teachers and others to attend these professional development activities, workshops, and conferences. In addition, the district provides small groups of teachers with planning time during the school day.

The team examined randomly selected personnel files to establish whether there was a connection between the array of professional development in place and recommendations in evaluations for specific professional development. The team looked at 44 personnel files for teachers and 47 personnel files for administrators. Less than 5 percent of administrator evaluations had specific suggestions to improve performance. Less than 10 percent of teacher evaluations contained formal recommendations for professional development. The team also observed in reviewing evaluation documents that there was no systematic tracking to determine if professional development or other recommendations were implemented and whether such implementation affected student performance.

The district is supporting considerable professional development both in- and out-of-district. The budget reflects a considerable financial investment in various forms of professional development, the costs of which are systematically tracked. Yet in a random sampling of the evaluation system, it was clear that administrators infrequently make specific suggestions to teachers regarding professional development. Reasons that teachers pursue particular professional development beyond that embedded in their daily work are not clear. Nor is there evidence that the district follows up on professional development events to determine their impact on instruction. The connections between professional development and teacher performance are unclear. Without making those connections, Somerville is missing an opportunity to deepen its efforts toward its goal of maintaining a highly effective workforce.

## **Student Support**

**The district maintains a wide array of community contacts and educational programs to support students.**

Somerville Public Schools has a wide array of programs for students and the community. Every K-8 school offers students who need extra academic help the Supplemental Education Services (SES) program, managed in-house by the academic after-school coordinator. Title I students whose MAP and MCAS scores show a need for extra help are ranked according to their level of need and offered after-school help twice a week, for one hour and fifteen minutes. Ninety percent of the students are tutored in ELA; math is offered if qualified tutors are available. However, students may work on math with computer programs such as Fastmath, River Deep,

and Do the Math, some of which are also available for use during the school day. This year the SES program joined with ACE-IT, an in-house tutoring program for non-Title I students; the format is the same for them as for Title I students. In addition, the program also handles outside tutoring services such as Sylvan Learning. In all, 300 Title I, 150 ACE-IT and 75 outside tutoring program students are serviced.

The programming in this extended day program includes enrichment activities, opportunities to practice a sport, and a block of time devoted to homework. The staff tries to connect with teachers in the case of students such as those in the special education and ELL programs who need to work on particular lessons. The program also runs during school vacations and summer break. It is a fee-for-service model, but families that qualify may pay reduced rates or receive a voucher for free services. The district also runs a variety of summer schools for ELL students, incoming kindergarten students, new K-8 students, and at-risk incoming ninth grade students.

The district also offers Unidos, a dual immersion English and Spanish program that services approximately 44 students per grade. Grades 1 through 8 of the Unidos program are housed at the two locations of the East Somerville Community School.

Parents register their children for school at the Parent Information Center (PIC). In addition to the usual intake procedures, testing and placement for ELL students, the PIC has served as a resource for non-English speaking parents, offering information on finding city services and departments. The PIC director also manages translation services for the district. School documents are routinely translated into Spanish, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole. Each language has a signature color that is used for every brochure and flyer so parents can find the desired language easily. Translators in these languages, often more than one, are sent to each PTA meeting. The PIC also has a file of translators for other languages spoken in the district and can provide those services for school meetings when requested.

The PIC director also serves as the homeless liaison. The district has a number of shelters for families who are the victims of domestic violence. Since busing is not provided for in-district students, students from these homeless families will generally be placed in the neighborhood schools. However, transportation is provided for those homeless families who came from another district and wish to keep their children in their original schools. The district also has links to Cradles to Crayons, an agency for the needy in Brighton that provides needed clothing and other supplies to families. The liaison also makes sure that homeless or formerly homeless children who qualify for McKinney Vento scholarships are apprised of this opportunity, and she writes a letter to confirm their status.

The district provides special services to ELL students through the Welcome and Guidance Center at the high school. The office is located at the front of the building, across from the main office. It is a resource for ELL students and their families, providing tutoring, guidance services, and follow up for at-risk students, and is the home base of the ELL paraprofessionals.

The current ELL director is also manager of the Somerville Family Learning Collaborative (SFLC). This program reaches out to families whose first language is not English. It provides courses that bring families in contact with the school, including ESL courses for adults during

the school day and informative meetings about health, the schools, and other topics. As a result of the program, parents of ELLs are brought into the schools to participate in their child's education.

The district has assigned several staff members to work with students who have issues with attendance, the courts, or academics, and who may be at risk of dropping out. The director of student services not only supervises the attendance officers K-8 but also maintains contact with the police and fire departments. He gives training on bullying prevention and approved restraints, maintains contact with Cradles to Crayons, and is the district liaison to the justice department and mental health service providers used by the district. At the high school, the Student Study Team places students with a redirect counselor. Redirect teachers use studies to work with students on academic and school-related issues. When necessary, they have contact with the court, attendance officers, and outside agencies.

The high school also has a night school for adults that sometimes assists students, especially seniors, with credit recovery. The Somerville Community Adult Learning Experiences (SCALE) program is specifically for adults pursuing a basic education, GED, and ESL instruction.

In addition, the district has been able to secure grants and educational connections with universities such as Northeastern and Tufts. It has a number of other initiatives in the planning stages, such as providing healthy food to students and safety initiatives.

Finally, it was clear to the review team that Somerville has a number of dedicated staff members committed to working with the diverse population of Somerville and to supporting the varied social, academic, health, and safety goals of the city. Also, a large number of parents are active and vocal in their school's PTA's. These parents are capable and willing to advocate for the causes they believe are essential to providing their child with the best possible education. They reported they felt fortunate to live in such a multicultural, multilingual environment. At the same time, it has been difficult to engage the parents of ELL students in the regular PTA.

Somerville Public Schools has encouraged and supported an array of programs that reach out to the community and provide assistance.

**The effectiveness of academic supports for high-risk populations is hindered by inconsistent practices and programs.**

The district has a highly diverse population and prizes its position as a multilingual, multiethnic urban center. Layered atop the diverse population, the educational framework has not worked to the benefit of high-risk students.

*Needs of ELL students and students with disabilities*

The ELL student population of the district constituted 18 percent of all students in 2010-2011 and constitutes 16 percent in 2011-2012. From 2009 to 2011 the percentage of students scoring at Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment (MEPA) Level 1 or 2 (the lowest levels) declined from 25 percent to 19 percent, meeting the state percentage of 19 percent. In those same years the percentage of ELL students scoring proficient on the MEPA increased, from 30 percent

to 33 percent, which is still slightly below the state percentage in 2011 of 38 percent. However, the percentage of ELL students making progress on MEPA in 2011 was 62 percent, which compares favorably to the state percentage of 58 percent. This data shows encouraging trends.

However, Table 7 below shows a consistent, substantial academic achievement gap between ELL students in Somerville and their peers in the state. With the exception of the mathematics proficiency rate, which was 15 percent in 2011 as compared to 13 percent in 2009, percentages were lower in 2011 than in 2009. At the same time, with the exception of the percentage scoring 2 or above on ELA open response items, the state percentages rose each year from 2009 to 2011.<sup>6</sup>

**Table 7: Somerville and State ELL MCAS Proficiency Rates and Scores of 2 or above on Open Response Questions**

**2009-2011**

	2009		2010		2011	
	<b>Somerville</b>	State	<b>Somerville</b>	State	<b>Somerville</b>	State
ELA MCAS proficiency rate	<b>12%</b>	19%	<b>5%</b>	22%	<b>8%</b>	23%
Math MCAS proficiency rate	<b>13%</b>	21%	<b>11%</b>	24%	<b>15%</b>	25%
Percentage averaging 2 or above on Open Response Items - ELA	<b>25%</b>	32%	<b>14%</b>	28%	<b>13%</b>	28%
Percentage averaging 2 or above on Open Response Items – Mathematics	<b>24%</b>	29%	<b>20%</b>	31%	<b>22%</b>	33%

Source: District Analysis and Review Tool for English Language Learners on ESE website

<sup>6</sup> In a comparison of 2011 ELL performance with three other districts of similar sizes and similar percentages of low-income students, Somerville had lower percentages than two districts (Malden and Revere) of ELL students scoring proficient or above and averaging 2 or above on Open Response items; its percentages were higher than or equal to those of the third district, Salem.

- Malden’s 2011 ELL proficiency rates were 20 percent (ELA) and 32 percent (math); its percentages of ELLs averaging 2 or above on Open Response questions were 31 percent (ELA) and 40 percent (math).
- Revere’s 2011 ELL proficiency rates were 17 percent (ELA) and 23 percent (math); its percentages of ELLs averaging 2 or above on Open Response questions were 29 percent (ELA) and 31 percent (math).
- Salem’s 2011 ELL proficiency rates were 8 percent (ELA) and 8 percent (math); its percentages of ELLs averaging 2 or above on Open Response questions were 12 percent (ELA) and 9 percent (math).

Special education students, a second high-risk subgroup, account for 21 percent of all Somerville students. As shown by Table 8 below, their MCAS performance shows a declining pattern.

**Table 8: Somerville and State Special Education MCAS Proficiency Rates and Scores of 2 or above on Open Response Questions 2009-2011**

	2009		2010		2011	
	<b>Somerville</b>	State	<b>Somerville</b>	State	<b>Somerville</b>	State
ELA MCAS proficiency rate	<b>19%</b>	29%	<b>17%</b>	29%	<b>17%</b>	31%
Math MCAS proficiency rate	<b>14%</b>	21%	<b>14%</b>	21%	<b>11%</b>	22%
Percentage averaging 2 or above on Open Response Items - ELA	<b>33%</b>	36%	<b>24%</b>	32%	<b>23%</b>	34%
Percentage averaging 2 or above on Open Response Items – Mathematics	<b>27%</b>	32%	<b>25%</b>	32%	<b>22%</b>	32%

Source: District Analysis and Review Tool on ESE website

Between 2009 and 2011, the proficiency rates of special education students drifted lower in ELA and in math. At the same time, the percentages of students averaging 2 or above on Open Response questions dropped. Except for the percentage of students averaging 2 or above on Open Response questions in ELA, the comparable state rates rose very slightly or stayed the same during this period.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> In a comparison of 2011 special education performance with three other districts of similar sizes and similar percentages of low-income students, Somerville had lower proficiency rates for students with disabilities than two districts (Revere and Salem) and higher rates than one (Malden). Its percentages of students with disabilities averaging 2 or above on Open Response items were lower than those percentages in two of the districts (Malden and Revere) and higher than those percentages in the third (Salem).

- Malden’s 2011 special education proficiency rates were 16 percent (ELA) and 10 percent (math); its percentages of students with disabilities averaging 2 or above on Open Response questions were 25 percent (ELA) and 24 percent (math).
- Revere’s 2011 special education proficiency rates were 27 percent (ELA) and 12 percent (math); its percentages of students with disabilities averaging 2 or above on Open Response questions were 37 percent (ELA) and 24 percent (math).
- Salem’s 2011 special education proficiency rates were 22 percent (ELA) and 12 percent (math); its percentages of students with disabilities averaging 2 or above on Open Response questions were 20 percent (ELA) and 16 percent (math).

During school year 2009-2010, the most recent year of data available to the review team, 64.3 percent of special education students participated in full inclusion (in the general education classroom for at least 80 percent of the day). This exceeds the state rate of 57.0 percent. By contrast, a smaller percentage of district special education students participated in partial inclusion, 5.5 percent versus the state rate of 20.8 percent. The second most frequent mode of special education instruction in the district was substantially separate instruction, which was the case for 18.2 percent of the population, higher than the state rate of 15.4 percent. These figures cause some concern. A majority of special education students are in the regular classroom; however, those with moderate to severe disabilities spend a much-reduced amount of time there. This situation creates an environment that is less than optimal for these special education students. This may be due to insufficient support for these students available in regular classes. The review team observed relatively few paraprofessionals or co-teachers in the classroom. In addition, regular education teachers at the K-8 level reported in interviews that there is little time set aside within the school schedule for teachers to plan instruction with the special education teachers and paraprofessionals who work with them in their classrooms.

During the last several years, both the special education and ELL departments began mainstreaming their students. But there is limited support offered to these students in the mainstream classrooms, support they may well need. In addition, when these two high-risk groups are exposed to curriculum and instruction in the regular classroom, it occurs with a mainstream student population that has made little progress on either ELA or math MCAS between 2008 and 2011 (see Table 3 in the first Student Achievement finding above).

Research tells us that the educational achievement of special education students and ELL students improves with exposure to the mainstream curriculum and with integration with their peers. Generally, the presence of special education and ELL students in the mainstream classroom requires curriculum accommodations, perhaps a class co-taught by the regular and special education teacher, or the assistance of a trained paraprofessional, as well as time for all instructional personnel to plan lessons together.

In the case of ELL students, research in second language acquisition reveals that once students have the basics of language, they advance their language acquisition by learning language in context and in association with peers who speak that language. Of course, ELL students constantly run into obstacles as they try to understand the new language. The scaffolding that allows them to participate meaningfully in mainstream classes is known as sheltered instruction. This type of instruction provides accommodations such as vocabulary support, graphics and images to assist in the comprehension of spoken and written language, working with like-language peers more advanced in their acquisition of English, a combination of spoken and written directions and instructions, and the communication of language objectives in addition to learning objectives. Tiered or differentiated instruction also helps students at the lower end of English proficiency learn the essential facts of a lesson while the remainder of the class explores additional aspects, moving through the essentials at a faster rate of speed. This method of

instruction has gained favor because it assists not only ELL students, but also special education and mainstream students who need scaffolded instruction.

*Inconsistent implementation of practices and programs*

A look at the larger picture of instruction in Somerville and systemic culture may shed further light on the barriers to improving instruction and services for high-needs students. Many teachers have received some category training for sheltered English instruction. The district encourages this training and pays teachers to take it. Teacher interviews reveal that most teachers have received two of the four categories of training. District documents report that only twenty-nine teachers have received all four trainings. However, classroom observations show that few teachers employ common SEI strategies. For example, although some classrooms posted a learning objective, few classrooms posted language objectives. Review team members did not observe many examples at any level of instruction of word walls, pairing of like-language students, use of graphic organizers and pictorial displays, or differentiated instruction. Some of these common classroom practices are also of great assistance to students with learning disabilities. In general, as described in the above finding on instruction, the review team in its classroom observations saw infrequent differentiation to address students' needs, despite some professional development for teachers in differentiation. It appears that the district does not hold teachers accountable for implementing the professional development initiatives prioritized by the district, supported by research, and necessary to educate students well.

Variation in curriculum and programming in the regular education classroom adds another dimension of difficulty for ELL and special education students. In interviews, administrators and teachers reported variation in the level of implementation of the new balanced literacy program, with some teachers continuing to use basal readers. In addition, interviewees indicated that some math teachers continue to rely on the old Scott Foresman math series that was replaced by Investigations ten years ago. In grades 6, 7, and 8, the algebra curriculum varies widely by school. Middle school math teachers report being unhappy with the McDougall Littell series available to them and say they may only use it as a reference, basing more lessons on their own sequence. Seventh and eighth grade math teachers have not had an opportunity to meet with each other regularly or with a math curriculum person so there is little consistency across schools. In fact, in most schools, because there is only one middle school math teacher, there is no one to confer with in the building. As a result, there is inconsistency: not all schools offer a full year of eighth grade algebra, and some may offer very little algebra, although the district expects 9<sup>th</sup> graders to arrive at the high school knowing algebra. These variations in curriculum certainly impede the progress of regular education students. Special education and ELL students, already challenged by the material, are particularly vulnerable to the inconsistencies in the curriculum delivered.

Common planning time could afford teachers the opportunity to address some of these curricular inconsistencies. However, teachers reported that not all schools have common planning time built into their schedules, and the collective bargaining agreement prohibits teachers from being required to attend a meeting on the half-Wednesdays, when there is only a half-day of school. A

few teachers who want to meet to plan lessons together are not able to do so, nor is the principal able to call such a meeting.

All of this has begun to change with the arrival of a K-8 curriculum person who is working with coaches and teachers to standardize what is taught. He is also working with the upper elementary teachers to select a math series that meets their needs, including accessible language and opportunities for differentiated instruction.

As students move to the high school, the high-risk ELL and special education students must accommodate to the high school structure, which is homogeneous grouping in classes. Students with poor MCAS scores or scant algebra backgrounds are frequently tracked into skills level English courses and the skills level algebra course, Algebra 1a and 1b. These skills levels continue in geometry and in all grades of the English Department course of studies. Interviewees argued that skills level courses meet the Massachusetts curriculum standards “on some level,” but Twenty-first Century Skills, Common Core, and other current educational thinking encourage higher expectations for all students. Skills level courses run counter to this imperative.

Students who fail MCAS in grades 7 and/or 8 do not receive separate support. Support is offered within the classroom as teachers incorporate MCAS-like questions and prompts as part of the regular curriculum. High-risk students must wait for targeted support until grade 11, when they become eligible for an MCAS prep course after failing the 10<sup>th</sup> grade ELA or math MCAS. These students are also candidates for the voluntary afternoon tutoring and vacation sessions that are offered.

### *Summary*

The district has not had in place a fully developed and implemented curriculum or an instructional program to support it; rather, the K-8 schools in particular reflect a mix of new and old curricula and strategies. The lack of a consistent and articulated curriculum for ELA and math from K to 8 hampers the education of special populations who are being educated in the mainstream classroom. The district does not have a philosophy of differentiation and sheltering that is applied consistently from grade to grade or from school to school. In the K-8 schools, teachers say that they do not have time to plan for inclusion classes. Differentiation and sheltered instruction are not the norm at the high school where homogeneous grouping, including the existence of a skills track, is used in place of curriculum accommodations. The result is programming that can hold back high-risk students from achieving higher aspirations.

## **Financial and Asset Management**

**Good relationships and collaboration, fostered by the district’s open and well-documented budget development process, have led to consistent strong financial support of the schools by the city.**

The chairman of the Board of Aldermen and the mayor both serve on the school committee, providing them considerable information about the schools as well as the opportunity to have

input into school decisions. Both the mayor and the superintendent described a collaborative approach to funding the school budget; for example, they meet regularly to review revenue projections and worked out a plan to fund contract settlements after negotiations were completed. The city's financial support of the schools is strong. The fiscal year 2011 expenditure per in-district pupil for the district was \$15,627, higher than the state average of \$12,907 and the median of \$11,226 for similar-sized districts (districts with from 4,000 to 4,999 students). Net School Spending data for the district indicates that it has been consistently above the level required by the state over the past few years by 6 to 22 percent. The district also has relatively more leaders and staff than districts generally have—in 2010 the ratio of students to district and school administrative and instructional leaders, including instructional coaches, was 99:1 and the ratio of students to teachers was 12.4:1. (The equivalent state ratios in 2011 were 113:1 and 13.9:1.)

The city has approved major renovations to schools, most recently the East Somerville Elementary School, Somerville High School, the Healey School, the Argenziano School at Lincoln Park, and the Edgerly School. The city has collaborated with school committee members, the superintendent, and the Department of Public Works supervisor to produce a five-year capital plan for the city. It includes high school projects and a reconstruction of East Somerville Elementary School, all approved for fiscal year 2012; these projects total \$38,649,239.

The city's strong financial support has counteracted reductions in Chapter 70 state aid to education, including a major cut of 20 percent in fiscal year 2004. Since 2007 a new Chapter 70 allocation formula has set target aid shares of foundation budget by considering community property per capita and household income. By this formula, Somerville is entitled to a smaller share of foundation budget as state aid than it had been receiving based on the historical baseline aid formula, and the percentage Chapter 70 aid constitutes of its foundation budget has been gradually decreasing toward that target aid share, from 38.2 percent in fiscal year 2007 to 32.8 percent in fiscal year 2012.

The budget process begins in October with principals confirming current levels of staffing and providing initial input regarding needs for their schools, and city officials meeting with the superintendent regarding Department of Revenue Cherry Sheet and other revenue projections. The business manager attends school council and PTA meetings to get a sense of each school's needs. The administrative team then reviews budget proposals from principals and other sources and prioritizes them into three tiers of new requests, sending a preliminary budget to the school committee in February. Budget meetings presenting iterations of the budget to the school committee's Finance and Facilities Subcommittee, and meetings with city officials regarding adjustments to revenue projections, continue from February through the spring. In June the school committee holds a public hearing and votes the budget. The superintendent then presents the budget to the Board of Aldermen for their approval by the end of June. School committee members described their own input into the budget; one member stated that he had proposed an additional million dollars of line items, of which approximately \$600,000 was finally incorporated into the budget.

The budget document itself is clear and comprehensive and includes supporting material such as the superintendent's letter and presentation slides, changes in revenues categories, and current enrollment, class sizes, and staffing. Initiatives with new cost implications are described, such as high school building needs, instructional coaches, credit recovery for high school students, support for the Choice/Healey School unification, after-school offerings, K-8 foreign language and music staffing, and expansion of the pre-K SMILE program. Staff reductions are listed, including, in the budget reviewed, elementary (5.0) and high school (1.2) teachers and reduced staffing for the Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experiences (SCALE). Among the most significant of the initiatives with new cost implications is implementing more special education programs to bring back out-of-district students as well as reduce future out-of-district placements in the schools. (Administrators reported bringing about five out-of-district students back to the district.)

The budget document includes not only the local appropriation request, but an accounting of outside funds such as grants and revolving funds, with the line items supported from these sources, so it provides a complete picture of the district's funding and proposed expenditures. According to End-of-Year Financial Reports, the district receives \$6 to \$7 million in grants each year, and while much of these are entitlement grants, the district also employs a grant writer who works with principals on specific grants for services they would like to implement in their schools. District grants have funded programs such as technology, Italian, and childhood health initiatives. Administrators said that careful management of grant and circuit breaker funds allowed the district to avoid a steep reduction in funding when federal stimulus grants no longer offset Chapter 70 reductions in 2011.

District administrators, school committee members, and city officials and administrators all reported that they were satisfied that the budget process is transparent and inclusive. City officials described working with the superintendent on the budget as a team approach. A clear benefit of this is support by the community and city officials for the school budget. Most recently, the voted fiscal year 2012 budget showed an increase of \$811,956 (1.7 percent); though this would normally be a level of increase below present level spending, city officials explained that they expected to increase the budget by a million dollars to support salary increases based on salary levels recently negotiated with the district's employees. The city's strong support of the schools is linked to the transparency of the budget process, its inclusiveness, and the resulting trust among stakeholders.

**The district and the city manage school finances with attention to monitoring and control procedures and to possible cost saving measures. There is considerable integration of city and school services for the schools.**

The district uses the city's MUNIS financial software and its payroll service. The combined school and city oversight of requisitions, contracts, invoices and payroll works smoothly, according to both school and city administrators. The MUNIS system provides electronic requisitions with automatic control of over-spending, and monthly reports to principals and the school committee on available balances to prevent overspending. Purchasing requisitions are

approved by both district and city officials. Invoices are approved by the school principal or other administrator to verify receipt of the goods and services, then by the school business manager and the school committee's subcommittee for finance and facilities, and then by the city auditor for final approval and payment. Principals get reports on open purchase orders so they can be closed when possible to free up funds for other purposes.

Similar controls are in place for payroll. The human resource office prepares a list of employees for verification by principals in the fall, double checks salary levels based on education and experience, and prepares weekly and biweekly payrolls with additional payments for extra time, coaching, etc. submitted by appropriate administrators and approved by the business manager, chairman of the school committee, and the mayor. A paper and electronic trail is maintained to ensure accountability and accuracy. Administrators noted that the human resources office compares payroll projections to budget beginning in the fall, with more frequent review in the spring to monitor available balances in payroll accounts. Team members who examined payroll and expenditure financial records in the school business office confirmed these procedures. The management of school funds has consistently kept district budget expenditures under budget in fiscal years 2009 – 2011.

The district and the city work together in various ways to manage services and expenditures in a cost-effective way. Examples given include collaborative bidding for food supplies, paper, and other items, participation in the GIC health insurance program (supported by school staff) for a savings of \$3 million in school charges (confirmed by the FY11 End of Year Report) and refinancing of city debt in 2005 and 2008. School and city also cooperate on the cleaning and maintenance of the schools, the responsibility of the city Department of Public Works, with satisfactory results; a work order system allows principals and other administrators to request maintenance services as needed. City officials outsourced custodial services for the schools, saving overtime and other personnel costs while improving cleaning, especially at the Winter Hill School and the high school. As of fiscal year 2011, maintenance costs for the schools were above average. Team members visited the schools and found some showing the effects of age and in need of updating, especially the high school and the Brown and Winter Hill schools.

The district has made technology savings, for instance by monitoring printers and copiers and by use of a Virtual Desktop Infrastructure (VDI) to reduce hardware costs. It has reduced busing, has become an approved provider of Supplementary Educational Services (SES), increasing the number of participants from 70 to hundreds, and has strengthened in-district special education programs to reduce out-of-district costs. However, the district has been losing students to charter schools, with another one possibly opening soon, which sends funds out of the district that are difficult for the district to compensate for by reducing costs.

The mayor reported on city initiatives such as Shape Up Somerville and Summer Promise, which are intended to improve childhood health and reduce obesity and to provide recreational and social support services from school, city, and local agencies for Somerville children. He praised the assistance and support the city has received from school administrators on these initiatives.

The district monitors expenditures carefully and cooperates with the city in effective financial control systems. These careful financial management practices along with continued efficiencies contribute to transparency and good management in the district as well as its consistent ability to keep expenditures within available revenues. As mentioned previously, district and city officials have collaborated in many effective ways; good working relationships and mutual trust are evident. The collaboration has had a positive effect on management of resources and the maintenance and renovation of school buildings.

## ***Recommendations***

**The school committee, working with the superintendent, should shift its focus of attention to a primary focus on its important role in policy making, oversight of the budget, and evaluation of the superintendent. The school committee should reshape policies and practices that might lead subcommittees and the committee as a whole to spend time on issues that are best left to the superintendent and his staff, such as issues of personnel and educational programs. The school committee should also re-evaluate its subcommittees and retain only those that are aligned with the school committee’s most effective focus.**

Section 37 of Chapter 71 of the Massachusetts General Laws gives the main powers and duties of a school committee as follows: “The school committee in each city and town and each regional school district shall have the power to select and to terminate the superintendent, shall review and approve budgets for public education in the district and shall establish educational goals and policies for the schools in the district consistent with the requirements of law and statewide goals and standards established by the board of education.”

The school committee as a whole and its subcommittees sometimes take on matters that do not fall into any of these three areas and that are best left to the superintendent or his staff—for instance when interviewing finalists for administrative positions, voting on an amendment to an administrator’s contract or on professional development, or determining what courses or subjects should be offered. These decisions should be the responsibility of the superintendent, as the one hired by the school committee to be the chief instructional leader of the district, with the prerequisite expertise. He is the one who is responsible for most hiring in the district and for developing the plan for improved student achievement in the district. Such decisions should be brought to the school committee as information only to keep the committee informed of how the superintendent is managing the district.

It is suggested that the superintendent work in cooperation with the chairperson of the school committee to help each of the members understand his or her role and responsibility as a school committee member. It is further recommended that the school committee seek assistance to maximize its time so that it can refocus its meetings on important school district governance issues. In the course of this refocusing, the committee should re-evaluate its subcommittees—for instance the Educational Programs and Instruction Subcommittee and the Personnel Subcommittee—and review and revise its policies.

G.L. s. 71, s. 37, quoted in part above, gives important guidance concerning the responsibilities of school committees. School committee members should be advocates for the students, understand the use of data, and focus meetings on how to work toward high achievement for all students. With more attention from the school committee on policy, particularly around high student achievement, the superintendent will have more support to make important changes in the district that will improve education.

**The superintendent and his administrative staff should work together to define a small number of essential foci that everyone will work on to improve student achievement in the Somerville Public Schools.**

The complexity and detail of the District Improvement Plan, with its five goals and 31 strategies, does not lend itself to all staff being able to identify a small number of essential foci on which the important reform work in Somerville is based. Staff interviewed named a broad range of different initiatives without a clear consensus on which strategies were the key priorities districtwide. A strength to build upon is that literacy was an understood priority at the elementary and high school levels, although it was not a clearly articulated priority at the middle school level.

After a great deal of research, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has developed the following theory of action for accelerating district improvement:

If a . . . district can define a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning, execute well-defined initiatives with a relentless focus on implementation, and systematically monitor the impact of those initiatives to inform mid-course corrections, outcomes for students will be dramatically transformed.

Somerville has not shown significant growth in student achievement in several years. It should define a narrow set of strategic objectives and then concentrate all resources on doggedly promoting those objectives.

For example, professional development should be used expressly for the purposes of promoting those strategic objectives. As many as 275 individual workshop days were approved for outside of the district for the period from September 2010 to January 2011. There was no record of focus for these workshops. Research has shown that one-day workshops are very often ineffective in influencing practice in a district. Professional development needs to be planned, focused, and deliberate, with appropriate monitoring and evaluation, to have a positive effect on student achievement. Making an explicit alignment between professional development offerings and the narrowed set of foci would be the next step.

Communication of these objectives to all stakeholders will be key. All teachers and administrators in the district should be able to clearly articulate the identified strategic outcomes and know what is expected of them in working toward them. With a keen focus on a few important strategic objectives, Somerville will be able to develop a District Improvement Plan that is a map toward school improvement.

**The collective bargaining agreement between the Somerville Teachers Association and the Somerville School Committee should be thoroughly revised to reflect the work that must be done to improve student achievement in a Level 3 urban school district.**

The collective bargaining agreement between the Somerville Teachers Association and the Somerville School Committee has not had a thorough revision since the 1960s. Many parts of the contract are unclear or outdated, leading to confusion on the part of both teachers and

administrators as to what is and is not allowable in many day-to-day situations in the district; for instance, it is unclear whether professional status teachers may opt not to develop lesson plans, and it is unclear under what circumstances a principal may take notes in a classroom when not doing a formal evaluation. The agreement does not reflect the usual responsibilities in a school district in this era of teacher accountability for student learning.

The agreement should be rewritten not only to align the district's evaluation system with the new Massachusetts model system for educator evaluation, but also to redefine the roles and working conditions necessary for teachers and administrators in a school district where in recent years student performance has been low and flat, the proficiency gap with the state has increased, and student growth overall has not shown meaningful change. A collaborative effort between the superintendent and teachers association representatives to come to agreement on what is needed for teachers to have a positive impact on student achievement should be the basis for a strong and viable collective bargaining agreement.

**The district should ensure the use of differentiated instruction in classrooms, expand the range of teachers' instructional techniques, provide teachers with guidance on raising expectations for students, and increase teachers' ability to elicit higher order thinking from their students. Key to these improvement efforts are clear expectations for teacher performance and administrative supervision, carefully tailored professional development, and focused time by administrators in their role as instructional leaders.**

Interviews with personnel in the district, with teachers, principals, district administrators, and school committee members revealed a deep frustration that, despite their efforts, district student achievement has not improved in recent years. District administrators reported encouragement in what they saw as improvements in student growth. However, while there may be some pockets of improved growth, a look at median student growth percentiles in the district overall indicates modest but not significant changes both up and down.

The review team's observations in 81 district classrooms showed instructional challenges. Expectations for student performance across the schools were not high, particularly at the high school, with high expectations being observed in 64 percent of all classes visited and 46 percent of high school classes visited. The team observed differentiated instruction to address the range of student needs 21 percent of the time. Whole group instruction was the favored instructional technique, occurring in 70 percent of the classes visited, with small group learning observed for some portion of the time in 40 percent. There was limited evidence of higher order thinking: students examined, analyzed, or interpreted information in 59 percent of the classes visited; and students evaluated/reflected on their own thinking, progress, and approach in 25 percent of classes visited. Finally, students used various oral and written means to represent their ideas and thinking in 42 percent of classes visited overall.

Improving the quality of instruction in the district will require that it address several issues raised in the findings of this report. Expectations concerning teacher performance and administrative supervision must be explicitly defined and the ambiguities contained in the last collective bargaining agreement with teachers removed. Also, teacher professional development must be

carefully tailored to the needs of district students as established through the district's work in defining a small number of foci for all district personnel to work toward. And finally, though it may be new to some of them, administrators must fully assume and carry out the role of instructional leader with the confidence that in so doing they are acting in the best interest of students.

**The district should continue its work in developing common K-12 curricula for ELA and math and continue to work to ensure that teachers are delivering it consistently.**

At the time of the review the high school had done the most work to develop and implement a district curriculum; teachers were meeting by grade levels to do further work on curriculum, and there was a plan to develop formative assessments throughout the curriculum to provide teachers with data on student progress.

At the elementary and middle school levels, work was underway to update, focus, and enforce a common curriculum across grades and schools. In math, the district was working to address the inconsistency in the use of Investigations in kindergarten through grade 5 and develop formative assessments in grades 3-5; to develop middle school math curriculum and select a new math textbook; to better align math practices between the elementary and middle school levels; to ensure that all eighth graders have taken enough algebra to prepare them for high school; and to develop formative assessments for middle school math. In ELA, the district was working to complete the transition to balanced literacy by providing extensive professional development; developing balanced literacy units for implementation in classrooms; and establishing focus classrooms to serve as exemplars of effective implementation

The district is working to counter a previous culture in which some high school teachers did not use curriculum guides and made individual decisions without guidance; some elementary teachers continued to use old texts for math instruction even though Investigations had been purchased and adopted ten years ago; and teachers had developed a reliance on whole-class instruction using basal readers in ELA, without a clear connection to the core content in the curriculum frameworks and leading to difficulty in transitioning to balanced literacy. Now, intensive curriculum work at the high school has led to the establishment of specific curriculum expectations that department heads report monitoring; there has been some clarification with principals and teachers to reinforce the implementation of one K-5 math program, Investigations; and the district expects teachers to have completed the transition to balanced literacy by the 2012-2013 school year.

The district should continue to develop complete common and aligned curricula for all grades in ELA and math and must continue to follow through to ensure that teachers implement the approved curricula. Only then can the district have confidence that its students are being taught what it has decided is most appropriate for their success and that it has a system in place that will lead to improved student achievement.

**The district should continue making strides to expand the assessment information available in its student information system.**

The district has made important strides in establishing a student information system for the collection, dissemination, and analysis of student assessment data. The system's database includes the MCAS, MAP, MEPA, and MELA-O scores available for each student. Staff at the district, school, and classroom levels have online access to the assessment information in the database pertinent to their level of responsibility, and a skilled data analyst is available to provide analysis of that information.

However, the information in the database as it stands now is of limited usefulness for those responsible for the improvement of student achievement. MCAS scores represent summative assessment data. DIBELS provides formative assessment information only for students in kindergarten through grade 2, along with progress monitoring for struggling students in higher grades. The district is analyzing MAP results and creating collaborative action plans to address the student needs indicated, but MAP testing, given three times a year and useful for indications of student progress over the course of the year only in October and February, does not provide teachers and their supervisors with the rich data they need to make meaningful adjustments in instruction. The high school administers common mid-year and final exam assessments in all courses. However, this information, while useful, is summative in nature and does not provide a teacher with data on student progress over the course of a semester. Also, this information is not available on the student information system. In K-8 schools and in the English department at the high school, work is underway to remedy this situation and develop much-needed formative assessments, but further work is needed. It is urgent that this work come to completion across all grades and departments and that all the resulting assessment information be collected for easy access in the student information system. Increased availability of formative assessment data will mean that teachers and their supervisors have access to a rich array of information that will enable them to target instruction to address demonstrated student needs, leading to improved student achievement.

**Principals and department heads should assume more responsibility for monitoring the instruction of teachers and providing them with useful feedback and guidance through the supervisory process, not just through evaluation.**

For a period of several years, district proficiency rates and median student growth percentiles (SGPs) have shown little or no improvement. Administrators, teachers, and school committee members have expressed perplexity as to why student achievement in the district has not been improving given the amount of effort expended for that purpose. One contributing factor is that principals and department heads are not monitoring the instruction of teachers under their supervision sufficiently, though this is a responsibility they assume as instructional leaders in their schools.

There are a number of reasons for the monitoring being insufficient. In interviews, principals reported that their role as instructional leaders was still somewhat new to them and said that they

relied on the support of the coach who regularly accompanies them as they visit classrooms and confer afterward with teachers. Also, while a key factor in any instructional leader's effectiveness is a supervisory emphasis on the use of available assessment data to structure classroom instruction, interviewees reported considerable variation as to principals' focus on the use of data. In addition, there was confusion among teachers and administrators surrounding an administrator's informal, brief (less than 20 minutes) classroom observation. Although the collective bargaining agreement does not expressly state this, the practice has evolved that administrators may not take any notes during a brief observation. This practice significantly limits a principal or department head's ability to function as an instructional leader by interacting with teachers frequently and effectively around their observed instruction. Finally, ambiguous language in Article V, J of the collective bargaining agreement—which requires non-professional-status teachers to have written lesson plans for review by their principal, but is silent on whether professional status teachers have to develop them—has resulted in the interpretation of the language by some professional status teachers as meaning that they have a choice as to whether to write lesson plans. Some do not write them.

A specific instance of K-8 principals not being given a role in monitoring instruction in classrooms occurred in 2011-2012 when coaches and grade level teams met to review MAP test results and formulate a collaborative action plan to address student instructional needs. The teachers' association wrote to the superintendent with questions about the development and use of the action plans. When the superintendent responded to the teachers' association's concerns, he indicated that use of the form is not required and that the teacher retains the action plan. The review team found that in some schools the principal does not have access to the action plans. It is apparent that teachers are in charge of whether or not they make use of the student assessment information available to them to address student needs by means of the collaborative action plan; the involvement of administrators is not required.

Not only do administrators find the role of instructional leader somewhat new and vary in how much they focus on the analysis and use of data, because of district policy or practice principals and department heads have limited opportunities to monitor teacher instruction. The situation in Somerville has been one in which teachers are in control of what they teach and whether they use data to modify their instruction. (See discussion of prior culture in Somerville in recommendation on common K-12 curricula above.) Only when policy and practice are clarified and instructional leaders can fully assume the authority to monitor classroom instruction will the district take full control of the improvement of student achievement.

**The district should make a more concerted effort to actively and deliberately recruit and select teachers with the qualifications needed in Somerville.**

Interviews with administrators in Somerville showed a clear need for teachers with certain strengths, such as multi-lingual capacity, training in teaching ELLs, and ability to differentiate instruction. However, the district does not screen or interview candidates to determine their level of competency in these areas. As a result, its new hires may or may not have the background, experience, and skills that correspond to district needs.

Somerville should develop a district recruitment plan that includes aggressive strategies to seek out candidates who have demonstrated the competencies sought by the district. These candidates would already possess the kind of skills that the district needs to meet its student achievement goals. In the course of this effort, the district should also design common screening and interview guides that reflect district priorities, for use by those involved with screening and interviewing.

Implementation of this strategy will help ensure that well-qualified candidates from inside and outside of the system are available for consideration when vacancies occur. It will also standardize screening and interviewing protocols that will be aligned with district needs, not just the needs of a particular vacancy. Aggressive recruitment of teachers and other professional staff with the qualifications Somerville needs to improve teaching and learning, along with screening and interviewing procedures that aim toward hiring those teachers, will result in Somerville maximizing the ability of its professional staff to improve student achievement.

**The district should prioritize professional development that best supports improved instruction, aligning professional development costs with training strategies that are in turn aligned with the greatest improvement in instruction and student performance.**

Recent (fiscal year 2010) professional development costs in the district are about one and one half times state spending, whether calculated per teacher or per student. Although all professional development events and processes are systematically tracked from an accounting perspective, there are no official records that reflect the return on the investment in professional development—its impact on individual performance. In addition, in its review of personnel files for administrators and teachers, the team saw recommendations for professional development in only a small proportion.

Once the district has decided on a narrow set of strategic objectives to accelerate student learning, as discussed in the second Leadership and Governance recommendation above, it should go through a zero-based budget cycle with its professional development funds. Within collective bargaining agreements and state and federal training requirements, the district should assign resources to professional development events and programs that are aligned with the district's strategic objectives for teaching and learning and the needs of professional staff as determined by performance evaluations. (As it aligns its educator evaluation system with the new Massachusetts model, the district should take advantage of the opportunity presented to develop and implement professional development that prioritizes the educator needs identified through the goal-setting and evaluation process.) The district should then follow up with an evaluation of each professional development event or program to determine what impact it has had on staff performance and thus on student learning.

The team learned that the administration and union are planning to form a joint committee to address professional development issues. This committee should consider these suggestions, which are aimed at helping the district arrive at cost-effective professional development that is responsive to the most pressing needs of the district and its staff.

**The district should ensure that tiered support strategies, improved supervision, adequate planning time, and intervention during the school day are consistently in place, in order to improve learning and achievement for its high needs populations.**

The district has several large populations of students with more challenges than most. These high needs populations are low-income students at 68 percent of Somerville students, students with disabilities at 21 percent, and ELLs at 18 percent (out of a population of students whose first language is not English of 52 percent). Since these population groups do not all overlap completely, it is reasonable to say that a substantial majority of the population faces particular challenges. Although instruction should be planned with this in mind, classroom observations revealed that differentiation and sheltered instruction are not the norm in the district's classrooms despite evidence of professional development in these areas. Nor are tiered strategies. At the high school level homogeneous grouping, including the use of a skills track, is used instead of curriculum accommodations.

The district has made some progress on curriculum development and in making sure all staff are teaching the current curriculum chosen by the district, particularly since the arrival of a K-8 curriculum coordinator, but the curriculum is not yet fully developed or consistently delivered, and is not articulated in all areas. Consequently, the district does not yet have fully in place common understandings of what students will learn, a situation that is particularly difficult for these high needs populations. And because not all schools have common planning time built into their schedules, and under the collective bargaining agreement teachers may not be required to attend a meeting on Wednesdays, when there is a half-day of school, the opportunities to work on curriculum are limited.

The district has a wide array of support programs for students, and a number of dedicated staff members committed to working with the diverse student body in Somerville and to advancing the varied social, academic, health, and safety goals of the city. Most support efforts, however, are currently concentrated during after-school and vacation tutoring sessions. Most intervention for elementary school students occurs after school during the tutoring sessions. High school students are not eligible for an MCAS prep course until after they have failed the MCAS exam in grade 10. They are also then eligible for after-school and vacation practice.

In order to address these concerns and improve achievement for all learners, it is suggested that the district consider the following steps:

- Focus district efforts on implementing sheltered and tiered instruction, as well as curriculum accommodations, in all classrooms. The district has made efforts in this regard. Teachers have received some category training and professional development in differentiation. The purpose of these teaching tools is to make it possible for all students to access the curriculum, meet higher standards, and succeed in developing 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Common Core thinking skills.
- Continue to train principals to provide the teacher supervision that ensures that district priorities and curricula prevail in the classroom and that teachers are supported in improving their instruction.

- Charge principals with structuring the school day to include common planning time as well as time for teachers to plan for co-taught inclusion classes, working with the teachers' association if necessary to consider what time may be dedicated to common planning.
- Offer intervention during the school day to students who are not meeting standards. Provide supplemental support for 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students who previously failed MCAS exams.

In addition, as part of supporting teachers with differentiating instruction for students with disabilities, the district should

- Evaluate the adequacy of the staffing (for instance, co-teachers or paraprofessionals) provided to support Somerville students with disabilities in inclusion placements. The district might also consider whether limitations on the amount of support available for students in inclusion placements have resulted in a higher proportion of its students with disabilities being placed in substantially separate settings than is the case statewide (in 2010, 18.2 percent compared with 15.4 percent of state students with disabilities).

Staff members expressed a clear desire to help their high-risk students, but conditions are not yet in place to facilitate their doing so. As it increases the amount of structured common planning time available to work on curriculum and instruction, improves supervision from administrators, and puts more focus on implementing sheltered and differentiated instruction and providing intervention during the school day, the district will be putting many of the necessary conditions in place to help district staff make a difference in the lives of all their students.

**In order to make the best use of resources, the district should:**

- **continue its efforts to use its financial resources in more cost effective ways;**
- **make sure that its budget is fully aligned with the small number of strategic objectives the superintendent and his administrative staff have prioritized, by repurposing its existing financial or staff resources to achieve those objectives;**
- **plan strategic abandonment of initiatives and programs that are not aligned to its core priorities or that evidence has shown do not advance those priorities significantly.**

The district has taken several cost saving measures. The DIP includes a strategy to expand the appropriate inclusion of students with disabilities, including by creating in-house special education programs to bring out-of-district students back to the district, and the district has already made progress on this goal. Increased mainstreaming of students and bringing students back in district from out-of-district placements require additional district supports for those students, but the cost is offset by lower self-contained classroom or out-of-district costs. In addition, the district has cooperated with the city in supporting major savings in employees' benefit costs and in shared support programs for children; continued collaboration along these lines can continue to create efficiencies along with better coordinated programs for children.

Continued efforts to find cost effective measures in these areas can help free funds for education in spite of pressures limiting funding such as Chapter 70 reductions and charter school charges.

The district is concerned with the cost of students who attend charter schools. Continuing the strategy in the DIP to inform the community about improvement initiatives in the school system has the potential to keep students and to attract charter students back to the district, increasing funds available to the district.

Additional savings may be possible by consolidating and focusing programs and positions. The district has an above average number of administrators for its size, and some programs, such as support services, after-school programs, and community outreach and adult education might benefit from coordination. The district has already implemented some efficiencies, such as the reduction of administrative expenses for the adult education program and increased participation in the after-school program. A study of programmatic and administrative efficiencies could help the district continue to reduce related administrative and other costs. The study might consider the consolidation of programs and services and of various administrative tasks and might suggest ways to coordinate and focus services while reducing the number of administrators. Finally, maintenance costs for the schools are somewhat higher than average, and a study of maintenance and energy costs has the potential to save expenses.

In addition to cost-saving efforts, the district should make sure that the allocation of its funds is aligned with the small number of strategic objectives the district leadership prioritizes, as indicated in the second Leadership and Governance recommendation above. (See also the last recommendation under Human Resources and Professional Development for zero-based budgeting of professional development funds based on those few strategic objectives.) In the course of reallocating its financial and staff resources to achieve those objectives, the district should also end initiatives and programs that are not aligned with its core priorities or not effective in accomplishing them.

By reallocating its resources as necessary to support its objectives sufficiently, the district will be ensuring not only that costs are controlled but also that funds are being spent in the most productive way possible to improve student achievement in the district.

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

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The review of the Somerville Public Schools was conducted from January 30-February 2, 2012, by the following team of educators, independent consultants to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Dr. Nadine Bonda, Leadership and Governance

Dr. Alenor Williams, Curriculum and Instruction

Patricia Williams, Assessment and Review Team Coordinator

Dr. Thomas Johnson, Human Resources and Professional Development

Dr. Katherine Lopez Natale, Student Support

Dr. George Gearhart, Financial and Asset Management

## Appendix B: Review Activities and Site Visit Schedule

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### District Review Activities

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

- The review team conducted interviews with the following Somerville financial personnel: Finance Director, Director of Operations, Supervisor of Accounts. The review team conducted interviews with the following members of the Somerville Public Schools School Committee: chair, three members.
- The review team conducted interviews with the following representatives of the Somerville Teachers Association: president, two representatives.
- The review team conducted interviews and focus groups with the following representatives from the Somerville Public Schools central office administration: Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Director of Curriculum K-8, Special Education Director, Director of English Language Learners, MCAS Data Analyst, Student Services Director, Director of Human Resources, Director of Operations, Finance Director.
- The review team visited the following schools in the Somerville Public Schools: Brown (KG-06), East Somerville (1-8), Healey (K-8), Kennedy (PK-8), Lincoln Park (K-8), West Somerville (K-8), Somerville High (9-12).
- During school visits, the review team conducted interviews with school principals and teachers. The team interviewed 8 elementary teachers, 10 middle school teachers, and 11 high school teachers.
  - The review team conducted 81 classroom visits for different grade levels and subjects across the 8 schools visited.
- The review team analyzed multiple sets of data and reviewed numerous documents before and during the site visit, including:
  - Data on student and school performance, including achievement and growth data and enrollment, graduation, dropout, retention, suspension, and attendance rates.
  - Data on the district's staffing and finances.
  - Published educational reports on the district by ESE, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), and the former Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA).

- District documents such as district and school improvement plans, school committee policies, curriculum documents, summaries of student assessments, job descriptions, collective bargaining agreements, evaluation tools for staff, handbooks for students/families and faculty, school schedules, and the district's end-of-the-year financial reports.
- All completed program and administrator evaluations, and a random selection of completed teacher evaluations.

## Site Visit Schedule

The following is the schedule for the onsite portion of the district review of the Somerville Public Schools, conducted from January 30 – February 2, 2012.

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
<p>January 30</p> <p>Orientation with district leaders and principals; interviews with district staff; review of documents; interview with teachers' association; Somerville High School classroom observations.</p>	<p>January 31</p> <p>Interviews with district staff, principals, department heads, coaches, counselors; classroom observations (Somerville High School); review of personnel files; teacher focus groups; focus group with parents; interview with teachers' association.</p>	<p>February 1</p> <p>Interviews with city personnel, district administrators, coaches, principals, program coordinators; classroom observations (Winter Hill, Kennedy, West Somerville, East Somerville, Healey); interviews with school leaders; school committee interview.</p>	<p>February 2,</p> <p>Classroom observations (Argenziano, East Somerville, Brown); follow-up interviews; team meeting; emerging themes meeting with district leaders and principals.</p>

## Appendix C: Student Performance 2009–2011

**Table C1: Somerville Public Schools and State Proficiency Rates and Median Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs)<sup>8</sup> 2009-2011 English Language Arts**

Grade	2009		2010		2011	
	Percent Proficient	<i>Median SGP</i>	Percent Proficient	<i>Median SGP</i>	Percent Proficient	<i>Median SGP</i>
All Grades—District	51	42	51	47	52	47
All Grades—State	67	50	68	50	69	50
Grade 3—District	48	NA*	51	NA*	44	NA*
Grade 3—State	57	NA*	63	NA*	61	NA*
Grade 4—District	32	32	33	29	34	36
Grade 4—State	53	50	54	50	53	51
Grade 5—District	43	34	42	41	47	48
Grade 5—State	63	50	63	50	67	50
Grade 6—District	52	54	51	55	53	55
Grade 6—State	66	50	69	50	68	50
Grade 7—District	47	45.5	54	49	56	52
Grade 7—State	70	50	72	50	73	50
Grade 8—District	64	48	60	55	65	52
Grade 8—State	78	50	78	50	79	50
Grade 10—District	70	41	64	50	68	39
Grade 10—State	81	50	78	50	84	50

Note: The number of students included in the calculation of proficiency rate differs from the number of students included in the calculation of median SGP.

\*NA: Grade 3 students do not have SGPs because they are taking MCAS tests for the first time.

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

<sup>8</sup> “Student growth percentiles” are a measure of student progress that compares changes in a student’s MCAS scores to changes in MCAS scores of other students with similar performance profiles. The most appropriate measure for reporting growth for a group (e.g., subgroup, school, district) is the median student growth percentile (the middle score if one ranks the individual student growth percentiles from highest to lowest). For more information about the Growth Model, see “MCAS Student Growth Percentiles: Interpretive Guide” and other resources available at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/mcas/growth/>.

**Table C2: Somerville Public Schools and State  
Proficiency Rates and Median Student Growth Percentiles (SGPs)  
2009-2011 Mathematics**

Grade	2009		2010		2011	
	Percent Advanced/ Proficient	<i>Median SGP</i>	Percent Advanced/ Proficient	<i>Median SGP</i>	Percent Advanced/ Proficient	<i>Median SGP</i>
All Grades—District	41	43	42	45	40	45
All Grades—State	55	50	59	50	58	50
Grade 3—District	50	NA*	53	NA*	40	NA*
Grade 3—State	60	NA*	65	NA*	66	NA*
Grade 4—District	37	46.5	32	36	27	37
Grade 4—State	48	50	48	49	47	50
Grade 5—District	40	42	42	43	40	40.5
Grade 5—State	54	50	55	50	59	50
Grade 6—District	48	43	42	42	49	57
Grade 6—State	57	50	59	50	58	50
Grade 7—District	23	40	35	43	33	47.5
Grade 7—State	49	50	53	50	51	50
Grade 8—District	31	46	30	55	35	46
Grade 8—State	48	50	51	51	52	50
Grade 10—District	60	40	60	48	61	46.5
Grade 10—State	75	50	75	50	77	50

Note: The number of students included in the calculation of proficiency rate differs from the number of students included in the calculation of median SGP.

\*NA: Grade 3 students do not have SGPs because they are taking MCAS tests for the first time.

Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

**Table C3: Somerville Public Schools and State  
Composite Performance Index (CPI) and Median Student Growth Percentile (SGP)  
for Selected Subgroups  
2011 English Language Arts**

	Somerville Public Schools			State	
	<i>Number of Students Included</i>	CPI	<i>Median SGP</i>	CPI	<i>Median SGP</i>
All Students	2,284	78	47	87.2	50
African-American/Black	323	66.9	40	77.4	47
Asian	212	84.4	54.5	90.2	59
Hispanic/Latino	878	71.7	48	74.2	46
White	842	86.8	47	90.9	51
ELL	334	48.8	47	59.4	48
FELL	201	78.5	53	81.7	54
Special Education	543	58.7	41	68.3	42
Low-Income	1,622	73.7	46	77.1	46

Note: 1. Numbers of students included are the numbers of district students included for the purpose of calculating the CPI. Numbers included for the calculation of the median SGP are different.  
2. Median SGP is calculated for grades 4-8 and 10 and is only reported for groups of 20 or more students. CPI is only reported for groups of 10 or more students.  
3. "ELL" students are English language learners.  
4. "FELL" students are former ELLs.  
Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

**Table C4: Somerville Public Schools and State  
Composite Performance Index (CPI) and Median Student Growth Percentile (SGP)  
for Selected Subgroups  
2011 Mathematics**

	Somerville Public Schools			State	
	<i>Number of Students Included</i>	CPI	<i>Median SGP</i>	CPI	<i>Median SGP</i>
All Students	2,295	68.7	45	79.9	50
African-American/Black	327	55.5	43	65	47
Asian	215	82.6	61	89.5	64
Hispanic/Latino	878	61.7	41	64.4	46
White	846	77.4	45	84.3	50
ELL	334	48.9	42	56.3	52
FELL	198	70.5	53	75.1	53
Special Education	547	47	35	57.7	43
Low-Income	1,629	63.9	44	67.3	46

Note: 1. Numbers of students included are the numbers of district students included for the purpose of calculating the CPI. Numbers included for the calculation of the median SGP are different.  
2. Median SGP is calculated for grades 4-8 and 10 and is only reported for groups of 20 or more students. CPI is only reported for groups of 10 or more students.  
3. "ELL" students are English language learners.  
4. "FELL" students are former ELLs.  
Source: School/District Profiles on ESE website

## Appendix D: Finding and Recommendation Statements

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### *Finding Statements:*

#### **Student Achievement**

1. In recent years student performance in the district has been low and flat, the proficiency gap with the state has increased, and student growth overall has not shown meaningful change.
2. Grade by grade, on the 2011 MCAS, the district had high percentages of students scoring Warning/Failing in math as compared to the state. Though the percentage of Somerville students scoring Warning/Failing in ELA was also higher in each grade than the state percentage, the difference between the district and state percentages was not as great.

#### **Leadership**

3. Some subcommittees of the school committee discuss, review, and sometimes vote on educational and personnel matters that should be informed by expertise in the field of educational leadership and would best be handled by the superintendent. The superintendent would then present his decisions to the school committee for informational purposes and might choose to seek input from the public or from the school committee before making these important decisions.
4. The district and staff have identified so many priorities that the key focus areas for improving student achievement are not shared districtwide, thus reducing the potential impact of the staff's and schools' collective efforts. For example, literacy is an understood priority at the elementary and high school levels, but there was little evidence that literacy was a priority at the middle school level.
5. The collective bargaining agreement between the Somerville Teachers Association and the Somerville School Committee is in many places unclear and outdated, leading to confusion on the part of both teachers and administrators as to what can and cannot occur in many day-to-day situations in the district.

#### **Curriculum and Instruction**

6. Classrooms typically demonstrate several important elements essential to creating a climate conducive to learning. Positive student-teacher relationships were observed, teachers were well prepared and delivered content to students in a clear way, and there were opportunities for small group work or guided practice. Techniques that advance

students to higher performance levels were not as frequent—such as through high-level tasks, activities that promote higher-order thinking, demonstration of high expectations, differentiation of learning activities, and wait time to make sure students at all levels master the next level of content.

7. The district has made some progress in developing and more consistently delivering common K-12 curricula for English language arts and mathematics.

## **Assessment**

8. The district is developing a powerful student information system with the potential to provide teachers with rich data for making instructional and assessment decisions. However, the system as it currently exists is limited by the amount of assessment information available, by variation in the emphasis principals place on data analysis, and by missed opportunities to use existing data through collaborative action plans and tiered instruction.

## **Human Resources and Professional Development**

9. Principals and department heads assume limited authority for monitoring classroom instruction.
10. The teachers' collective bargaining agreement is not adequate to clarify professional responsibilities in a new era of collective accountability for student learning.
11. School district policy GCF inappropriately provides for the school committee to interview principals and district administrators.
12. The district's practices for recruiting and selecting educators do not systematically focus on attracting and retaining well-qualified staff with skills and experiences aligned with district needs.
13. Professional development in the district is robust. There is a missed opportunity because professional development has limited connection to performance evaluations, and the improvement of performance after participation in professional development events is not tracked.

## **Student Support**

14. The district maintains a wide array of community contacts and educational programs to support students.
15. The effectiveness of academic supports for high-risk populations is hindered by inconsistent practices and programs.

## **Finance**

- 16.** Good relationships and collaboration, fostered by the district's open and well-documented budget development process, have led to consistent strong financial support of the schools by the city.
- 17.** The district and the city manage school finances with attention to monitoring and control procedures and to possible cost saving measures. There is considerable integration of city and school services for the schools.

## ***Recommendation Statements:***

### **Leadership and Governance**

1. The school committee, working with the superintendent, should shift its focus of attention to a primary focus on its important role in policy making, oversight of the budget, and evaluation of the superintendent. The school committee should reshape policies and practices that might lead subcommittees and the committee as a whole to spend time on issues that are best left to the superintendent and his staff, such as issues of personnel and educational programs. The school committee should also re-evaluate its subcommittees and retain only those that are aligned with the school committee's most effective focus.
2. The superintendent and his administrative staff should work together to define a small number of essential foci that everyone will work on to improve student achievement in the Somerville Public Schools.
3. The collective bargaining agreement between the Somerville Teachers Association and the Somerville School Committee should be thoroughly revised to reflect the work that must be done to improve student achievement in a Level 3 urban school district.

### **Curriculum and Instruction**

4. The district should ensure the use of differentiated instruction in classrooms, expand the range of teachers' instructional techniques, provide teachers with guidance on raising expectations for students, and increase teachers' ability to elicit higher order thinking from their students. Key to these improvement efforts are clear expectations for teacher performance and administrative supervision, carefully tailored professional development, and focused time by administrators in their role as instructional leaders.
5. The district should continue its work in developing common K-12 curricula for ELA and math and continue to work to ensure that teachers are delivering it consistently.

### **Assessment**

6. The district should continue making strides to expand the assessment information available in its student information system.

## **Human Resources and Professional Development**

7. Principals and department heads should assume more responsibility for monitoring the instruction of teachers and providing them with useful feedback and guidance through the supervisory process, not just through evaluation.
8. The district should make a more concerted effort to actively and deliberately recruit and select teachers with the qualifications needed in Somerville.
9. The district should prioritize professional development that best supports improved instruction, aligning professional development costs with training strategies that are in turn aligned with the greatest improvement in instruction and student performance.

## **Student Support**

10. The district should ensure that tiered support strategies, improved supervision, adequate planning time, and intervention during the school day are consistently in place, in order to improve learning and achievement for its high needs populations.

## **Finance**

11. In order to make the best use of resources, the district should:
  - continue its efforts to use its financial resources in more cost effective ways;
  - make sure that its budget is fully aligned with the small number of strategic objectives the superintendent and his administrative staff have prioritized, by repurposing its existing financial or staff resources to achieve those objectives;
  - plan strategic abandonment of initiatives and programs that are not aligned to its core priorities or that evidence has shown do not advance those priorities significantly.