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Athol-Royalston Regional School District, Review Recommendations

Leadership and Governance

1. Athol-Royalston Regional School District should develop and implement an Accelerated Improvement Plan that addresses issues from the review and align its School Improvement Plans with it to speed its efforts to improve student achievement.

A. The school committee and superintendent should work collaboratively with the District and School Assistance Center (DSAC) to develop and implement a comprehensive Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP).

1. The plan should address root causes of low performance by identifying a few major objectives, along with clear benchmarks that the district can use to determine whether it is on track to achieve the objectives. The plan should also include the specific steps to be taken (activities) to address each goal; the resources required to achieve it; the measure(s) used to determine whether or not each goal is met; the person(s) responsible for addressing and achieving each goal; and relevant timelines.

a. *District Accelerated Improvement Planning - Guiding Principles for Effective Benchmarks* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/level4/AIP-GuidingPrinciples.pdf>) is an ESE resource that provides information about different types of benchmarks to guide and measure district improvement planning.

2. Since the AIP is intended to be a “living document,” the district should establish a system for frequent reflection and data analysis related to the plan, and should modify it as needed.

B. Like the AIP, the School Improvement Plans should focus on student achievement, and they should have SMART goals that are aligned with the AIP.

1. The AIP and the SIPs should be based on data and focused on improving student achievement.

2. The goals in each of the SIPs should be aligned with the AIP goals. These goals should be SMART goals (Specific and Strategic; Measurable; Action-Oriented; Rigorous, Realistic, and Results-focused, and Timed and Tracked).

- C. The SIPs should have common templates. The templates should include, among other elements, information about needed resources.
 1. The leadership team should decide on a similar template for all the SIPs.
 2. The district budget should be informed by the resources needed to implement the AIP.
- D. The AIP and the SIPs should be part of an in-depth reporting and accountability system.
 1. Principals should report periodically to their school councils, staffs, the superintendent, the school committee, and the community on their progress toward SIP goals.
 2. Similarly, the superintendent should report periodically to the school committee, staff, and the community on progress made toward AIP goals.
 3. The SIP goals should inform administrators' educator evaluation goals, for which they should be held accountable. Likewise, the school committee's evaluation of the superintendent should include accountability for progress toward his goals, which should be informed by the AIP goals.

Benefits: Carefully crafted goals, intentional alignment, periodic reporting, and accountability will ensure that the AIP and SIPs provide a clear, unifying vision that guides the work of all stakeholders in improving student achievement and closing achievement gaps.

2. The school committee and superintendent should work with the teachers' association to establish more effective communication and resolve collective bargaining issues.

- A. The district should set up structures for regular meetings with teachers' association representatives, at least once every two weeks.
- B. The district should work with the teachers' association to resolve the remaining differences and come to an agreement on a new collective bargaining agreement (see Recommendation #8 under Human Resources and Professional Development below).
- C. If necessary, the parties should use third party mediators to ensure more efficient resolution of important issues.
- D. Models of more efficient labor-management collaboration, such as the Rennie Center case study referred to below, should be considered. The DSAC may be able to support this work.

A suggested resource is The Rennie Center. The Rennie Center's case study, *Labor-Management-Community Collaboration in Springfield Public Schools*, describes how a district improved collaboration, communication, and relationships among adult stakeholders

with the goal of improved student achievement. In particular, Lesson 4 in the case study details the district's experience in working with third-party facilitators.

Overview:

<http://www.renniecenter.org/news/120305EducationNewsReportLaborManagement.html>

Direct link: <http://www.renniecenter.org/research/LaborMgmtCommunityCollab.pdf>

Benefits:

- With the establishment of better communications through a structure for regular meetings with the teachers' association, a new collective bargaining agreement, and the use of third-party mediators when necessary, administrators will be able to focus their full attention on supervising instruction, providing useful feedback to teachers, monitoring the implementation of curriculum, and examining assessment results in order to improve student achievement.
- Better lines of communication will also provide the teachers' association opportunities for input on key issues.
- Finally, increased communication and trust is essential for new initiatives such as the new educator evaluation system to be implemented effectively and with the full support of stakeholders.

3. All school committee members should

- **hold each other accountable for attending the MASC orientation session for new members; and**
 - **participate in professional development programs to continuously improve their ability to carry out their roles and responsibilities in an evolving public school environment—for instance, if possible, the District Governance Support Project.**
- A. Every school committee member should attend the orientation session mandated by Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 71, section 36A, and adhere to school committee policy file BIA on "New School Committee Member Orientation." In addition, it is recommended that the district seek to have the school committee and the superintendent attend District Governance Support Project sessions co-led by ESE, the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents (MASS), and MASC.
1. The MASC orientation session provides new school committee members with a broad overview of their roles and responsibilities.
 2. The District Governance Support Project is designed to focus on continuous improvement and build greater understanding of the distinct roles and responsibilities

of the school committee and superintendent as well as promote new strategies for teamwork and collaboration to enhance student achievement. Each participating school district cohort, consisting of the school committee members and the superintendent, is coached by a team of MASC consultants and former superintendents, with the curriculum customized to meet the particular needs and challenges of each district.

Benefits: Both of these recommended programs will help school committee members to understand their role and responsibilities as elected officials more thoroughly. As a result, school committee members will be better able to serve students, parents, the school district, and the community.

4. The school committee and the superintendent should determine the reasons for the high rate of turnover in administrator positions in recent years, especially at the school level.

A. The superintendent should survey each administrator who has left the district in the last five years and determine the reasons for the administrator turnover.

1. The survey should request information as to the reason(s) why each administrator left the district. Also, the survey should request information as to what it would have taken to retain the administrator.

B. These results should then be shared with the school committee and, based on the results, all possible steps taken to reduce administrative turnover.

Benefits: Determining the reasons for the turnover will allow the district to develop a policy and practices to help it attract and retain administrators committed to the vision and mission of the district and schools, which is essential for building stability and continuity in the school system.

Curriculum and Instruction

5. The district should build its capacity to develop aligned, documented, and comprehensive curricula for all content areas. The district should also develop curriculum leadership practices that ensure that all instructional leaders are knowledgeable about the scope and purpose of curriculum and their responsibilities to monitor and support curriculum implementation.

A. The district now has a set of written documents reflecting its recent work to align the district's taught curriculum to the frameworks. The district should now develop and implement a process for ongoing curriculum review and refinement.

1. The process should include timelines, responsibilities, and principal, teacher, and community stakeholder input.

2. The district's documented curriculum should reflect the depth and breadth of development; ensure vertical and horizontal alignment; and include 21st century skills.
3. In addition to being aligned with the frameworks, revised curriculum documents (guides/maps/syllabi) for each subject should include learning objectives, resources, instructional strategies, pacing guides, and measurable outcomes or assessments aligned to the frameworks.

The following resources will help the district develop curriculum:

- a. The *Common Core State Standards Initiative* page of the ESE website (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/commoncore/>) includes links to implementation resources, model curriculum units, PARCC resources, and information about transitioning to the 2011 frameworks.
 - b. *How to Develop Curriculum Maps to Support a Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum that Guides Instruction* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/model/maps/CurriculumMaps.pdf>) is an ESE presentation that shares definitions of curriculum mapping, model maps, and ideas for the curriculum mapping process.
 - c. Science and Technology/Engineering strand maps (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/omste/maps/default.html>) are resources designed to support the review of the Massachusetts Science and Technology/Engineering (STE) Curriculum Framework.
 - d. Science and Technology/Engineering *Concept and Skill Progressions* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/omste/ste/default.html>) are articulations of possible ways for students to progress through levels of understanding of concepts.
 - e. *Writing Standards in Action* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/wsa/>) is a resource that includes examples of high-quality student writing with annotations that highlight how each piece demonstrates competence in learning standards at each grade level.
- B.** The district should determine who is responsible—at the district and the school levels—for overseeing the curriculum review process and for monitoring and supporting curriculum delivery.
1. Once a plan for curriculum leadership is established, this information should be broadly communicated to ensure a shared understanding throughout the district of roles and responsibilities related to curriculum and instruction.

- C. The district should move forward with a more deliberate, intentional focus on using data, including student assessment data, to inform curriculum revisions and instructional decision-making.

Benefits: A high-quality, comprehensive curriculum will ensure that all stakeholders have access to information reflecting what students are expected to know and be able to do. A sound curriculum development process with frequent and planned opportunities for assessment of the curriculum's effectiveness will enable the district to build its capacity to refine curriculum, increase consistency, and improve instruction in a proactive way.

Implementing these recommendations will also lead the district to greater shared understanding and clarity about developing curriculum based on high expectations for learner outcomes. There will be clear curricular leadership, and district leaders, principals, and teachers will understand their critical roles in curriculum implementation and monitoring of the taught curriculum. Stakeholders, too, will have a clearer understanding of their responsibilities in supporting higher levels of achievement for all learners.

6. The district should develop a common understanding of what constitutes effective instruction matched to specific content, with attention to practices that promote rigor and high expectations for all learners. The district should ensure that its instructional delivery model maximizes learning opportunities for all students.

- A. The district should, with stakeholder input, develop a clear, research-based definition of effective instruction, and should clearly articulate specific instructional expectations to ensure consistency throughout the district.
 - 1. Monitoring of instructional practices with feedback and individualized support should be structured to develop teacher capacity in literacy and math.
 - 2. Class schedules should be reviewed and revised to ensure that the district provides sufficient instructional time for all core subjects at all grade levels.
 - 3. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring consistency of practices between the two schools that serve grades 5-6.
- B. Professional development opportunities should focus on establishing exemplars of highly effective practice with attention to effective, differentiated, tiered instructional practices that engage all learners.
 - 1. The district has undertaken work with Teaching and Learning Alliance and Looney Math to improve teaching and learning in literacy and math. This partnership should be analyzed to ensure that it is having the desired impact.

- a. A resource that could be helpful for this analysis is ESE’s *External Provider Pipeline Toolkit* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/framework/level4/PipelineToolkit.pdf>), which is designed to help districts make informed decisions about recruiting, screening, selecting and monitoring external service providers.
 2. Professional development should focus on questioning to provoke thinking and on engaging students in higher order tasks.
 3. Exemplars of high quality student work should be developed.
 4. Professional development should also address the use of formative assessments and data in the classroom to inform daily instruction.
- C. The district should reassess the roles of instructional staff.
1. The district should identify and communicate ways to leverage support staff to best meet student needs.
 2. The deployment of support staff (paraprofessionals and para-specialists) should be driven by student performance data.
 3. The district should consider redeploying finances and reconfiguring services to enable the addition of curriculum and instructional supports such as instructional coaches, co-teaching models, and team leaders, in order to build the capacity of teachers and instructional support staff members most effectively.
- D. A systematic review and inventory of all instructional materials—including texts, instructional technology, and equipment—should be undertaken to ensure equity of access at all schools.
1. The district should ensure that all classrooms are equipped with multiple resources that can support students’ diverse learning styles.

Benefits: With agreement on specific highly effective instructional practices matched to content and the establishment of expectations for teaching and learning, the district will be more equipped to align human, financial, and material resources to ensure equity and to maximize the district’s ability to improve learner outcomes. The district will be better able to make effective use of the educator evaluation system by providing consistent, reliable monitoring as well as feedback and support of instructional practices.

Assessment

- 7. To create a high-performing data-driven culture of continuous improvement, the district should develop a more systematic and collaborative process to continually collect, analyze, and use student performance data.**
- A.** District leaders, from the school committee to principals to program leaders, should develop a shared vision and common expectations as to the role of data to improve curriculum, instruction, and student achievement.
1. District leaders should establish methods for continuously analyzing student performance data, along with specific data sources, timelines, and communication methods. This districtwide approach to data should be aligned with the AIP, inform the SIPs, and activate a continuous improvement cycle.
 2. As part of this effort, the district should establish a districtwide data team with responsibility to disaggregate and analyze districtwide data and issue reports about its findings. Each school should have a specific designated group that shares the responsibility of disaggregating and analyzing data for the school and each subgroup and reporting to the district data team.
 3. This process should be developed in collaboration with key teacher representatives to build trust and to develop teacher leadership capacity in a data-driven culture of improvement.
 4. The district should determine which of its data sources are reliable and valid, train all teachers in the use of these selected resources, eliminate those that are not providing sufficient, reliable data (benchmark tests that are not aligned to the curriculum, for example), and identify any gaps in data.
- B.** Parents and teachers should have efficient and reliable access to student performance data.
1. The district should ensure that all teachers have access to data reports that can inform their teaching so that decisions about daily instructional goals, interventions, programs, and support can be made in a timely way.
 2. Parents should routinely have access to information about their children's academic progress.
- C.** The school committee should, with the superintendent, identify data that will be used to inform decision-making and planning.
- D.** The educator evaluation system should support the use of data to improve curriculum, instruction, and student achievement.

1. The teachers' association, school and district leaders, and the school committee should immediately address concerns about the role of achievement data in the new educator evaluation system.
 2. The role of data in the new educator evaluation system should be clearly understood by all parties so that there is joint ownership of the task of improving instruction to help students attain proficiency.
- E. The district should gather data in two areas that are of concern: the impact of programs for foster students on the budget and the reasons why departing families choose to send their children to other districts.
1. While the district is committed to meeting the needs of students who are placed in the district by outside agencies and has dedicated resources to these needs, the district should analyze data to determine what programs and services these students are being served by and what the cost of these programs and services is.
 2. District leaders should increase the frequency of exit surveys so that departing families are asked annually why they are choosing schools outside of the district.
- F. Resources to assist the district in developing a culture that is highly-skilled in using data to improve schools include the following:
1. The *District Analysis and Review Tool (DART)* can help district leaders see where similar districts in the state are showing progress in specific areas to identify possible best practice.
 Overview: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/dart/>
 Direct link, *DART User Guide*: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/dart/userguide.pdf>
 2. The *District Data Team Toolkit* provides resources to help a district establish, grow, and maintain a culture of inquiry and data use through a District Data team.
 Overview: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/dart/lg.html>
 Direct link, full text: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/ucd/ddtt/toolkit.pdf>
 Module 4 of the Toolkit (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/ucd/ddtt/Knowledge.pdf>) may be useful to identify root causes, which can then be compared to the root causes identified through the district's improvement planning.
 3. *Edwin Analytics* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edwin/analytics/>) is a powerful reporting and data analysis tool that gives authorized districts and state level users access to new

information, reports, and perspectives on education and programs that specifically support improvement in teaching and learning.

4. The district should collaborate with its DSAC representative to prioritize those areas in which all classroom teachers need basic training on the effective use of data, and continue its work with DSAC in building the capacity of all school-level data teams.

Benefits: Implementing this recommendation will lead to a greater understanding of the critical role that data analysis plays in improving student achievement and will increase the district's ability to engage in a continuous cycle of improvement. The effective use of data will help district leaders, principals, and teachers to improve instruction, advance student learning, analyze program effectiveness, and target resources strategically.

Human Resources and Professional Development

8. The parties must complete negotiations on a successor collective bargaining agreement, including language on educator evaluation, immediately.

In recent years, labor/management issues in the district have slowed down the process of improving the school system. At the time of the review, negotiations were continuing over a successor collective bargaining agreement (CBA).

- A. With the recent change in association leadership, the superintendent/school committee and the teachers' association have an opportunity to work collaboratively on improvement initiatives in the district. The district should take the necessary steps to ensure that any issues between the parties are resolved quickly, so that agreement about a successor CBA can be reached immediately. (See the second Leadership and Governance recommendation above.)
- B. The review team recommends that the CBA be revised as follows:
 1. The CBA should be split into separate collective bargaining agreements for teachers and for administrators and simplified.
 2. Obsolete language and unnecessary detail should be eliminated from the agreement, and policies and procedures removed.
 3. Provisions in the CBA should be up to date, and any that no longer apply should be deleted.
 4. In negotiating the language in the CBA it should be kept in mind that "a teacher's primary responsibility is to teach and that his energies should, to the extent possible, be

utilized to that end,” (Article V of Appendix A of the expired contract); the amount of time that teachers are expected to teach should be reconsidered.

5. The detailed list of duties that teachers are not required to perform should be replaced with less restrictive language that gives teachers and principals more flexibility in doing their jobs.

Benefits: Implementing this recommendation will ensure that the CBA is transparent and clear to all stakeholders. It will provide principals appropriate authority to run schools effectively and administrators the flexibility to ensure

- adequate instructional time,
- teacher collaboration and growth, and
- effective oversight of students.

9. The district should establish a new educator evaluation system that is consistent with the new Massachusetts system and begin at once to implement this new system in 2013-2014.

At the time of the review, negotiations were continuing over a successor collective bargaining agreement, including language on educator evaluation. Under the state’s educator evaluation regulations at 603 CMR 35.11, the district was required to adopt and begin implementing a new educator evaluation system by the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year.

- A.** In order to resolve any remaining educator evaluation issues as soon as possible, a petition seeking arbitration should be filed with the commissioner of elementary and secondary education in accordance with [G.L. c. 71, s. 38](#) and school committee policy GCO-R-1. In any case, the district should update ESE’s Educator Policy, Preparation, and Leadership unit on the status of its educator evaluation negotiations.
- B.** In addition to reaching resolution on a successor collective bargaining agreement, including language on educator evaluation, the district should lose no time in beginning implementation in 2013-2014.
 1. The district should ensure all administrators and teachers have been provided with the ESE-developed training for evaluators and for teachers and specialized instructional support personnel as required by Chapter 131 of the Acts of 2012, passed by the Massachusetts legislature in June 2012. See the Quick Reference Guide for Educator Evaluation Training Requirements available at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/eeval/>.
 2. It should ensure that the five-step evaluation cycle set forth in 603 CMR 35.06 is implemented, including self-assessment by educators, goal-setting and plan development, plan implementation, formative evaluation, and summative evaluation.

3. It should ensure that in 2013-2014 evaluations begin for at least half of its educators under the new system, as required by 603 CMR 35.11(1)(d).
4. As recommended above under Assessment, the teachers' association, school and district leaders, and the school committee should immediately address concerns about the role of achievement data in the new educator evaluation system. They should also address the concerns the team was told existed about teaching in a new culture of frequent observations.
 - a. *The Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/eval/model/>) is a collection of resources to support effective implementation of the new educator evaluation system, including district- and school-level planning and implementation guides, model rubrics, and model contract language.
 - b. The *Educator Evaluation Training Programs* page of the ESE website (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/eval/training/>) is part of a comprehensive strategy of support and set of resources for districts to support effective implementation of local evaluation systems, including a list of ESE-approved vendors.
 - c. The *Educator Evaluation Resources* page of the ESE website (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/eval/resources/>) provides additional resources to support implementation of the new educator evaluation framework.

Benefits: Benefits from implementing an educator evaluation system consistent with the new Massachusetts system include alignment of district/school, team, and educator goals and the promotion of collaboration and continuous learning. When implemented well, such a system will be a powerful driver for improving instruction.

10. The district should develop a systemic process for recruiting, screening, and hiring educators and align this process with the Accelerated Improvement Plan and School Improvement Plans. The district should prioritize specific proven professional development programs that lead to improved instruction and improved student learning, initiating procedures to determine the effects of professional development on educator practice.

- A. The district should develop a systemic process for recruiting, screening, and hiring educators and align this process with the Accelerated Improvement Plan and School Improvement Plans.
 1. The review team recommends that the district take the steps necessary to form deliberate partnerships and regular communication with institutions that could provide the most promising candidates for teaching and administrative positions and help build capacity in the district.

2. The district should develop and carry out a plan for hiring administrators and teachers based on needs determined by reference to the AIP and SIPs and based on evidence that candidates for positions in the district have the skills and experience that match those needs.
- B.** The district should use the AIP and the SIPs and data provided by the district's data teams to prioritize targeted professional development that will lead to improved student learning outcomes.
1. The district's data teams can provide data indicating how specific professional development might improve student learning outcomes, to be used by the district's Professional Development Committee and by educators and their evaluators.
 2. The district should work with the teachers' association to take the steps necessary to allow the Professional Development Committee to be active again, so that it can create a district Professional Development Plan that targets professional development to the prioritized needs of the district shown by the data provided by the district data teams.
 3. Educators and evaluators should tie the mandatory goal development included in the new educator evaluation system to data.
- C.** The new educator evaluation system offers an opportunity to integrate promising professional development into educator plans.
1. The district can develop a formative conference protocol in which, as part of his or her educator plan, the educator being evaluated participates in targeted professional development and provides evidence of its impact on classroom instruction.
- D.** The district should initiate procedures for determining the effects of professional development on practice across the district; over time these can become a powerful tool to improve student learning.

Benefits:

- Developing a systemic process aligned with district needs to recruit, screen, and hire the most qualified educators available to meet those needs will build capacity in the district, bringing about improved professional practice and student achievement.
- Linking strong targeted professional development with student data by enabling the Professional Development Committee to plan district professional development based on district needs and priorities and by strengthening the relationship between professional development and educator evaluation will ensure that the investment in professional development at the district and school levels is effective and efficient.

- Determining the effects of professional development on practice will give the district the information to determine how best to make use of professional development to improve professional practice and student learning.

Student Support

11. The district should strengthen its tiered system of support to more effectively address a wide spectrum of student needs including students working below grade level and those ready for accelerated work.

- A. The district should identify a few valid and reliable screening tools and assessments to identify struggling and advanced students and to monitor progress. This will provide Athol-Royalston with a clear indication of needs at each grade level and can guide teachers in developing instructional modifications to meet those needs.
- B. The district should focus on differentiating instruction by offering professional development, in-class support, and observation and supervision of instruction in a safe and supportive environment. The new educator evaluation system may provide an excellent framework for this. A unified focus on differentiated instruction will create more student-focused classrooms that are organized in fluid small groups and are more responsive to students' individual strengths and challenges.
- C. The district should list the opportunities for Tier 2 and 3 interventions and provide them to students as they move through the continuum of services. Interventions should be targeted and focused, based on specific needs that emerge from data. With a tighter focus on in-class differentiation, Tiers 2 and 3 could be strategically used for students who are not progressing in class. Tiers 2 and 3 should be used to supplement—not supplant—core instruction. This additional instructional time in Tiers 2 and 3 should be documented and monitored by the district.
- D. The district should consult the Massachusetts Tiered System of Support (MTSS) (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/mtss/>) for more detailed guidance on how to establish and monitor an effective tiered system of support.

Benefits: A more effective tiered system of support with opportunities for students with a range of abilities to be appropriately challenged and supported will provide access to learning for all students.

Finance and Asset Management

12. The district should take a variety of steps to make sure that its funds are allocated efficiently, in accordance with the goals and priorities in its AIP and SIPs, and in the ways that will boost student achievement most effectively.

- A. Unit A collective bargaining agreement:** As it completes negotiations on a successor collective bargaining agreement for Unit A (see first recommendation under Human Resources and Professional Development above), the district should:
1. analyze the allocation of resources under the language of the old agreement (and its interpretation via past practice) and under any proposed new language, including
 - a. the provisions for the amount of time teachers may be required to teach and the list of duties they are not responsible for (see first recommendation under Human Resources and Professional Development above),
 - b. the provisions for common planning time and its direction by administrators, and
 - c. the provisions for sick time; and
 2. set as goals for the negotiation remedying the inefficiencies and achieving the possible cost-savings identified through this analysis.
- B. Other agreements:** In negotiating other agreements, for instance, the next paraprofessional collective bargaining agreement, the district should similarly analyze the allocation of resources under the agreement and under any proposed new language, and set goals remedying any identified inefficiencies and achieving any identified cost-savings.
- C. Consolidation of elementary schools:** As a means to achieve further cost-savings (e.g., by eliminating the duplication of staff roles and reducing operational expenses), the district needs to continue implementing plans to build a new elementary school in Athol, closing the Riverbend, Sanders Street, and Pleasant Street schools.
- D. Inclusion of improvement plan goals and priorities in budget documentation and presentations:** As part of ensuring that School Improvement Plans (SIPs) and the Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) provide direction and focus for the schools and district, goals and priorities from the plans should be included in the budget documentation and presentations with an explanation of how funds are allocated to support these goals and priorities.

1. The budget should be aligned with the AIP and SIPs: the allocation of funds should reflect the plans' goals and priorities. In order to accomplish this, the school committee should set guidelines for budget development in accord with these goals and priorities.
2. Information and resources about establishing budget priorities can be found in *Smart School Budgeting* from The Rennie Center and The Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials (MASBO):
(<http://www.renniecenter.org/research/SmartSchoolBudgeting.pdf>).
3. As is the case in many districts, the school committee should have more in-depth conversations with district administration about each year's budget and about how it reflects district goals and priorities.

E. Review of staffing plan: As it allocates funds through budget development, the district should review the way it assigns staff roles and uses staff time. Since, as in any district, the large majority of Athol-Royalston's expenditures are in the areas of salaries and benefits, the way it uses staff has to be continually re-examined.

1. In connection with this review, the district should examine the teacher absence rates at all of its schools, determine the reasons for the high rates of absence across schools, and take steps to reduce the number of absences.

F. Comparison of expenditures: The district should compare its expenditures to comparable districts and the state average to better understand current and possible allocation of resources.

1. Large differences between expenditures by comparable districts and/or the state can be followed up with further investigation of specific expenditures by the district and their likely impact on student performance, as well as inquiries to other districts.
2. The following resources provide data to support these comparisons:

ESE's School Finance Statistical Comparisons:

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/statistics/>

District Analysis and Review Tools (DARTs): <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/dart/>

In particular, the DART for Staffing and Finance

(<http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/dart/DARTFinanceStaff.xlsx>) provides reports comparing finance and staffing data from four districts and the state over three years.

G. Cooperation with other districts: The district should investigate cooperating with neighboring districts on programs and services where expenses can be shared, with savings to all participating districts.

1. As district staff make inquiries to other districts about particular expenditures, as recommended in F. above, they should pursue the possibility of sharing expenses with neighboring districts—for instance, expenses for food services.
2. Nearby communities are also experiencing financial constraints, and might welcome the possibility of savings in purchasing as the result of group buying and bidding.

H. Special education review: The district has a high percentage of students in special education programs. Detailed review of these programs and their effectiveness, and of the district's identification practices, could drive revisions to the allocation of resources for more targeted and effective interventions and programs.

Benefits: Benefits to the district from implementing these recommendations include:

- alignment of resource allocation with plans and their objectives,
- more effective use of resources,
- more shared understanding of plans and programs among stakeholders including the school committee, and
- greater accountability for district leadership and the school committee.