Lexington Public Schools

REVIEW OF

DISTRICT SYSTEMS AND PRACTICES

ADDRESSING THE DIFFERENTIATED NEEDS

OF ALL STUDENTS

October 2009

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
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This document was prepared on behalf of the
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Overview of the Reviews of District Systems and Practices Addressing the Differentiated Needs of All Students

Purpose:

The Center for School and District Accountability (SDA) in the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) is undertaking a series of reviews of school districts to determine how well district systems and practices support groups of students for whom an achievement gap exists. The reviews will focus in turn on how district systems and practices affect each of four groups of students: students with disabilities, English language learners, low-income students, and students who are members of racial minorities. The first set of districts reviewed, in May and June 2009, are Agawam, Chelsea, Lexington, Quincy, Taunton, and Westwood, districts where data pointed to responsive and flexible school systems that are effective in supporting all learners, particularly students with disabilities, or where there was an interest in making these systems more effective.

Key Questions:

Three overarching key questions guide the work of the review team.

- **How do district and school leaders assume, communicate, and share responsibility for the achievement of all learners, especially those with disabilities?**
- **How does the district create greater capacity to support all learners?**
- **What technical assistance and monitoring activities from ESE are most useful to districts?**

Methodology:

To focus the analysis, the reviews collect evidence in three critical domains: **(I) Leadership, (II) Curriculum Delivery, and (III) Human Resource Management and Professional Development.** The reviews seek to identify those systems and practices that are most likely to be contributing to positive results, as well as those that may be impeding rapid improvement. Practices that are a part of these systems were identified from three sources: Educational Quality and Accountability indicators, Program Quality Assurance Comprehensive Program Review criteria, and the 10 “essential conditions” in 603 CMR 2.03(6)(e). The three domains, organized by system with component practices, are detailed in Appendix F of the review protocol. Four team members previewed selected district documents and ESE data and reports before conducting a four-day site visit in the district. The four-member teams consist of independent consultants with expertise in district and school leadership, governance, and financial management (to respond to domain I); curriculum, instruction, and assessment (to respond to domain II); human resource management and professional development (to respond to domain III); and special education (to collect evidence across all three domains; see italicized indicators under each domain in Appendix F of the review protocol).

The review of the Lexington Public Schools was conducted from June 8–11, 2009. The review included visits to the following district schools: Lexington High School (9–12), Joseph Estabrook School (K–5), Maria Hastings School (K–5), and the William Diamond Middle School (6–8). Further information about the review and its schedule can be found in Appendix B; information about the members of the review team can be found in Appendix A.

District Profile

The Lexington public school district serves approximately 6200 students in grades PK–12 at nine schools: six elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school.

The following chart displays the race/ethnicity characteristics of the district and state for the 2008–2009 school year.

Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (2008–2009)		
Race	**% of District**	**% of State**
African American	4.3	8.2
Asian	24.5	5.1
Hispanic	4.3	14.3
Native American	0.1	0.3
White	63.7	69.9
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.0	0.1
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	3.1	2.0

For the last four years, the district has been managed by a superintendent who has developed a leadership team that includes a deputy superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and professional development; an assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and professional development; an assistant superintendent for human resources; a director of student services; an assistant superintendent for finance and operations; a special education director; a Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) director; and an English Language Learner (ELL) director.

In the 2008–2009 school year, the district employed approximately 522 teachers; almost all were licensed in their teaching assignment and/or were highly qualified. The student/teacher ratio was 11.9 to 1. The district exceeded the state graduation and dropout target rates for both regular and special education students, and over 90 percent of students with disabilities were taught in full or partial inclusion classrooms. The district does not offer school choice, but does accept METCO students.

Student Performance

The district has no NCLB accountability status in (English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics, and has an NCLB performance rating of Very High in both content areas. In the 2007–2008 school year, in grades 3–5, the district did not make AYP in ELA in African American/Black, special education, and low income subgroups. In 2008, in grades 3–5, it did not make AYP in special education or low income subgroups in mathematics. Since 2001, the district has made AYP in the aggregate in ELA and mathematics.

A review by the team of the 2008 MCAS analysis conducted by the district, and ESE data warehouse data, showed that the district has consistently performed at a high level on the MCAS tests. For example, in mathematics in 2008, the composite performance index (CPI) for the district was 93.3, an increase of 1.1 from 2007. In mathematics, the CPI for students with disabilities was 76.8, an increase of 2 from 2007.

The district recognizes that while for the most part MCAS test scores are exemplary, there are areas where improvement can be made. For example, information on the district website revealed that, although no grade 10 students performed in the Failing category, the district did not improve overall in ELA, and the students with disabilities subgroup did not make AYP in ELA. In addition, the CPI decreased from 92 in 2007 to 88.9 in 2008 in ELA for students with disabilities. The district has identified opportunities for growth, and acknowledged the need to focus improvement initiatives on students with disabilities and other subgroups.

Findings

<u>*Student Achievement*</u>

Consistent with the district's commitment to equity and excellence, principals understand that all students can learn, and exercise their responsibility for the learning of students with disabilities by actively collaborating with district supervisors and specialists.

The district has directed attention and resources to decreasing the disparity between its high aggregate and lower subgroup student achievement results. According to central office administrators, the district began a major initiative to recognize and close the achievement gap in January 2008 when the superintendent accepted a report by the former president of the Lexington Educational Association, entitled *The Achievement Gap in the Lexington Public Schools: Documentation, Research, and Recommendations*, showing that METCO students in the district were not performing as well as white and Asian students. The differences were apparent on internal and external achievement measures and other progress indicators, including grade point average and subscription of honors, higher level, and advanced placement courses.

In response to the report's leading recommendation, the superintendent created an achievement gap task force composed of administrators, faculty, and parents, and broadened its charge to encompass all students in a plan for equity and excellence in education. The task force produced an action plan in May 2009 containing specific and detailed recommendations for professional learning communities, standards-based common assessments, tiered intervention strategies, data-driven instruction, extended learning opportunities, applied technology, and embedded professional development. The district has begun to implement many of these recommendations.

The district's commitment to equity and excellence in education was also evident in documents reviewed by the team. For example, in his opening address to the faculty in August 2008, the superintendent addressed the need to "… nurture, support and educate each and every student in our community regardless of race, wealth, background or special needs…" The preface to the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence* committed the district to "…scientific acceptance, not just belief that all students can achieve at proficient or higher levels." The 2008–2009 school year system goals included "…closing the achievement gap for Lexington special education, METCO, African-American, and low-income students who are not performing at the proficient level," and the Lexington High School 2008–2009 school year school improvement plan (SIP) included a goal to "…improv[e] student academic performance, especially among lower achieving students."

In interviews with the team, principals frequently acknowledged that all students can learn with appropriate conditions and provisions. One stated that the bell-shaped curve no longer represents the expectation for student learning. Another told the team that the achievement gap is the difference between potential and fulfillment, and the principal's role is to help all students actualize and maximize their inherent abilities. More than one principal said that teachers are not allowed to rely upon excuses for student failure, such as background weaknesses, poverty, or learning problems. One added that the school is responsible for helping all children succeed regardless of multiple factors beyond the school's control.

Elementary and middle school principals told the team that the district's K–8 special education supervisors consult closely with them on the management of special education programs and the supervision and evaluation of special education personnel. The special education supervisors are responsible for ensuring the quality and appropriateness of programs and services, including districtwide programs housed in each school. Each supervisor has responsibility for one middle school and its three elementary feeder schools. Principals and supervisors stated that they meet weekly to facilitate the implementation of special education programs and services, and to discuss the progress and needs of students under special education management. They agreed that this collaboration is effective.

Supervisors and principals share responsibility for the evaluation of special education staff. In interviews, K–8 principals stated that the model varies from school to school, but there is flexibility provided that evaluation responsibilities are fulfilled. For example, either the principal or supervisor can assume primary responsibility for all evaluations, with the other contributing to final evaluations, or the supervisor might take primary responsibility for some evaluations and the principal for others. Evaluation team liaisons are supervised and evaluated by special education supervisors. Although members of the Lexington Educational Association, evaluation team liaisons evaluate special education staff assigned by the supervisors.

Most K–8 principals said they rely on supervisors' expertise to help special educators improve performance, but some principals with training in special education methods and techniques take a more direct role in supervision. Principals told the team they ensure that mandated accommodations are being provided to students in accordance with the terms of Individualized Educational Plans.

At the high school, the special education department leader and Multidisciplinary Service Team (MST) director assume primary responsibility for management of programs, services, and the referral and evaluation process. They also supervise and evaluate special education personnel in cooperation with the principal or assistant principals.

Evaluation team liaisons are responsible for ensuring that the special education process and procedures are carried out uniformly**,** consistently, and according to regulation in every school. Liaisons are full-time in each school, except for two elementary schools sharing a liaison. Principals stated that liaisons manage the referral and evaluation procedure in compliance with timelines; conduct initial, review, and reevaluation meetings; and coordinate the development and revision of Individualized Educational Plans. K–8 principals reported that they meet weekly with liaisons, and also prior to and following certain team evaluation meetings since liaisons are empowered to authorize programs, services, and adaptive equipment.

Leadership

The district has developed multiple goal statements and corresponding initiatives without explicit prioritization, sequence, and connections, which makes it difficult to define, communicate, and share the responsibility for achievement of all learners.

There are a multitude of documents guiding the direction of the school district. For the first time, in the 2008–2009 school year, the school committee established its own list of eight goals, listing five initiatives. Some subsequent school committee goals were generic and did not contribute to the priorities of specific schools or instructional staff, such as goal two concerning capital projects, goal three concerning budget, goal four concerning policy development, and goal six concerning negotiations. Other goals—such as goal seven's post graduate surveys—were accomplished through a contract with an outside vendor. The eighth goal was an appropriate public relations goal. While these goals are not a dilemma in the day-to-day operation, they do illustrate that multiple goal statements emerge from almost every part of the governance spectrum.

Annually, the most encompassing set of priorities emerge from the system goals developed by the superintendent and adopted by the school committee in the fall. For the *2008–2009 System Goals*, adoption was mid-October 2008. These goals focus on three core purposes, and are the basis for the key indicators. In all, this document contains five pages single-spaced of goal indicators.

The indicators are a blend of strategies, evidence, and performance targets more clearly stated in the template used by principals to write SIPs. Annually in June, the superintendent reports to the school committee on the progress of the previous year's goals. A typical report, such as the 2007–2008 school year report, identifies goals added after the fall adoption date to handle issues that emerge during the school year. This indicates that the adopted system goals are continuously expanding during the school year.

The SIPs, also reviewed and approved by the school committee in the fall, were clear in format and included timelines and identified personnel to supplement goal statements, performance targets, strategies, and evidence/data. Interviews with principals, as well as accompanying documents such as minutes of meetings, indicated that SIPs were developed according to statute with input from an appropriate school council and involvement of staff, parents, and the community.

The greatest challenge discussed by principals is selecting initiatives that most directly impact their individual schools from the plethora of district initiatives. At the time of the review, the report with the most impact was the *Action Plan for Excellence and Equity* with its 32 identifiable action indicators. For the high school, the 2008 New England Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges (NEASC) report added more recommendations to the district initiatives from an outside source, as did the recent Coordinated Program Review (CPR) by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE), which affected all schools as well as central administration. After SIPs were approved by the school committee in late October 2008, the deputy superintendent completed a report called the *2008 MCAS Analysis*. This report ended with five short term goals and six long term goals. Identifying priorities is particularly important to principals because SIPs are an integral and important part of their annual evaluations. In June 2009, the district received the *K–12 Education Technology Consulting Report*, which outlined 30 action steps for the 2009–2010 school year in a multi-year improvement plan.

This continuously expanding set of goals and initiatives has created a sense of being overwhelmed and frustrated at the school leadership and teacher levels. During interviews, teachers and administrators expressed a need to reduce the number of goals and initiatives. There was support from principals and teachers for individual goals and initiatives, but the increasing number of priorities is confusing. Each time a new report emerges, such as the 2008 NEASC report or the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence*, an additional layer of tasks and priorities emerges. As a result, school leaders select those areas that are most important to them, which creates a disorganized approach to documents used to set direction in the district.

Adopted superintendent and school committee goals and SIPs were "after the fact statements" since the budget was effective July 1st and school had been in session for approximately a month and a half. In one respect, it indicates that identified initiatives were already in progress, and the budget was aligned with funding needs. What might be missing would be spring initiatives that were not funded, and therefore not included in the school year's planning model.

To manage all these goals, and to accomplish some of the more technical initiatives, the district organization—as evidenced by the organization chart—was in revision. For example, the impending vacancy in the deputy superintendent's office will result in the elimination of that position and reassignment of those duties to others, including the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. The monies saved by this reduction will be used to fund a new administrative position focused on data analysis and assessment (during the week of the site visit, that position was filled for the next school year). Similarly, a retiring principal will assume part-time duties in the central administration office, assisting in achieving professional development goals.

With all of this, there is an evolving leadership team. A few years ago, there were three superintendents in three years. More recently, there has been significant turnover in key central administration positions, as well as principal positions this year and next, most notably at the high school. Additionally, the teachers' association has undergone a change following the retirement of a long-time president.

The district has maintained the fiscal capacity and flexibility to improve instruction and achievement for all learners, particularly diverse learners.

In most Massachusetts school districts, these are very difficult fiscal times. The district has completed a budget plan for the 2009–2010 school year which minimizes the loss of staff and programs based on current assumptions, with a state budget still to be finalized. There is little evidence of cutbacks in staff or programming except for some instructional assistants. According to districtwide interviews, these reductions are not supported by administrators or teachers, but no acceptable alternatives have been identified by the leadership team. To keep the instructional assistants, a reduction elsewhere in the budget would be necessary.

There is evidence that the budget addresses the district's major initiatives. One example is a recent, large investment in special education programs intended to reduce costs of out-of-district placements and also generate revenue from other school districts enrolling students in Lexington Public Schools, a fiscally successful program. A second example is the proposed changes in the administrative organization chart for the 2009–2010 school year, which deletes a deputy superintendent position and adds a director-level position targeting data and assessment. A third example is continued funding of needs identified at the completion of district curriculum reviews.

The district's budget is able, in the short term, to continue to address its core purposes and overall goals. In particular, this FY10 budget cycle enables the district to improve instruction and increase achievement for all learners. The existence of general agreements between town officials and school officials reduces the potential for internal disagreements within the town.

The reduction in the number of instructional assistants for FY10 is untimely since it might affect diverse learners. It may mean that some students will have multiple instructional assistants rather than one, with an impact on consistency and relationships. There could also be a decline in the quality of instructional aides if prospective certified teachers in these positions leave because of declining assignments and health benefits, and are replaced by less qualified staff. However, one principal reduced the number of instructional assistants to gain monies to fund an additional special education teacher; this type of reorganization might actually improve instruction.

The fiscal 2010 budget funds the teaching of diverse learners by supporting initiatives found in the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence.* The budget documents are easily found on the district's website.

As described in several central office interviews, the district uses a revenue model budget perspective. There is a working agreement about the allocation of costs and the percentage split of remaining revenue—an approximately 72 percent to 28 percent split, with schools gaining the larger share. The district uses the *MUNIS* accounting system, but is unable to break out costs for areas such as special education at its present stage of development, though this was stated as a goal by two central office administrators.

Principals have some legitimate latitude in budget development. On a per-pupil basis, they receive allocations in which they can flexibly shift money from one line to another. As noted by one principal, the building base allocation is not a large sum, but there is flexibility. Principals and other administrators can also request supplemental appropriations for their buildings or programs, which are reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

On a more substantive level, principals are primarily responsible for screening and recommending teachers and other staff for employment. In this critical endeavor, they seem to have great flexibility in selecting the best qualified and experienced staff, even if their choices are costly, but with the caveat that they can rarely go to the top of salary schedules for newly employed personnel.

The district's primary planning tools, the *System Goals for 2008–2009* and the SIPs, were not aligned with the budget because they did not precede the budget, but instead, followed the budget in the developmental timeline. In some respects, these planning tools, and other reports such as the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence*, form the basis for budget decisions occurring one budget cycle later.

The district is not totally without fiscal concerns. The district has little control over some statewide budget implications, and, within its own decision-making, there are areas to monitor closely. First is the use of stimulus money. For FY10, about half (estimated $700,000) of the stimulus money will be used as an offset for an anticipated reduction in circuit breaker (special education reimbursement) revenues normally provided by the state. If stimulus money is a one-year revenue infusion, this decision moves the impact ahead one year, and requires a plan dealing with this issue in the FY11 budget.

Second, several administrators described the school budget as continuing a practice of relying heavily on the Lexington Education Fund (LEF) for supporting professional development. This creates a dependent posture that may not be viable for a number of reasons in the long term. Those reasons might include a reduction in funds raised, or more complex shifts in LEF's policies and philosophies regarding their use.

Finally, the most expensive future budget implications are contained in the *Lexington Public Schools PK–12 Master Plan* (March 12, 2009), which highlights physical plant needs. With a planning group set to analyze the implications of this report in the 2009–2010 school year, there can be little doubt that any attempt to address the identified issues will be a major cost consideration for the schools and the town.

The district currently has limited capacity and infrastructure to support the foundational activity of collecting and analyzing program and assessment data.

The primary data analyzed by the district is MCAS data. The most extensive analysis is executed by an outside vendor who previously produced substantial paper reports, but now offers reports in computer disc form. In addition, there are some internal MCAS analyses. The *2008 MCAS Analysis*, produced by the deputy superintendent, is an example of a district-based report. The most significant current report analyzing data is the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence.* This report is of particular importance because it addresses the issue of test performance in various student subgroups and includes 27 action plan items.

The individual schools produce limited analysis of MCAS data. One principal remarked that the staff needed to learn how to work with data. That perspective was affirmed by interviews with central administration staff. Aside from the two aforementioned internal reports, there was only ad hoc evidence of test analysis. In interviews, administrative and teaching staff described a need for professional development if the district is to be more data-driven in its decision-making. In a continuing theme, it was pointed out that this professional development is linked to LEF funding.

The district recently made an offer to an individual to assume a data specialist position at the district director level of administration to establish data analysis teams in all of the schools for the 2009–2010 school year. This new administrative position recognizes the need for data assessment, particularly at the school and classroom levels. There was some interview commentary about teachers attempting to analyze data through the professional learning community format. This has merit for grade level, subject area, or school, but less value as part of a districtwide analysis to inform instruction.

Additional interview commentary noted the lack of technology to analyze district or school results. This was supported by the June 2009 *K–12 Education Technology Consulting Report*. In listing nine areas of concern, some of the findings include: Lexington educators are "frustrated and feel stymied"; software is lacking; professional development in educational technology use is very sparse; and, most importantly, “Technology is not being used effectively for collecting and analyzing student data/information for the purpose of improving instruction.”

At this time, the primary data in the secondary schools is MCAS results, but grades K–5 have drafted a *Lexington Public Schools Assessment Grid* with many more assessment measures. Everyday Math at the elementary level has benchmark tests, and the district is developing more assessments. The district does not have a comparable grid for grades 6–12. The high school is beginning to deal with the concept of common final exams. In an interview, this was described as being contrary to the well-established independent culture. On more than one occasion, the high school was described as having a culture of strong independence among its staff. This was reinforced throughout the NEASC document. On both elementary and secondary levels, the technology to make data analysis easy for classroom teachers is lacking even if training and skills are up-to-date. Non-test data pertaining to graduates two years post-graduation is being accumulated. This data is being gathered by an outside firm specializing in this area.

The context of this finding is very important. Despite the relative lack of sophisticated test data analysis, particularly for student subgroups, and the narrow focus of primarily analyzing MCAS data, the big picture results of testing student achievement in the district are extremely impressive. On MCAS testing, district scores are among the very best in the state. On nationwide tests such as SAT exams, district scores are similarly impressive. Those results imply that a very talented staff and committed student body are producing significant student achievement levels. In fact, classroom observations confirmed that students come to class committed to learn, and there are few classroom distractions or digressions from lessons being taught.

The district has chosen not to rest on its laurels, which can be easy to do in a high-performing district, but rather to identify the need to be more data-driven in the contemporary sense. The district has developed an action plan, reorganized its administrative assignments, identified professional development needs about data analysis, and encouraged professional learning communities to enhance learning, particularly among student subgroups comprising diverse learners.

Curriculum Delivery

To ensure continuity of service provision, the district facilitates the transition of students with disabilities at the junctures between grades, schools, and programs.

According to central office administrators, the district reorganized the coordination of special education programs and services in grades K–8 in the 2008–2009 school year, replacing grades K–5 and 6–8 special education supervisors with two K–8 supervisors in order to improve the transition of students from grade to grade, school to school, and program to program. In interviews with the review team, the K–8 supervisors described a deliberate, comprehensive procedure for ensuring continuity of service provision at junctures, especially transitions from preschool to kindergarten, grade 5 to grade 6, grade 8 to grade 9, and graduation (or turning twenty-two) to post-secondary education and the work world.

To facilitate the transition of students under special education management from preschool to kindergarten, the district preschool coordinator meets with the K–8 supervisors of the receiving elementary schools in early spring to discuss the needs of incoming students. The supervisors then make appropriate provisions to ensure that all requirements of entering students' Individualized Educational Plans can be fulfilled, including provision of related services such as speech and language and occupational therapies. As additional components of this facilitated transition, receiving teachers confer with sending teachers to discuss incoming students' strengths and needs, as well as best practices; entering students and parents visit receiving schools on separately scheduled orientation days; and K–8 supervisors ensure that all relevant student records are transferred to receiving schools in a timely manner.

The K–8 special education supervisors also described the procedure for transitioning students with disabilities from grade to grade within a school. They stated that sending and receiving teachers and providers meet to discuss students' needs to ensure continuity of services. Sometimes this means adjusting the frequency of services or the degree or nature of support to help students meet grade level requirements. In making class placements, principals try to match students' learning styles with receiving teachers' teaching styles. The supervisors stated that principals are diligent and resourceful in ensuring that schools meet the continuing and emergent needs of students with disabilities.

Lexington High School offers a transition program to help students with disabilities make the transition to post-secondary education or employment at graduation (or age twenty-two), and develop interview and job readiness skills. Services include credit-bearing career exploration courses and guided work experiences of 6–20 hours per week under supervision. The transition program also offers students the opportunity to take aptitude assessments and interest inventories and then discuss results and implications with counselors. In addition, program counselors connect eligible students with disabilities with appropriate providers in the adult human services network, such as the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, through the Chapter 688 referral process.

The district ensures that instruction for students in substantially separate programs is based on the state frameworks, and provides joint trainings on curricular content and instructional methodologies for regular and special educators.

Central office administrators and principals told the team that district benchmarks and the state frameworks inform instruction in all substantially separate programs. In most programs, teachers use customized strategies and methods, but the curricular content and learning outcomes are equivalent to the regular education program. In the elementary intensive learning program for students with developmental delays and intellectual impairments, the curricular topics and broad learning outcomes are the same as in the regular education program; however, teachers modify their instruction to accommodate students' learning levels, rates, and preferred modes of demonstrating mastery. For example, they use scaffolding to help students with concept formation and abstract reasoning.

Central office administrators and principals told the team that special and regular educators attend the same in-service education sessions on district programs. For example, both special and regular educators were enrolled in sessions on the Scott Foresman Reading program, including *Comprehensive Literacy in the Elementary Classroom* and *Teaching Reading Comprehension* *with Non-Fiction Text in the K–5 Classroom*. In addition, both regular and special educators attended the professional development series on the revised K–5 mathematics curriculum, conducted after school on four Monday afternoons during the 2008–2009 school year.

In the 2007–2008 school year, thirteen special education and regular education teachers enrolled in a course entitled *Assessment-Driven Instruction and Intervention for Grades K–2*, conducted by the mathematics department head. In the same school year, three-person teams composed of a regular education teacher, a special education teacher, and a mathematics specialist met monthly under a Title V training grant to design a collaborative service delivery model for mathematics instruction in grades 1 and 2.

The district has increased its capacity to serve students with disabilities within the community by developing and expanding a continuum of substantially separate programs. These programs have reduced and prevented out of district placements, resulting in savings.

According to ESE data, the district serves approximately 92 percent of its students with disabilities in full or partial inclusion programs. The district also provides a continuum of substantially separate programs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Specifically, the district offers an articulated progression of programs encompassing all three levels for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), language-based learning disabilities, and social/emotional disorders that interfere with learning. The district refers to these programs as districtwide intensive learning programs. Each school houses at least one districtwide program.

Through this continuum of highly specialized programs, the district provides for most of its significantly disabled students in the least restrictive environment, its community schools. Central office administrators stated that the district's specialized programs were comparable in quality to approved private programs, fulfilled all requirements of students' Individualized Educational Plans, and were capable of meeting emerging needs of enrolled students.

The number of students attending out-of-district placements declined from the 2007–2008 to the 2008-2009 school year from 110 to 91 students. According to ESE data for 2008, the district's percentage of students attending out-of-district special education programs (4.7 percent) was lower than the statewide average (6.7 percent) and lower than that of a number of similarly high-performing districts, such as Belmont (12.5 percent), Brookline (5.2 percent), Lynnfield (8.6 percent), Newton (5.7 percent), Needham (7.4 percent), and Wellesley (5.7 percent).

Central office administrators also reported that they routinely analyze student needs to develop appropriate local programs and services. For example, in the 2009–2010 school year, the student services department intends to conduct an analysis of referrals to child study teams to detect patterns, trends, and needs. In the 2007–2008 school year, the district redesigned three district intensive learning programs at a cost of over $500,000. Specifically, the middle and high school intensive learning programs for students on the autism spectrum and the high school program for students with emotional problems were expanded and improved to increase district capacity to serve all eligible students.

According to the June 2008 superintendent's report on the fulfillment of the 2007–2008 school year system goals, the district realized savings of 1.8 million dollars in cost prevention by instituting these programs. Similarly, central office administrators told the team that they intended to shift staff to improve the quality and scope of services in programs for students with ASD at the Hastings and Fiske elementary schools. According to the 2009–2010 school year district budget document, the potential savings in cost prevention is estimated at $146,000.

In order to prevent unnecessary referrals to special education, the district has designed and begun to implement a tiered intervention approach to instruction and intervention in literacy in grades K–5, and is developing a similar model for grades 6–8. The district intended to develop a tiered intervention model in mathematics in grades K–8.

According to principals and central office administrators, the district completed the design of a procedure for reading instruction and intervention in grades K–5 in the 2007–2008 school year, and piloted it at the Bowman Elementary School in the 2008–2009 school year. The procedure consists of assessing students' mastery of literacy skills through periodic schoolwide assessments, and providing assistance proportionate to needs through a leveled system. Although it was too early to tell if this approach had reduced the number of initial referrals to special education, administrators stated that it helps define the roles and responsibilities of teachers and specialists, and continuously informs instruction with useful and relevant data about the progress of learners. Additionally, they said that formative assessment had improved the quality and focus of literacy instruction, making it more effective.

According to documentation on the tiered system, Tier 1 instruction is rendered in classrooms by classroom teachers, with appropriate differentiation to meet the needs of individual students. The classroom reading program is the program of choice for all students, and the goal is to help students benefit from it. At Tier 2, reading intervention or English as a Second Language (ESL) specialists provide intensive small group (Tier 2A) or individual (Tier 2B) instruction to students who have not achieved Tier 1 proficiency targets on schoolwide screening tests, such as the Developmental Reading Inventory (DRA). Classroom teachers remain the reading teachers of record for these students and, to the extent possible, assistive instruction is delivered within regular classrooms.

If determined to have a disability under the special education law, students who did not respond to two 8–10 week cycles of Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction enter Tier 3. At Tier 3A, special educators instruct students under special education management using specially designed programs and methods. At Tier 3B, special educators use systematic phonological awareness or fluency/comprehension programs such as Orton Gillingham; Wilson; or Retrieval, Automaticity, Vocabulary, Engagement with Language, Orthography (RAVE-O) to instruct students. Although special educators provide instruction at Tier 3, classroom teachers are the reading teachers of record. Students determined not to have a disability under the special education law continue at Tier 2, where programs are modified to address needs identified by progress monitoring.

Students not making effective progress following two cycles of instruction at Tier 3 enter the district's substantially separate language learning program at Tier 4. At this level, special educators use explicit, highly prescriptive methods with frequent monitoring and benchmarking. Special educators are the reading teachers of record for students at Tier 4.

According to central office administrators, the four-tier literacy instruction and intervention approach at the Bowman School used grant funding to purchase AIMSweb, a comprehensive web-based program to monitor student progress in response to intervention, and 28 Bowman teachers were trained to use it. The district has plans to implement systematic progress monitoring in literacy in all elementary schools in the 2009–2010 school year.

In the 2008–2009 school year, the district was developing a three-tier literacy intervention program at the middle school level consisting of classroom and specialized assistance in decoding, comprehension, and advanced comprehension. As an initial step, the district established a guided study class in each middle school to help students develop content- and discipline-related organizational, study, and comprehension skills.

According to central office administrators and principals, the district evaluated the effectiveness of existing regular program Tier 1 and 2 interventions in mathematics in the 2008–2009 school year, and intends to evaluate the effectiveness of Tier 3 and Tier 4 special education interventions in the 2009–2010 school year. They told the team that the district has fewer mathematics than literacy specialists, adding that this might be a constraint in providing appropriate direct services to students and consultation to classroom teachers. The district administers common benchmark assessments three times a year to assess mathematical skills of all students in grades 1 and 2. Student scores are rank-ordered to establish priority for assistive instruction. In some schools, students in a grade are grouped by common instructional needs during common mathematics blocks, and classroom teachers and specialists provide targeted instruction.

In the 2007–2008 school year, the district began to offer a mathematics intervention course at both middle schools for certain students in grades 6–8. This course is intended to reinforce basic mathematics skills, such as addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division of integers, decimals, and fractions. Students are assigned based on their most recent mathematics MCAS scores. The program teachers use an item analysis of student results to plan initial instruction. The district provided evidence of the course’s success: according to documentation, middle school students performed better in aggregate on the 2008 mathematics MCAS test than on prior testing in 2007. Subgroup performance also improved, except for a slight decline in the limited English proficient (LEP) subgroup at Diamond Middle School.

District schools have long-established child study teams to help regular educators accommodate a wider range of learners in their classes. The child study process varies from school to school, and resources and strategies for differentiating teaching and learning are not codified.

Central office administrators and principals stated that school-based child study teams have functioned in the district for many years. These teams help regular education teachers meet the needs of students making unsatisfactory progress through modification of the regular education program. The range of modifications available to child study teams include adapted and supplemental materials; changes in curricular content, scope, or emphasis; revised expectations, requirements, or outcomes; remedial instruction; and alternative strategies and methods. The review team found references to child study teams in all faculty handbooks.

Principals stated that child study teams are the first recourse for teachers seeking help for struggling students, adding that the teams are not intended to be barriers to referring students suspected of having needs under the special education law. They gave examples of the expedited referrals of such students, bypassing the typical stages of the process. Child study teams also consider the needs of students with behavioral and emotional problems that interfere with learning. Some principals have differentiated the child study process by creating separate child study teams to address behavioral concerns. They stated that while teams deal effectively with mild behavioral problems, moderate to severe problems are more difficult to resolve without specialized consultation or assistive personnel.

The assistant superintendent for curriculum conveyed that the child study process was under revision with the goal of standardizing the procedures and timelines in a system-wide plan by the end of the 2009–2010 school year. The 2008 NEASC report cited Lexington High School for lack of a coordinated student intervention or support team. The assistant superintendent for curriculum told the review team that establishing a functioning team and an improved process at the high school level were immediate goals.

Child study forms and procedures currently used by the K–8 schools are not uniform. Principals said that while student referral procedures have many common elements, there are some differences. For example, some procedures require extensive documentation of students' educational histories or results of prior modifications made by referring teachers. Timelines for implementing and assessing the effects of intervention plans developed by child study teams also vary by school, within a range of four to eight weeks.

In reply to a review team question, principals said there is currently no connection between the child study process and the tiered intervention approaches the district is using in literacy and mathematics. They explained that the two processes are parallel, and sometimes simultaneous, but that the district intended to integrate them.

The assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and professional development told the team that the District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP) was also under revision. A Comprehensive Program Review (CPR) conducted by ESE in April 2008 found that the district's elementary and high school teachers lacked training on the DCAP. In fact, most were unfamiliar with the document and did not know what it contained. Principals stated they were unaware of a comprehensive resource guide with documented strategies and techniques for dealing with typologies of student needs at various age and grade levels, either as a separate document or component of the strategic plan. Some principals said that they refer teachers to a number of published resources containing strategic advice, although this was not part of the formal district procedure.

The district has developed well-defined and sequenced benchmarks in core and elective subject areas, which can facilitate the development of common formative assessments.

On the district's website, parents and educators have access to a clear and coherent set of benchmarks for core and elective subject areas at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The purpose of these benchmarks is to outline student performance or learning objectives for each of the academic subject standards. Review of these benchmarks and interviews with central office administrators and curriculum leaders indicated that the benchmarks not only align with the Massachusetts State Frameworks, but in many cases also align with national standards in science, math, English language arts, social sciences, and the arts.

An interview with a central office administrator revealed that benchmarks are currently in a three-year review cycle in which they are updated by a curriculum review committee of curriculum leaders and instructional staff. Introductory narratives to benchmark documents and interviews with curriculum leaders demonstrate the district's commitment to viewing these benchmarks as an evolving and living document that guides the curricula of schools.

Interviews with central office administrators, principals, curriculum leaders, and instructional staff disclosed that the next challenge is developing common formative assessments. Although the district has begun to develop common formative assessments at the elementary and middle school levels in literacy and math, formative assessments are primarily school-based and have not been consistently developed or implemented. According to interviews with central office administrators and various documents (SIPs, central office memos, and the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence*), the district has identified the development of common formative assessments as a districtwide initiative. The clarity and coherence of the current set of benchmarks will facilitate the development of common formative assessments.

The district has committed to the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model as a mechanism to empower instructional staff to use available student data to guide decisions about how to improve student learning, share best practices, and build collaborative school cultures.

In August 2007, the superintendent outlined the characteristics of a professional learning community as described by a nationally known educator and researcher:

- Time for collaboration built into the school day and school calendar
- Collaboration embedded in routine practices
- Collaborative teams focus on learning
- Collective inquiry into "best practice" and "current reality"
- Action orientation/experimentation
- Teams pursue specific and measurable performance goals (quantitative or qualitative)
- Commitment to continuous improvement

In addition, the superintendent explained that the heart of the PLC model is the commitment of educators to pose four questions:

1. What do we want each student to learn?
2. How will we know each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?
4. How will we respond when a student already knows it?

Interviews with central office administrators, principals, curriculum leaders, and instructional staff, along with a variety of documents (SIPs, central office memos, and the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence*) demonstrated the district's commitment to creating data-driven and collaborative school cultures that focus on improving student learning and ensuring that all students achieve at high levels.

Although the district has made significant steps in promoting and implementing the PLC model, interviews with principals, curriculum leaders, and instructional staff revealed three major challenges. First, although the PLC model is a valued districtwide initiative, school staff have expressed frustration that they do not have adequate time for fully implementing it. At the elementary level, the issue is regular common planning time. An interview with one elementary school team revealed that they value the model and have been able to create two common planning periods per week, but clarified that this practice was an exception rather than the norm. At the middle and high school levels, interviews with middle and high school principals revealed that the issue is competing commitments. In most cases, staff have common planning time, but feel pulled in a variety of directions because of various initiatives.

The second challenge is providing ongoing professional development to ensure the effective implementation of the PLC model. Principals and instructional staff explained that beyond a professional development presentation to district staff in 2007 by a recognized expert in Professional Learning Communities, schools have not received regular and ongoing professional development in the PLC model.

The third challenge is the lack of a consistent protocol to guide PLC activities. Interviews with central office administrators and principals revealed that grade level and subject area teams develop goals and activities that are submitted to principals for approval. Based upon review of district and school improvement documents, it was unclear how goals and activities within PLCs are related to school and districtwide goals. Various documents (SIPs, central office memos, and the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence*) outline a plan for PLCs to develop specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely (SMART) goals, but there is currently no stated plan or protocol on how PLCs need to function.

The district has taken steps to address systemic educational inequities to ensure that all students, especially diverse learners, have access to a high-quality education, are systematically moved from lower- to higher-level courses, and are provided the appropriate support to ensure academic success.

The superintendent commissioned a study to investigate whether schools were effectively educating all students, especially diverse learners. This study culminated in the 2008 publishing of *The Achievement Gap in the Lexington Public Schools: Documentation, Research, and*

Recommendations. According to this report, although the district was one of the top-performing districts in the state based upon MCAS, a careful study of the subgroups revealed that a significant number of African-American and Latino students from METCO were not achieving at proficient or advanced levels. The superintendent acted upon a recommendation in the report to create an Achievement Gap Task Force (AGTF) that would be charged with developing an action plan to address the achievement gap. This group evolved into the Equity and Excellence Task Force (EETF), since the group understood its role as supporting the academic achievement not only of METCO students, but of all students. In May 2009, EETF published the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence* outlining a series of recommended actions and highlighting the need for developing common formative assessments to guide tiered intervention strategies.

Interviews with the superintendent and central office administrators indicated that the work of EETF was an important first step in addressing the achievement gap and moving the district towards greater accountability in serving all students. An interview with a parent focus group exposed concern that the district has a culture of effectively serving the "highly motivated student" but not engaging the "struggling student."

Parent concerns were echoed in an interview by high school staff. One department head expressed the concern that "Lexington does not yet have a systemic culture of upward mobility." Students enrolled in lower-level courses, particularly diverse students, are not systematically encouraged to enroll in higher-level courses. If students enroll in high-level courses, sometimes they do not receive appropriate support to ensure success. The May 2008 report developed by the visiting NEASC team addressed the lack of diverse student enrollment in upper-level courses and the lack of support structures to ensure high achievement. The 2008 *Achievement Gap Report* also highlighted the lack of diverse student representation in higher-level courses.

The *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence* is an important first step in addressing the problem of upward mobility, but interviews with principals, curriculum leaders, and instructional staff revealed concern about enacting the plan in a timely fashion.

The district is in the process of rewriting the job description for a new METCO director, with the goal of hiring a director who can oversee and support the academic achievement of all METCO students.

Instructional staff are not consistently using differentiated instructional strategies to address the learning needs of all students, especially diverse learners.

When asked whether they believed teachers were consistently and effectively using differentiated strategies, central office administrators, principals, curriculum leaders, and instructional staff were unanimous in their assessment that differentiated instruction could be found in pockets of staff, but not consistently across grade levels and subject areas.

Principals and curriculum leaders attributed this lack of consistency to two causes. First, instructional staff do not yet have a clear understanding of what differentiated instruction looks like in their subject areas. One department head described the challenge as a problem of intention and language. Staff may use a differentiated strategy, but lack a clear understanding of the appropriate use of the strategy and how it affects learning. Regarding language, staff are just beginning to use the same lexicon when describing teaching practices. Second, instructional staff have not received consistent and ongoing professional development.

Interviews with curriculum leaders and instructional staff also revealed that PLCs are supposed to serve as vehicles for professional development, but differentiated instruction is not an explicit focus of these groups.

Finally, random classroom observations at the elementary, middle, and high school levels verified that, although a number of teachers engage their students using diverse instructional strategies, a number of teachers also utilize a teacher-centered format. The 2008 NEASC confirmed that at the high school level, instruction was still primarily teacher-centered—there was little evidence of differentiated strategies.

In 37 random observations of classrooms at 2 elementary schools, 1 middle school, and the high school, partial or solid evidence of characteristics of instructional design or delivery was evident 75 percent of the time, and partial or solid evidence of characteristics of an organized classroom was evident 85 percent of the time.

During the site visit, team members observed 37 randomly selected classrooms and recorded the presence or absence of 17 characteristics included in the ESE SY 2008–2009 Learning Walk characteristics continuum, grouped into three categories: Organization of the Classroom, Instructional Design and Delivery, and Student Ownership of Learning. Team members recorded whether evidence related to examples of practice for each characteristic was not observed, partial, or solid for each standard within the three categories. Typically, team members observed classroom instruction for approximately 20 minutes at the beginning, middle, or end of class. Observations were conducted at the four schools as follows: 18 at the elementary level, 4 at the middle school level, and 15 at the high school level. Team members observed 14 ELA classrooms, 6 mathematics classrooms, 6 science classrooms, 5 social studies classrooms, and 6 classrooms of other subjects.

Organization of Classroom is the category for the first three characteristics, including classroom climate, the presence of learning objectives, and how teachers maximize the use of classroom time. Team members observed the tone of classrooms, the behavior of students, and whether teachers maintained order and structure. Team members also looked for oral or written references to learning objectives or goals. Additionally, team members looked at levels of student engagement, the pace of classes, and the smoothness of transitions. Partial or solid evidence of the characteristics of an organized classroom was evident in 73 percent of elementary classrooms, 92 percent of middle school classrooms, and 82 percent of high school classrooms. Districtwide, characteristics of an organized classroom were observed in 85 percent of observed classrooms.

Instructional Design and Delivery includes 12 characteristics, numbered 4– 15, oriented toward the quality of teaching and learning. Team members observed areas such as levels of teacher content knowledge, range of instructional techniques, depth of student questions, pacing of lessons, how teachers differentiate instruction, how teachers assess students to check for content knowledge, and whether students have opportunities to apply knowledge. Examples of effective instructional practice included teacher implementation of instructional strategies to activate prior knowledge, students drawing on existing knowledge to inform learning, teacher response to students' abilities and/or individual needs, and teacher use of varied instructional strategies to target learning objectives. Partial or solid evidence of the characteristics of instructional design and delivery was evident in 73 percent of elementary classrooms, 77 percent of middle school classrooms, and 71 percent of high school classrooms. Partial or solid evidence of these characteristics was evident in 75 percent of observations districtwide.

Student Ownership of Learning includes two characteristics, numbered 16–17, related to whether students can explain routines, procedures, and processes that help thinking and learning: Does the teacher lay out routines, and can students explain them? Can students describe the activity they are engaged in? Can students explain their work? Partial or solid evidence of the characteristics of student ownership of learning was evident in 33 percent of elementary classrooms, 25 percent of middle school classrooms, and 40 percent of high school classrooms. Partial or solid evidence of student ownership of learning was evident in 38 percent of observations districtwide. Percentages are low in this category because team members had limited opportunities to speak with students during classes.

Human resources and professional development

The district does not have a written professional development plan. The implementation of numerous district programs and initiatives to improve student achievement makes it difficult for the district to focus professional development activities.

Information provided by interviewees and a review of documents indicated that the district does not have a written professional development plan. The district did have a professional development calendar and a list of professional development programs available to teachers through organizations such as the EDCO collaborative. In addition, interviewees indicated that the implementation of numerous district programs makes it difficult for the district to focus professional development activities. Interviewees reported that, while the district does have some districtwide professional development programs, professional development is primarily a site-based activity dependent on program, school improvement, and professional development grants from LEF. Although the district does not have a written plan, the district is creating a professional development committee to take on the challenge of structuring district professional development programs.

Interviewees noted that professional development has taken many forms in the district, such as PLCs at each school, which, in 2005, replaced a cafeteria approach to professional development. In addition, curriculum reviews have included professional development on differentiated and ELL instruction. Professional development is also informed by district goals. In the 2008–2009 school year, key indicator A, related to district goal 1, included a number of professional development indicators. While professional development programs have been implemented districtwide and in schools, interviewees indicated that there is a need "to connect the dots" and develop strategies to structure, sustain, and align professional development in the district.

While the district does not have a written plan, the district's website provided a breakdown of the 2008–2009 school year professional development offerings in science, mathematics, K–5 literacy, and physical education/wellness, as well as at general K–8 and high school levels. For example, at the high school level, specific offerings were published dedicated to advancing the work of the high school's curriculum development project, as well as the collaborative work designed to further the growth of professional learning communities. Kindergarten through grade 5 mathematics professional development included the goal of providing teachers opportunities to share instructional strategies and interventions aimed at closing the achievement gap. As part of professional development, the district periodically brings nationally recognized educators to the district for speaking engagements.

The district has begun to support instructional staff in the development and use of formative assessments to measure student learning and guide teaching practices.

In October 2008, to support the development and use of formative assessments, the district invited a nationally known educator to provide professional development on designing effective formative assessments to measure student learning and guide teaching practices. According to review of professional development agendas, the district provided follow-up professional development on designing effective formative assessments in February and May 2009. The 2009 *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence* report has made the development of common formative assessments an explicit goal for each grade level and subject area.

In interviews, principals and curriculum leaders suggested that ESE could provide more models and technical assistance in the development of a data clearing house that could help the district track formative assessment data.

Core professional development is principally funded through the Lexington Education Foundation (LEF) and other external sources, rather than through the district budget.

The Lexington Education Foundation (LEF) is the principal funder of private grants for professional development in the district. LEF was created in 1989 in response to the Proposition 2 ½ budget reductions. According to information on LEF's website, "…LEF is an independent, 501(c)(3) charitable organization committed to enhancing educational excellence for the children of Lexington Public Schools. Since 1989, LEF has awarded more than $2.7 million to Lexington educators through our competitive grants program. The initiatives we fund are outside the school operating budget and make a difference in enriching math skills, improving literacy, promoting 21st century technology, providing professional development for teachers, supporting the arts, and enhancing social competency."

Information provided by interviewees and a review of fiscal 2008 district expenditures provided by the Department show that the majority of core professional development funding was provided through private and state grants, rather than as an appropriation from the town. A review of a district grant summary report, dated February 24, 2009, shows that in 2008-2009, LEF provided $289,452 in program grants, $54,000 in school community grants, and $27,000 in professional development grants to schools. Interviewees indicated that the district did budget approximately $250,000 over three years for curriculum reviews, a key professional development activity in the district. Information on LEF's website showed that LEF provided the district with $413,000 in professional development funding in the 2008–2009 academic year.

While it is clear that LEF considers its funding to be supplemental to the district's operating budget, interviewees indicated that, due to budget cuts over the last few years, the school committee has developed a culture of depending on LEF funding for core professional development activities. One has to go no further than a review of grants awarded in the 2008–2009 school year to support that hypothesis. LEF awards go beyond providing a teacher with an opportunity for individual growth; they include awards that allow professional development to be provided to groups of teachers or across the entire district. For example, LEF provided $24,500 to train all elementary school teachers in administering and evaluating formative assessments. LEF also provided $27,000 for districtwide summer curriculum and instructional development workshops. Further, LEF provided a school community grant to the high school to fund activities directly related to professional learning communities, activities articulated by district and school leaders as foundational.

The district has implemented a mentoring program for new teachers and made a substantial financial commitment to retain and support high quality teachers.

According to interviewees and a review of documents provided by the district, a successful mentor-coach program is in place in the district. The program was developed in collaboration with LEF and funded through the district's operational budget for approximately $85,000. The goals of the program are to sustain teacher retention and support teachers by providing professional growth opportunities.

The mentor-coach program is a two-year program. The focus of the mentoring component of the program is on first-year teachers, who generally need assistance with classroom management, classroom practices, and other issues they encounter as new teachers, such as planning lessons and reviewing student assessments. During the first year of the program, all teachers new to the profession are provided a one-on-one mentor. The principals decide whether teachers new to the district—but not new to teaching—are included in the program. Interviewees indicated that mentors receive a stipend of $1000. Mentors are required to have a professional license, professional teacher status in the district, and a minimum of five years of teaching experience, with at least three years in the district.

The focus of the content coaching component of the program is on assisting second-year teachers with curriculum and instruction issues. According to a description of this component, content coaches provide one-on-one mentoring for second-year teachers on curriculum issues, with a focus on planning and differentiating instruction. The district requires content coaches to be veteran teachers with deep content knowledge. Content coaches also receive a stipend of $1000. Coaches must have demonstrated a mastery of the district's curricula and have expertise in classroom teaching. They must be familiar with curriculum mapping, standards-based curriculum, instruction and assessment, and differentiated instruction. Although the two program components collaborate to support new first- and second-year teachers, they have distinct functions, with the biggest difference being the focus on instructional best practices and pedagogy in the second year of the program.

Both programs are overseen by a mentor-coach committee, which selects and assigns mentors and coaches, schedules new teacher orientations, inductions, and mentoring programs, and evaluates the program.

The superintendent evaluates principals according to the Principles of Effective Administrative Leadership and aligns the goals of the principals with the goals of the district.

Administrators have been delegated responsibility for their schools by the superintendent and held accountable for improving student achievement. A review of the principal contract shows that the superintendent should complete yearly performance reviews by July 1st. All school and central office leaders periodically receive 360-degree evaluations, including the superintendent. A review of a sample of principal evaluations showed that the superintendent has used the Principles of Effective Administrative Leadership to evaluate principals and has aligned the goals of the principals with the goals of the district.

Reviewed evaluations were detailed and lengthy and included specific references to accomplishments or the need for improvement. The superintendent indicated that principals provide evidence of accomplished goals, and evaluations include comments on whether goals have been accomplished in the prior year. For example, one evaluation noted that the principal used classroom observations and an analysis of multiple types of student assessment results to assess student performance. Another evaluation noted that the principal used observational data to improve instruction in the classroom and used mathematics and literacy coaches to supplement the analysis of MCAS test data at the school. Evaluations showed that principals held teachers accountable and that one teacher had been suspended by a principal. The superintendent commended a principal for obtaining professional development grants, implementing a co-teaching model, creating a leadership team at the school, and developing PLCs.

One principal stated that the superintendent is very skilled at personnel issues, and that although being a principal presents challenging supervisory issues, principals do not operate in a vacuum, but are supported by central office administrators. Another principal stated that the superintendent allows principals sufficient authority, and that they can also seek advice from the superintendent. Reviewed evaluations were instructive, timely, and signed by the superintendent and the principals.

Recommendations

The district should continue to support phased implementation of multi-tiered instruction and intervention in literacy and mathematics at the elementary and middle school levels in accordance with the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence*.

The review team encourages the district to continue to implement, evaluate the effectiveness of, and refine multi-tiered instruction and intervention in literacy and mathematics at the elementary and middle school levels. The district field-tested a four-tiered literacy instruction and intervention model at the Bowman Elementary School in the 2008–2009 school year and, according to the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence*, intends to implement it in all elementary schools in the 2009-2010 school year. The district began to implement a three-tiered instruction and intervention model in literacy at the middle school level in the 2008–2009 school year and, according to the *Action Plan*, intends to evaluate the effectiveness of this model and refine it in the 2009–2010 school year. Also according to the *Action Plan*, the district intends to develop a tiered approach to instruction and intervention in mathematics at the elementary and middle school levels. This work is currently in the preliminary stages.

The district should consider standardizing the child study process and linking it to tiered interventions. The district should establish an effective student support team at the high school.

The district has long-established child study teams in the schools, but the child study process varies. The team found differences in referral procedures, timelines, resources, and the contents of students' regular education modification plans. The team encourages the district to make the child study process uniform, perhaps by standardizing and combining best practices of individual schools.

The district is beginning to develop a tiered system of interventions in literacy and mathematics in grades K–8, but the levels of this system are not explicitly connected to the stages of the child study process. The team encourages the district to consider integrating the tiered intervention cycles with the phases and timelines of the child study approach to create a uniform systematic approach.

The 2008 CPR report cited Lexington High School for lack of a coordinated student intervention or support team. In interviews, the review team confirmed that, although administrators and staff respond readily to individual student needs, the school does not have an effective formal procedure for identifying and providing assistance to struggling students. The team encourages the district to continue to develop a multidisciplinary team and a procedure for identifying and improving the performance of students making unsatisfactory progress at Lexington High School.

The district should continue codifying strategies and methods for providing for individual differences in a curriculum accommodation plan.

The district does not have a formal district curriculum accommodation plan, either as a separate document or as part of its strategic plan. The team found that this plan was under development.

The team encourages the district to complete the plan and to consider including successful strategies and methods—contributed by teachers, coaches, and specialists—for meeting a variety of student needs.

The leadership of the district should consider reducing the fragmentation of goals and initiatives by synthesizing them into a more definable focus.

From information obtained from interviewees and reviewed documents, there appears to be a need to reduce, consolidate, and stop the proliferation of goals. Many documents containing goals and initiatives have common themes and components. They are candidates for consolidation, which would reduce repetition and lead to a more pointed allocation of resources. After consolidation they would be more understandable to the staff expected to implement them, and to the community that needs to support them. Finally, consolidation would realize a more in-depth follow-through on the district and school plans.

The district should consider the alignment of the budget with the District Improvement Plan (DIP) and the School Improvement Plans (SIPs).

A more logical approach to budget sequence might be first to develop the system goals for an ensuing year, followed by the development of SIPs based in part or whole on the system goals, and then to develop a budget that supports both the DIP and SIPs. This sequence would move the timetable for the definition of school year goals to late spring, just before adoption of the budget. It would require little change in the superintendent's practice of providing an annual report on the system goals at the end of the year, but would advance the timetable for other reports from the September/October period to late spring.

The district should continue the development of the *MUNIS* accounting system to a point where it is able to delineate program costs, particularly in special education, in a more detailed and timely manner.

The accounting system has the capacity to provide more detailed program analysis. This is a developmental topic as the use of the system becomes more sophisticated. The utilization of more detailed ongoing fiscal analysis would be valuable at checkpoints during the school year for planning and decision-making purposes.

The district should consider the benefit from an expansion to the secondary schools of the current draft of the assessment grid begun in grades K–5, to include more subjects as well as grades.

The district has made a good start in trying to outline assessment practices in grid format. There is room to expand the K–5 grid, but the greater need is to add grades 6–12 to the grid. The format provides a good graphical perspective of the many dimensions under consideration, and it may lead the district to ask questions about omissions and raise further questions about qualitative and quantitative data.

The superintendent should continue the development of a clear written job description for the new director charged with data analysis and assessment. The job description should be communicated throughout the district so that administrators and staff have a common understanding of how data will be used to improve student achievement.

The district is making a substantive commitment to providing expertise and administrative oversight for data analysis and assessment initiatives, and may benefit from a clear statement of the expectations for its new director. It is important to explain this administrator's assignment regarding test analysis, technical assistance, and professional development to all instructional staff since it can be anticipated that curriculum administrators, principals, and teachers may have different needs in moving the district forward.

In a written professional development plan, the district should include training on analysis of test data at the school and classroom levels.

The schools produce limited analysis of MCAS data, and a principal indicated that instructional staff need to learn how to examine and analyze data. That perspective was affirmed by interviews with central office staff. Administrators and teaching staff described a need for professional development if the district is to be more data-driven in its decision-making.

With the addition of a retiring principal to the part-time assignment of coordinating and developing professional development, district leaders should consider developing a multi-year plan designed with a template similar to that used by principals to write SIPs. This form of symmetry might allow a meaningful relationship between SIPs and district initiatives in staff development. This planning would also address the issue of too many initiatives that seem independent of one another, but when analyzed are actually complementary.

The district should consider using the curriculum review committees to develop the common formative assessments for each grade level and subject area.

Rather than creating an additional body or committee to develop common formative assessments, the curriculum review committees could develop them. This would ensure that the assessments are developmentally appropriate and clearly linked to grade and subject area benchmarks.

Having the curriculum review committees develop the assessments would also ensure that future revisions and modifications in curricula and benchmarks are based upon relevant formative assessment data. This close alignment of curricula and assessments is essential in supporting the district's commitment to educational equity, in accord with which all students are expected to achieve at high levels.

The district should consider providing ongoing professional development in the PLC model.

Changing the culture and instructional practices of schools takes time and ongoing professional development. Interviews with instructional staff revealed concern that professional development around the PLC model has been inconsistent.

Providing appropriate professional development would deepen the work of PLC teams and provide them with a common vision. Surveys could be used to determine how PLC teams are functioning, as well as to determine their specific professional development needs.

Additionally, effective professional development usually occurs in small group settings or within PLC teams. Although there are advantages to whole-district or whole-school professional development days, the district and schools should consider using a professional development provider to work closely with individual PLC teams. This structure would ensure that teams were receiving relevant and timely feedback and support.

The district should consider expanding the METCO Scholars Program to ensure that all students in lower-level courses are systematically moved to a higher level and are provided with the appropriate support to ensure academic success.

The action step of creating a METCO Scholars Program does not detail how METCO students will be systematically supported in enrolling in higher-level courses and what supports will be in place to ensure success. Since the goal of the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence* is to be more inclusive of all students, the plan should specifically address how the district will systematically support the upward mobility of all students. The plan needs to expand to a Scholars Program where students in lower level courses are systematically moved to a higher level and provided with the appropriate support to ensure academic success.

The district should follow through on its plan to write a professional development plan aligned with the needs of teachers and students.

Professional development is a principal way to build teacher knowledge and district capacity to support staff in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, while simultaneously focusing on district, school, and teacher goals. The lack of a written plan inevitably leads to a lack of focus on how teachers and schools should prepare to help students learn. A professional development focus is especially needed as the district embarks on an aggressive approach to improve student achievement, as articulated in numerous interventions, initiatives, and programs included in the *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence*.

The district should consider how learning walks or peer observations can serve as a vehicle to support staff understanding of what differentiated instruction looks like in their subject area.

Current educational research is clear that changes in teaching practices require "educational experiences" that convey what effective classroom instruction looks, sounds, and feels like. In addition to examining student data, PLCs can engage in focused learning walks or peer observations, allowing staff the opportunity to see what differentiated classroom practices look like. Debriefs with classroom teachers often provide insights as to why particular practices were used, and also reveal impacts on student learning.

Beyond annual teacher evaluations and mentoring programs, there are limited mechanisms for instructional staff to receive ongoing and timely feedback on teaching practices. Learning walks or peer observations are meant to be non-evaluative. Making use of them will help instructional staff be forthright about differentiated instruction dilemmas and will also provide an effective mechanism for staff to provide and receive timely feedback.

The school committee should consider restoring professional development funding in the district's operating budget and reducing the dependency on the Lexington Education Foundation (LEF) for funding core professional development programs.

It is important that the district does not avoid its responsibility to fund core professional development for teachers and staff, especially in times of fiscal uncertainty. Over the last several years, the district has become dependent on professional development funding from the Lexington Education Foundation (LEF), a benefactor that has provided the district, schools, and teachers with hundreds of thousands of dollars in professional development funding. Assuming LEF is not immune from a fiscal downturn, the district needs to develop its own capacity to fund professional development and reduce its dependency on LEF.

The district should consider ongoing support for PLCs in the collection and analysis of summative and formative assessment data.

The *Action Plan for Equity and Excellence* proposed creating "data teams" to oversee the collection and analysis of student data. The district should also consider building the capacity of PLCs to collect and analyze student data to inform instruction. Analyzing relevant data and developing a plan to modify and change instruction are primary responsibilities of PLCs. The district needs to clarify how it will provide ongoing and timely support to PLCs in analyzing data and using it to guide teaching practices.

The district recently hired a data and technology director for the 2009–2010 school year who will manage the development and implementation of a computerized data system that should more effectively track student progress and achievement. Overseeing the professional development of instructional staff and PLCs in the collection and analysis of data could be one of the primary job responsibilities of this new director.

Appendix A: Differentiated Needs Review Team Members

The review of the Lexington Public Schools was conducted from June 8-11, 2009, by the following team of educators, independent consultants to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Dr. Philip Devaux: Leadership, Domain I

Frank DeVito: Curriculum Delivery, Domain II

James L. Hearns: Human Resources and Professional Development, Domain III

Dr. James McAuliffe: Special Education

Appendix B: Differentiated Needs Review Activities and Schedule

Differentiated Needs Review Activities

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

- The review team conducted interviews and focus groups with the following representatives from the Lexington Public Schools central office administration: superintendent; deputy superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and professional development; assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and professional development; assistant superintendent for human resources; director of student services; assistant superintendent for finance and operations; high school department heads; special education coordinators; K–12 curriculum teams; ELL director; Title I director; McKinney Vento coordinator.
- The review team visited the following schools in the district: Lexington High School (9–12), Joseph Estabrook School (K–5), Maria Hastings School (K–5), and the William Diamond Middle School (6–8).
  - During school visits, team members interviewed the school principal, conducted classroom observations, and met with the grade 1 teacher team at the Estabrook School, the intensive learning program (ILP) team at the Hastings School, and the leadership team at the high school.
  - The review team conducted 37 classroom observations for different grade levels and subjects across the four schools visited.
- The review team reviewed the following documents provided by the Department:
  - District profile data
  - Latest Coordinated Program Review Report and any follow-up Mid-cycle Report
  - Staff contracts
  - Reports on licensure and highly qualified status
  - Long-term enrollment trends
  - End-of-year financial report for the district for 2008
  - List of the district's federal and state grants
  - Municipal profile
- The review team reviewed the following documents at the district and school levels (some electronically):
  - Organization chart
  - District Improvement Plan

- School Improvement Plans
- School Committee Policy Manual
- Curriculum Guides
- High School Program of Studies
- Calendar of Formative and Summative Assessments
- Copies of data analyses/reports used in schools
- Descriptions of Student Support Programs
- Program Evaluations
- Student and Family Handbooks
- Faculty Handbook
- Professional Development Program/Schedule/Courses
- Teacher Planning Time/Meeting Schedules
- Teacher Evaluation Tool
- Classroom Observation Tools/Learning Walk Tools
- Job Descriptions (for central office and school administrators and instructional staff)
- Principal Evaluations
- Description of Pre-Referral Process
- School Schedules
- Central office memos

Review Schedule

The following is the schedule for the onsite portion of the differentiated needs review of the Lexington Public Schools, conducted from June 8–11, 2009.

Time	Day 1 Monday, June 8, 2009	Day 2 Tuesday, June 9, 2009	Day 3 Wednesday, June 10, 2009	Day 4 Thursday, June 11, 2009
7:30-7:45 **7:45-8:30**	**Team Arrival** **Introductory Meeting with District Leaders:** Dr. Paul B. Ash Dr. Lynne Celli Mary Ellen Dunn Linda Chase Robert Harris	**Team meeting and Document Review**	**School Visits:** Estabrook School 117 Grove Street 781-861-2520 **7:45 to 8:30 a.m**. Meeting with principal Martha Batten	**School Visits:** Lexington High School 251 Waltham Street 781-861-2320 x 1002 **7:45 to 8:30 a.m**. Meeting with principal Natalie Cohen
8:30-9:45	**Interview with Superintendent** Dr. Paul B. Ash **Philip Devaux** **Jim McAuliffe** **Interview with Curriculum Director** Dr. Lynne Celli **Frank Devito** **Jim Hearns**	**Interview with Superintendent** Dr. Paul B. Ash **Jim McAuliffe** **Philip Devaux** **Interview with K-12 Curriculum Team** Karen Tripoli, K-5 Mathematics Kathleen McCarthy, K-5 Literacy Dr. Walter Pavasaris K-12 Coordinator Fine & Performing Arts Eamonn Sheehan K-12 Coordinator PE/Wellness **Frank DeVito** **Jim Hearns**	**School Visits:** **8:30 to 8:45 a.m. Free time** **8:45 to 11:15 a.m.** Interview with school leaders Classroom observations Teacher team meetings at Estabrook School	**School Visits:** **8:30 to 11:15 a.m.** Interview with school leaders Classroom observations Leadership team meeting at Lexington High School

10:00-11:15	**Interview with CFO and key team members** Mary Ellen Dunn Robert Harris **Philip Devaux** **Jim Hearns** **Interview with Special Education Director** Linda Chase **Jim McAuliffe** **Frank Devito**	**Interview with Human Resources Director and key team members** Robert Harris **Jim Hearns** **Jim McAuliffe** **Document Review** **Philip Devaux** **Frank DeVito**	**School Visits:** **8:45 to 11:15 a.m.** Interview with school leaders Classroom observations Teacher team meetings at Estabrook School	**School Visits:** **8:30 to 11:15 a.m.** Interview with school leaders Classroom observations Leadership team meeting at Lexington High School
11:30-12:30: LUNCH AND TEAM MEETING				
Time	**Day 1** **Monday, June 8, 2009**	**Day 2** **Tuesday, June 9, 2009**	**Day 3** **Wednesday, June 10, 2009**	**Day 4** **Thursday, June 11, 2009**
12:30-1:15	**Interview with Professional Development Director and key team members** Dr. Lynne Celli **Jim Hearns** **Jim McAuliffe** **Document Review** **Philip Devaux** **Frank Devito**	**Interview with Title I, McKinney Vento, Student Support, ELL Directors** Carol Pilarski Linda Chase Robyn Dowling Grant **Jim McAuliffe** **Philip Devaux** **Document Review** **Jim Hearns** **Frank DeVito**	**School Visits:** **12:30 to 2:45 p.m.** Maria Hastings School 7 Crosby Road 781-860-5800 **12:30 to 1:15 p.m**. Meeting with principal Louise Lipsitz William Diamond Middle School 99 Hancock Street 781-861-2460 **12:30 to 1:15 p.m**. Meeting with principal Joanne Hennessy	**Team Meeting** **1:00 to 1:30 p.m.** Meeting with special education teams **Jim Hearns** **Frank DeVito**
1:30-2:45	**Principal interviews** Dr. Mary Anton Oldenburg Dr. Jade Reitman Elaine Mead **Frank DeVito** **Jim McAuliffe**	**Interview with 9-12 Department Heads** Gary Simon, Department Head 9-12 Mathematics JoAnn Campbell, Department Head 9-12 English Whitney Hagins, Department Head 9-12 Science	**School Visits:** **1:15 to 2:45 p.m.** Classroom observations: Maria Hastings School, and William Diamond Middle School	**Team Meeting**

		Robert Collins, Department Head 9-12 Social Studies Marie Murphy, Department Head 9-12 Foreign Language **Frank DeVito** **Jim Hearns** **Principal interviews** Dr. Jade Reitman Nancy Peterson **Jim McAuliffe** **Philip Devaux**		
3:00-4:00	**Team Meeting**	**Team Meeting**	Teacher Focus Group **Philip Devaux** **Jim Hearns** Parent Focus Group **Jim McAuliffe** **Frank Devito**	**Final Meeting with District Leaders**