



Massachusetts Department of
**ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY
EDUCATION**

**Riverbend-Sanders Street School
Level 4 / School Redesign Grant (SRG)
Monitoring Site Visit**

December 2013

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About the Level 4 Monitoring Site Visit Process

The purpose of the Monitoring Site Visit (MSV) is to provide Level 4 schools and School Redesign Grant (SRG) recipients with formative feedback in support of turnaround efforts. The MSV will help districts and schools understand where turnaround implementation is successful or lagging, as well as how future plans can be improved.

The MSV process is designed around the 11 Essential Conditions for School Effectiveness (Essential Conditions). The Essential Conditions were developed in 2009 and voted into regulation by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2010 to represent a research- and practice-based consensus of practices for effective schools. The Essential Conditions are central to ESE's systems for accountability and assistance. The MSV focuses on the following Essential Conditions: Effective District Systems for School Support and Intervention; Effective School Leadership; Aligned Curriculum; Effective Instruction; Student Assessment; Tiered Instruction and Adequate Learning Time; and Student Social, Emotional, and Health Needs. The remaining Essential Conditions will be examined only when relevant to a school's turnaround efforts.

The MSV utilizes multiple sources of evidence (documents, interviews, classroom visits) to understand the progress the school has made toward implementing plans for school turnaround. Over the course of the visit, evidence is collected and analyzed by a team composed of educators and consultants to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The final product of the MSV is a written report, documenting the team's findings (strengths and areas for improvement) regarding current school implementation of turnaround initiatives. The final page of the report is used to record the discussion between the team and the school during the prioritization process. Below is a detailed description of each section.

Strengths:

Strengths are used to identify programs, practices and operations that are working well and supporting effective school turnaround implementation. Strengths identified by the site team are based on evidence collected during the visit.

Areas for Improvement:

Areas for improvement identify practices and operations that may need attention to better serve students and/or school turnaround implementation. Areas for improvement identified by the site visit team are based on evidence collected during the visit.

Prioritization Process:

This section is developed collaboratively on the last day of the site visit. The school and team prioritize areas for improvement of SRG implementation to develop a focused plan for maximum impact within the available resources.

Essential Condition 1: Effective District Systems for School Support and Intervention

Strengths

The site visit team did not find areas of strength related to Effective District Systems for School Support and Intervention that rose to the level of a finding.

Areas for Improvement

The district does not have fully developed systems and processes to address the staffing and instructional needs of its lowest performing school.

- The district does not provide the principal with sufficient support for effective supervision and evaluation. District leadership noted that the Athol-Royalston School District recently revised the collective bargaining agreement to allow for increased classroom observations, including unannounced visits, in accordance with the new teacher evaluation system. In an interview, the principal reported that administrative duties, both at the school (e.g., chairing all Individualized Education Program [IEP] and child study team meetings) and at the district, where she is engaged in turnaround planning efforts, prevent her from conducting as many classroom observations as she would like. Further, since the two schools are in two buildings in separate locations, the principal needs to split her time between the two sites. The principal noted the importance of observations and evaluations to improving instruction at the school, but said that her schedule did not allow sufficient time for this work. In focus groups, teachers also stated that the principal's feedback on observations was helpful, but recognized that she is not in the building enough, noting that she has to go between two campuses and is often engaged in district-level meetings. Most teachers reported that they had received one formal observation, but had not received many informal observations.
- The district does not provide sufficient leadership support and technical expertise to improve programs, services, and instruction for students with disabilities. The principal reported that at the Riverbend School, approximately 48 percent of its students are served through special education. She stated that this percentage was too high, and felt that special education had become the default intervention for struggling students. Further, she felt that the district's placement of three substantially separate special education classrooms at the school prevented them from employing an inclusion model for the instruction of these students, since there were no grade K-2 classrooms and an overrepresentation of students with special needs in the three typical grade three and four classrooms in the building. When asked about the process for identifying special needs students, and specifically what data were examined, teachers reported that the process was informal and that data collected for review of students' progress was up to the teacher. One teacher noted that she used a behavior analysis tool to generate data on a student's performance, but that there was nothing available school wide or districtwide for teachers to use. In one focus group with special education teachers, all teachers reported being reassigned to teach special education this year. Although these teachers hold certification for their new roles, considerable time had elapsed since they had last served in these positions, and they were placed without being provided with any additional training or support in the use of assessments and interventions. The superintendent noted that special education teachers often focused on the administrative functions of their position, such as writing IEPs, and left core instruction to paraprofessionals who, the superintendent noted, were not trained to teach.

Essential Condition 2: Effective School Leadership

Strengths

The site visit team did not find areas of strength related to Effective School Leadership that rose to the level of a finding.

Areas for Improvement

The principal has a clear focus on driving student success at the school, but the entire staff is not yet prepared to be accountable for that focus.

- The principal acts strategically and purposefully in pursuit of a clear educational mission and empowers others to do the same. In interviews, the principal clearly articulated her plan for the school, identifying areas of focus she believed would drive student achievement – specifically, improved literacy instruction and assessments. The principal reported that teachers were not regularly using assessments to inform their instruction; this prompted her to institute use of the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System (BAS), along with professional development designed to support its implementation from Teachers for Teachers. Both teachers and principal reported that the principal had enlisted staff to help drive the necessary changes identified by leadership. Specifically, teachers and the principal described the formation of a districtwide literacy committee (co-chaired by the principal) that is tasked with improving the literacy program and implementing the new assessments. Both groups reported that the principal had sought and gained representation from multiple grade levels on the committee. The teachers and principal also noted the recent formation of a mathematics committee charged with rewriting the school's mathematics curriculum to align with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS).
- There is not a schoolwide, results-oriented focus on teaching, learning, and student success. Although the principal presented several goals for the school and steps to achieve them, teachers, in focus groups, did not consistently report practices aligned to driving student learning. For example, when asked about the use of data, teachers reported that they do not use consistent assessments and that most assessments are teacher-created and vary from class to class. Teachers also noted that they receive student performance data from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), but that they do not analyze or use the data to inform their instruction. When asked what could improve achievement at the school, teachers cited the need for enhanced social services to address the social and emotional needs of students and families. The superintendent reported that when asked a similar question during a mandatory stakeholders' assessment dictated by the school's Level 4 status, teachers similarly responded that the school needed a full-time counselor and nurse, but did not comment on instruction.
- Supervision and evaluation are starting to be tied to results, and promote the growth and development of staff. In focus groups, stakeholders reported that the district has recently implemented the state's teacher evaluation system. The superintendent noted that the new principal was hired, in part, because she has three years of experience implementing the evaluation system in her former district. Additionally, teachers and the principal reported that each teacher had received an iPad loaded with TeachPoint software so they could receive timely feedback from their observations online and respond immediately. Although these systems are in place, the principal noted that they were only recently implemented, and that she had not yet used the results of the observations to make staffing decisions or to schedule professional development (PD) to support identified deficiencies in instruction.

Essential Condition 3: Aligned Curriculum

Strengths

The site visit team did not find areas of strength related to Aligned Curriculum that rose to the level of a finding.

Areas for Improvement

The school's curricula are not aligned to state curriculum frameworks and are not aligned vertically between grades or horizontally across classrooms at the same grade level.

- School curricula are not aligned to the 2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. In interviews, the principal noted that the schoolwide curriculum was underdeveloped and not aligned to the CCSS. The scope and sequence maps reviewed by the site visit team referenced the CCSS, but teachers and leadership reported that the curricular materials available to teachers are not aligned. Teachers reported that the curriculum had not been revised recently and so much of it, mathematics in particular, was not aligned to the CCSS. Some teachers reported that they locate materials to supplement the school's curriculum, and work to align it to the CCSS, but reported that they do that on their own and not all teachers are using supplemental materials. In focus groups, the principal and teachers noted that the literacy and mathematics committees were tasked with developing a curriculum that aligned to the CCSS, but that process had not yet begun. A review of lesson plans showed that lessons were not aligned to the CCSS. Rather, lesson plans lacked a common format, did not contain similar elements (e.g., essential questions, assessments) and listed activities for the class without identifying student learning outcomes.
- The curriculum is not horizontally or vertically aligned. In focus groups, teachers reported that they write curriculum in a bubble and that they do not plan with teachers in other grade levels to ensure alignment. Similarly, teachers reported that many of their students do not enter their classes on grade level even though they had attended the school the previous year. Teachers also reported that they do not have common planning time for curriculum development, that lessons vary across classrooms in the same grade, and that they have not had opportunities (in vertical teams) to discuss students' learning gaps. A review of teacher schedules indicated that teachers in the same grade level had schedules that differed significantly in the amount of instructional time allotted to core instructional areas. For instance, one grade two teacher allots 425 minutes per week to the teaching of mathematics, while her colleague schedules only 110 minutes of mathematics instruction.

Essential Condition 4: Effective Instruction

Strengths

The site visit team did not find areas of strength related to Effective Instruction that rose to the level of a finding.

Areas for Improvement

The school does not employ a consistent set of instructional practices that are research-based and responsive to student needs.

- Instructional staff do not provide students with lessons that promote higher-order thinking. During classroom observations, site visit team members consistently observed students engaged in low-level activities (e.g., completing worksheets and identifying items in a picture). Similarly, the principal reported that teachers do not have the instructional expertise needed to engage all students in higher-order thinking, and reported that teachers resort to activities, such as worksheets. Students were asked to examine, analyze, and interpret information in only 25 percent of classes observed (n=16). In the majority of classrooms, students were engaged in call-and-response with teachers and filling in definitions. Many lessons observed were not connected to student learning objectives; teacher questions that were directly aligned with objectives were observed in only 19 percent of classrooms.
- Teachers do not use instruction that aligns with students' learning needs. In focus groups, teachers reported that the lack of consistent and robust assessments prevents them from fully understanding the needs of their students. Many teachers noted that the DIBELS assessment, which is consistently used by teachers, was a screening tool and identified that students had a deficiency, but not specifically what it was or why. The principal also reported that teachers do not regularly differentiate or use tiered instruction; classroom observations by site visit team members provided confirmation as tiered instruction was observed in only 19 percent of classes. Most instruction observed was direct, whole group, and teacher-led. The principal and some teachers also noted that teachers often refer struggling students to special education because they do not have the expertise to address those students' learning needs in class. Some special education teachers reported that general education teachers do not use accommodations that they recommend for students effectively. At the district level, the special education director reported that teachers have not received sufficient professional development on how to accommodate diverse student needs.
- Teachers do not engage in focused ongoing discussions about effective instructional practice. Teachers reported that they do not have sufficient common planning time, and therefore, conversations with other teachers are informal or happen outside of school hours. However, an analysis of teachers' schedules corroborated the principal's report that all teachers have one hour free during mid-day while students are at lunch and recess. The principal and teachers reported that this time, which is additional to contractual preparation time, is not used for collaborative planning. The principal reported that she has tried to organize a data team with regular meetings as a way for teachers to engage in discussions about student progress, but that some teachers have refused to attend these meetings. When asked about support for teachers in the school, district leadership noted that they no longer have instructional coaches to support teachers' professional development.

Essential Condition 5: Student Assessment

Strengths

The site visit team did not find areas of strength related to Student Assessment that rose to the level of a finding.

Areas for Improvement

The school does not use a system of formative and benchmark assessments.

- The school has a minimal, inconsistent use of assessments for instructional planning and student progress monitoring. As noted earlier, the school does not have an effective system of assessments, and teachers do not regularly use data to monitor the progress of their students. Teachers and the principal reported that DIBELS is used on a schoolwide basis, but felt that this assessment had shortcomings, stating that it is a screening tool and not a diagnostic tool. Teachers reported that they create most of the assessments that they use and that they are not consistent across classes. When asked about monitoring student progress, teachers reported an informal system of observing students to gauge if they are improving. Special education teachers reported that there is a Functional Behavior Analysis (FBA) tool, but that it is used inconsistently to determine the root of behavioral issues exhibited by a student.
- Teachers and school leaders do not systematically analyze and use available data. Although teachers reported that they have limited access to data, they also reported limited use of data that is available, including MCAS and DIBELS. When asked about professional development on the use of data, the principal noted that they had scheduled some PD time but that it was not extensive. In focus groups, teachers did not report using data to determine gaps in the curriculum, nor did teachers or the principal report using data to evaluate the effectiveness of PD. The principal noted that restrictions in the collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with the teachers had made it difficult to find time for regular data team meetings and to mandate attendance. Neither the principal, teachers, nor district leaders discussed any link between instructional improvement initiatives and instructional trends in MCAS performance.

Essential Condition 8: Tiered Instruction and Adequate Learning Time

Strengths

The site visit team did not find areas of strength related to Tiered Instruction and Adequate Learning Time that rose to the level of a finding.

Areas for Improvement

The school does not have a common understanding of, or a systematic approach to, providing a tiered system of student support.

- Teachers do not have sufficient expertise to meet the learning needs of all students. In focus groups, teachers reported that their students have a range of skill levels and noted that it is challenging to teach to the needs of all students. This was confirmed by classroom observations during which differentiated instruction was seen in only 19 percent of classes. In an interview with the principal, she reported that teachers do not have the knowledge and skill to properly tier instruction and, as a result, there is an overreliance on special education. She noted that the 48 percent special education rate was unnecessarily high – an assessment that was shared by the superintendent and special education director in focus group meetings. In interviews, special education teachers shared this same belief, and estimated that approximately 10-to-50 percent of their students could be in general education classrooms if teachers were more skilled at accommodating all students. They shared examples of when general education teachers had been resistant to employing modifications recommended by special education staff, such as giving a student more space in the classroom or using sensory manipulatives such as stress balls.
- The school does not have clear protocols or guidelines for referring students to tiered interventions, including special education. When asked about the process for referring students to special education, teachers noted that there used to be a protocol for referrals, but that it was no longer used. Instead teachers stated that they rely on a more informal evaluation system where they ask the special education teachers to observe students in their class and make recommendations. When asked if they rely on Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs) to make referrals for students with behavioral challenges, one teacher stated that she did, but noted that other teachers did not. Teachers did not articulate a clear process as to how students move out of special education. They noted that they follow the goals in students' IEPs, but there was not a set protocol for transitioning students out of special education. When asked how students were identified for interventions other than special education or Title 1 services, teachers reported that they did not follow formal criteria to group students, but relied solely on observing their progress in class.
- Interventions are not research-proven and taught by qualified professionals. When asked about how they select interventions for students, teachers reported that they rely on what they think is right and did not describe a research-based approach. Teachers noted that many of the interventions they use, such as reading and mathematics programs, have been at the school for years and so they use what is there. According to teachers, principal, and district leadership, three special education teachers are serving in new roles this year that are significantly different from their previous assignments. These teachers have not received any orientation, training, or support to familiarize them with the Wechsler Individual Achievement Test (WIAT) or with the Wilson Reading program that is the primary special education intervention used by the district. In an interview with district leadership, the superintendent stated that paraprofessionals have responsibilities that exceed their qualifications and that they are often responsible for instruction

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because teachers are doing administrative work, such as writing IEPs. Additionally, other members of district leadership noted that the reading coaches they have in schools are not properly trained or qualified for the demands of the job, and do not have skills or expertise in using data to inform their practice and monitor student progress.

Essential Condition 9: Students' Social, Emotional, and Health Needs

Strengths

The school creates a safe school environment that addresses the social, emotional, and health needs of its students.

- School leaders and staff create a safe and supportive learning environment. Site visit team members observed students behaving according to implicit or explicit rules and expectations in 100 percent of classrooms, and noted that students were well-behaved, engaged in lessons, and on task. Similarly, site visit team members observed evidence of respectful interactions in 100 percent of classrooms and noted teachers using positive language to encourage students and recognize success, and thanking students for participating. In focus groups, students reported that they are happy and like coming to school. All students in the focus group reported that they knew of someone at the school they could talk to if they were having issues or challenges.
- The school has a robust system to support the physical and behavioral health of students. In interviews, stakeholders reported that their students have significant needs that have been increasing over time and include students in poverty, homeless students, and students in the foster care system. When asked about the supports to address those needs, staff reported a very comprehensive system of supports for students and their families. For example, the school has a full-time liaison to connect students and their families with the services they need. Staff also gave examples of the liaison helping students find coats and assisting parents with transportation to the school and school events. They noted that the school has partnerships with the North Quabbin Community Coalition and Athol Hospital, and that there is an emergency team that will come to the school to evaluate a student who may need hospitalization. Staff also reported that the school offers dental and vision screenings, as well as therapists who offer on-site counseling. The cafeteria director noted that the school is participating in a fresh fruits and vegetables program, and reported that the students have been very receptive.

Areas for Improvement

The site visit team did not find areas for improvement related to Students' Social, Emotional, and Health Needs that rose to the level of a finding.

Prioritization Process

The site visit team met with the Riverbend/Sanders Street School's leadership team to review its findings, discuss the school's areas of strengths and areas for improvement, prioritize areas for improvement, and discuss ways to address the identified areas for improvement.

School and district leaders, teacher representatives and the site visit team were in agreement that there are strengths present in the school. Areas of strength the team discussed included classroom environment and the emerging instructional vision provided by the newly appointed school leader. The site visit team also noted the following areas for growth: tiered instruction, curriculum, and effective instruction.

The group identified Aligned Curriculum as the Essential Condition to prioritize for growth. The group identified the following priority within this Essential Condition as having the most potential impact on the success of the school as a whole: aligning curriculum to the 2011 Massachusetts State Curriculum Frameworks and aligning curriculum vertically and horizontally.

The team then developed the following goal, success measure, and action plan:

Goal: The school's curricula are aligned to the 2011 Massachusetts State Curriculum Frameworks and are aligned vertically between grades and horizontally across classrooms at the same grade level.

Success Measure: Curriculum maps will include topics and/or units, essential questions and assessments that are aligned to the Common Core State Standards, provide pacing guides and identify necessary resources.

Actions	Target Dates	Champions
Form committee for curriculum development, inform stakeholders about the work, and invite stakeholder participation.	12/31/13	Central office with support from principals
Identify and gather resources to pay curriculum writers.	12/31/13	Central office
Break down 2011 Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks by month.	2/28/14	Committee
Analyze model units.	3/28/14	Committee
Publish document as appendix to current curriculum scope and sequence.	8/1/14	Stakeholders