

Comprehensive Needs Assessment Amherst Regional Middle School

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Introduction

One of the goals from the 2009-2010 *Amherst, Pelham and Amherst-Pelham Regional District Goals* document, approved by the Regional School Committee and the Superintendent, is to "Assess the effectiveness of the Amherst Regional Middle School. Prepare and begin to implement a set of recommendations based on the assessment." In response to that goal, a contract was established between Superintendent Dr. Alberto Rodriguez, acting on behalf of the school division, and consultant Dr. Barry Beers on November 5, 2009.

The contract specified the following "services and goods" that would be provided by Dr. Beers, hereby identified as "the consultant."

A) Perform a needs assessment to include the following activities:

- 1) Review all appropriate quantitative data such as student achievement data, discipline data, attendance, etc.
- 2) Review of qualitative data to include parent surveys, interviews, etc.
- 3) Observations of classrooms.
- 4) Review of the School Improvement Plan.
- 5) Review of expectations to include delivery of instruction, planning and assessment.
- 6) Analysis of systems of instructional accountability.
- 7) Analysis of effectiveness of the school leadership team.
- 8) Review of the correlation between the stated and the taught curriculum and the consistency of delivery throughout the school.

B) Provide professional development (as dictated by the needs assessment) in the following areas:

- 1) Data-driven school improvement planning to include development, implementation and monitoring.
- 2) Instructional supervision
 - a) formal observations
 - b) walk-throughs
 - c) hire/fire conferencing
 - d) learning conversations
- 3) Delivery of instruction - best practices for teachers
 - a) development of learning targets
 - b) student engagement
 - c) formative assessment
 - d) differentiated instruction
- 4) Development and use of common assessments

C) Products:

- 1) A written, data-driven school improvement plan that includes the goal, statement of need, evidence of success, strategies, persons responsible, team members, resources needed, evidence, and completion date.
- 2) A written system of instructional supervision that focuses on the learner and identifies areas of strength and areas needing improvement for each teacher and the faculty as a whole.

- 3) A written procedure for providing post-observation feedback based on the needs of the teacher. Two sets of guidelines will be provided based on whether the teacher is meeting expectations or not.
- 4) A user friendly database that combines all available data in one location at the finger tips of the administrators, the leadership team, and/or teachers.

The summary of the needs assessment is contained in the remainder of this report.

1) Review all appropriate quantitative data such as student achievement data, discipline data, attendance, etc.

The results listed below were obtained by examining the state report card:

- AYP not made in 2009 which puts the school in year two of restructuring because of the performance of subgroups in Mathematics.
- The performance rating for English Language Arts was “very high” and for Mathematics it was “high.”

English Language Arts

- All subgroups met the AYP standard by meeting the performance standard or by meeting the improvement standard.
- The Special Education (87.9%) and Low Income (89.6%) subgroups did not meet the performance standard (90.2%) and the Asian or Pacific Island (-1.1 improvement) subgroup did not meet the improvement standard (+1.4).
- The improvement rating is “on target.”
- In the 7th grade, 84% of the students passed (26% advanced, 58% proficient). *At the state level, 70% of students passed (14% advanced, 56% proficient).*
- In the 8th grade, 91% of the students passed (32% advanced, 59% proficient). *At the state level, 78% of students passed (15% advanced, 63% proficient).*
- All subgroups met the attendance requirement.

Mathematics

- The Asian or Pacific Island subgroup (83.8 % performance and -2.6 improvement) did not make the performance standard (84.3%) or the improvement standard (+2.3).
- Four of the five subgroups did not meet the performance standard of 84.3% (Special Education 68.1%, Low Income 74.8%, Asian Pacific Island 83.8% and Hispanic 77.1%).
- The improvement rating is “on target.”
- In the 7th grade, 74% of the students passed (31% advanced and 43% proficient). *At the state level, 49% of students passed (16% advanced, 33% proficient).*
- In the 8th grade, 65% of the students passed (36% advanced and 29% proficient). *At the state level, 48% of students passed (20% advanced, 28% proficient).*
- All subgroups met the attendance requirement.

The data below reveal a discrepancy between grades given during the first trimester of 2010 and the results of the MCAS testing. A review of the final grades for 2009 showed a similar discrepancy.

MCAS with first trimester grades

- Math

- Of the students who were in the “Warned/Failing” category on the MCAS, 71% got a B+ or better for their first trimester grade. Approximately 75% of these students were in special education.
- Of the students who were in the “Needs Improvement” category on the MCAS, 70% got a B+ or better for their first trimester grade. Approximately 50% of these students were in special education.
- English
 - Of the students who were in the “Warned/Failing” category on the MCAS, 92% got a B+ or better for their first trimester grade. Almost all of these students were in special education.
 - Of the students who were in the “Needs Improvement” category on the MCAS, 63% got a B+ or better for their first trimester grade. Approximately 50% of these students were in special education.

The standards in ELA and Mathematics remain the same for 2010 but the year after that the ELA increases by 4.9 to 95.1% and the Mathematics standard increases by 7.9 to 92.2%.

Grades

Sixteen F’s were recorded in core classes last year. Seven of these Fs were by two students. The highest failure rate was in PE.

2) Review of qualitative data to include parent surveys, interviews, etc.

Parent Survey

A survey was completed by 129 parents (sixty-three seventh grade and sixty-six eighth grade) in the Spring of 2009. The results of the survey are listed on the school web site although it is difficult to read due to the formatting. The twenty-three page report of results is broken down into the following categories: Core Learning Percents, Safety, School Climate, and Communication. Each tally of responses is recorded separately for 7th and 8th grade parents.

The following conclusions were made by the consultant after a review of the survey results:

Parents of 7th and 8th grade parents who responded to the survey felt that:

1. The level of challenge and expectations for their child's learning was adequate.
2. Their child was adequately prepared to meet the expectations of his/her current class.
3. The vast majority of parents felt that their child received meaningful homework. An exception to this opinion was expressed for 8th grade science where 25% disagreed and 6% strongly disagreed.
4. Although the majority of parents stated that they were regularly informed of their child's work/progress, some parents disagreed, especially in the 7th grade (roughly 25%).
5. Overall, parents said that their child was positive about his/her experience at school although at the 8th grade 20% disagreed.
6. The vast majority of parents felt the school provided information about upcoming events and important information about the school; although at the 7th grade 24% disagreed.

Teacher Survey

The results of the National Middle School Association Middle Grades Assessment were deployed on September 10, 2009. The survey was completed by forty-two teachers, three administrators, six support staff, and one other. The respondents gave their response to sixteen topics. Each topic listed 4-11 questions.

The following conclusions were made by the consultant after a review of the survey results:

The staff who responded to the survey felt that:

1. Students are actively engaged in their learning (83%).
2. Teachers develop learning tasks that challenge each student to achieve at high levels (87%).
3. Teachers provide a variety of challenging learning activities (87%).
4. Teachers differentiate their instructional approaches based upon student learning needs (67%). It is significant to note that almost one-third of the respondents were neutral or disagreed.
5. Teachers gather evidence of student learning during instruction (69%). Twenty percent of respondents were neutral regarding this statement.

6. Teachers develop specific student learning expectations based on established content standards (83%).
7. Teachers participate in professional learning experiences that enhance the use of various instructional strategies (51%). It is significant to note that only half of the respondents agreed to this statement.
8. Students move seamlessly from elementary school to middle school (43%). More than half of respondents did not agree with this statement.

Considering the state of transition of the school leadership team, this category was not included in the comments from the consultant. However, a cursory review of the responses indicates that staff members are positive regarding the performance of the current school leadership team even though the principal must split his time between two schools.

Meetings with Teachers

On December 7, 2009, the consultant met with two groups of teachers with 5-7 members in each group. The meetings only lasted about twenty minutes each because the teachers had to return to class. The consultant made the following conclusions based on the comments made by the teachers in the groups:

1. The strengths of the school include the curriculum offerings, the commitment of teachers to do a good job in tough times, and the freedom for teachers to choose what and how they teach.
2. The areas needing improvement include a need for more emphasis on the middle school model, consistent leadership, funding, the special education model, and the move to the Response to Intervention model.
3. Teachers reported that there were no written expectations for planning, instruction, or assessment. However, they felt that most teachers were doing a good job and that there was consistency even in the absence of written guidelines.
4. Common assessments only existed in Mathematics and in a few English classes.
5. Teachers rarely saw administrators in the classrooms unless they were getting a formal observation.
6. Teachers expressed frustration that some of the public said the middle school was “broken.” Overall, they felt morale was low because of budget cuts and public opinion.

On January 11, 2010, the consultant offered three more options for teachers to share their thoughts with him. All teachers were informed that they could meet with the consultant after school, send an e-mail to him, or send an e-mail to the assistant principal who would forward the comments to the consultant without revealing the identity of the sender. A handful of teachers stayed after school but no e-mails were received by the consultant.

Meeting with Parents

In order to obtain feedback from the parents, the consultant asked that a “focus group” be established that would represent the demographics of the students served by the school division. Members of the Parent Guardian Organizations (PGOs) from each of the district’s Elementary, Middle, and High Schools were asked to recruit volunteers to participate in the focus group. The consultant met with seventeen parents on December 7, 2009. The group was not a representative sample. However, the consultant was informed that others were asked to join but they were not in attendance.

Group response methods were used so that all members could share their opinions. The parents informed the consultant that the main strengths (in no particular order) of the school included safety and cleanliness, the arts, and the dedication of the staff. The areas needing the most improvement included communication across the board and a lack of rigor.

When asked about the 6th grade being a part of the middle school, the parents said that their concerns were social, not academic. They reported that the only reason pre-algebra was not offered in the 7th grade was because the previous grades did not prepare the students for that challenge. In the opinion of most, improvements have been made from previous years. However, they continually pointed out problems with inconsistency from grade level to grade level, from team to team, and from teacher to teacher.

There was mixed reaction to the “Extensions” provided in the mathematics department. Most parents felt it was not effective and that parents had to do the teaching. A few saw no problem with it. Most agreed that the only reason they had their child do “Extensions” was so they could take Algebra in the 8th grade. Some felt the work was not challenging, merely more to do. There was a feeling that data should be shared more with parents regarding how the school was doing in general and in regard to other schools.

Meeting with Curriculum Leaders and Members of the School Council

The consultant initially planned to meet with the curriculum leaders to work on the data-driven School Improvement Plan that is called for in the contract. The consultant was informed that this effort should be undertaken by the School Council per Massachusetts law. Therefore, a meeting was scheduled with the School Council on December 7, 2009. Prior to the meeting, the consultant asked the school administration to share the following request with members of the School Council:

“Please ask as many participants (for the School Improvement Plan meeting) as you can come up with to provide 2-3 examples of data (from their area of expertise) that need to be addressed for improvement.” Various examples of data that could be reviewed were provided.

The participants at the school council meeting included parents, teachers, curriculum leaders, and administrators. The consultant started the meeting by stating the following objective: To develop a

draft school improvement plan that met certain criteria. It appeared that none of the members had brought any data with them to be reviewed. It became readily apparent that the consultant had a different agenda than most of the members of the School Council. The general feeling of the School Council was that the plan should be written for the 2010-11 school year based on the findings of the consultant. Some felt that the school improvement plan could not be written until a budget was established. Some felt that they should keep the plan written for 2008-09. A subsequent meeting, facilitated by the principal, provided similar results according to his summary of the meeting.

3) Observations of classrooms

On November 6, 2009, the consultant performed walk-throughs in eleven core classrooms and one elective classroom. Six of the observations were done with one assistant principal and then six more with the other assistant principal. Teachers from all teams were visited. After each observation, the consultant and administrators debriefed regarding what was observed and what would be recommended for improvement. The consultant suggested to the assistant principals that three questions should be considered during the observations in order to determine the level of “Evidence of Learning.” The three questions were:

- What should the students be learning that day? (stated as the objective)
- How were students engaged in the accomplishment of the objective?
- How did the teacher know whether the students met the objective or not?

The instruction that the consultant witnessed was very traditional. The emphasis was on what was taught rather than what was learned. Although many teachers posted agendas, daily objectives for what the students should be learning that day were rarely posted. The main two student activities witnessed were “watching” and “copying.” When soliciting responses from students, the teachers typically called on the first hand up, responded to the first call out, or responded to the choral responses from the same small group of students. There was rarely any evidence of methods used to check group understanding such as the use of white boards, ABCD cards, or signaling. There was little to no evidence of the use of data-driven differentiated instruction.

On January 11 and 12, 2010, the consultant observed another twenty-five core, elective, and special education classrooms. Overall, the consultant found the same results as previous visits. However, the special education and general intervention classrooms were the exception. The amount and quality of engagement were exemplary. The norm in the special education classrooms was one of high expectations and high support to meet those expectations. It is noted that the enrollments were small which facilitates this type of environment. However, the commendable conditions in these classrooms were more the result of the teacher behaviors than the class size.

4) Review of the School Improvement Plan

The consultant was unable to obtain a copy of the School Improvement Plan for 2009-2010. There is a copy of the 2008-2009 version on the ARMS website. The consultant was informed that the plan for 2009-2010 was the same as the previous year. The 2008-2009 document basically has

four parts: a Vision Statement, a section titled “High Achievement For Every Child,” a section titled “Communication,” and a description of the Turning Points model.

The first and only goal under High Achievement states: “We are committed to 100% of our students achieving high status. We are working towards setting high expectations for every child by providing appropriate levels of support and challenge. We are committed to knowing each child, his/her strengths and areas of need, building prior knowledge and promoting habits of mind and intellectual inquiry.” Three bullets are listed beneath the header of “Determine the current effectiveness in meeting the needs of all students:”

- Analyze data (current and past students) (MCAS, course selection.....)
- Survey current and past students and parents
- Focus groups.

The first and only goal under Communication states: “To improve communication with parents/guardians to more actively inform and involve them in supporting learning and engagement in our school (copied as is) community.” The five bullets listed under the goal are:

1. Survey effectiveness of communication.
2. Improve website (curriculum focus, FAQ,.....).
3. Solidify Open House information (course expectations (copied as is)).
4. Activate/train teachers to use the online grading.
5. Train students/parents/guardians to use online grading.

The last two paragraphs describe the organization of teams, the work of the “Inquiry Groups” (which according to the principal do not exist) and how the MCAS results have identified areas needing improvement. However, these areas of need and the next steps for growth are not included.

When the consultant spoke to teachers and parents, the vast majority informed him that they knew a School Improvement Plan existed but they didn’t know who created it and they didn’t know what was in it.

5) Review of expectations to include delivery of instruction, planning, and assessment.

There is nothing in writing that the consultant was able to obtain that listed any expectations for delivery of instruction, planning and/or assessment. There are no grading or homework policies. There is no identification of effective teaching strategies that should be employed by the teachers at the school. There is no set of guidelines for daily lesson planning and plans are not collected.

The consultant was informed that some teachers participated in “Skillful Teaching” training in the past. Currently, this program is only provided for teachers in their second year.

There is evidence of long range planning in some departments, but the extent to which daily planning occurs depends on the desire of the individual teacher to do so. A few daily plans

collected by the consultant revealed some detail, but most of the plans were minimal at best. Some teachers reported that they didn't write lesson plans.

6) Analysis of systems of instructional accountability

Walk-through observations are rare. Non-tenured teachers (1-3 years of experience) receive one observation per semester. Tenured teachers receive one observation every two years. According to teachers and administrators, all teachers are meeting expectations although everyone can improve.

Teachers informed me that they would like to get more feedback from school leaders. Some expressed a desire to be challenged to improve professionally.

7) Analysis of effectiveness of the school leadership team

The high school principal is also the acting middle school principal. There are two assistant principals on site. It is clear that the experience and competence of the high school principal and the dedicated work of the assistant principals have kept the school functioning during the absence of a permanent principal at the middle school.

The curriculum leaders are dedicated professionals. One problem is that they have responsibility for the delivery of the curriculum, but they have little or no time provided to get the job done. .

8) Review of the correlation between the stated and the taught curriculum and the consistency of delivery throughout the school.

In the absence of daily lesson planning, common assessments, and frequent monitoring of classrooms by administrators, any conclusions regarding the correlation between the stated and taught curriculum would be speculative.

However, the classroom observations conducted by the consultant did reveal the presentation of topics that are commonly taught in middle school. Also, the performance of the students on the MCAS would indicate that the major components of the state curriculum are being covered.

Recommendations (Not prioritized)

Develop a data-driven school improvement plan that meets the following criteria:

- User friendly – no more than one page per goal, no more than five goals.
- A living document to be discussed at faculty, department, and parent meetings.
- Developed by teachers and administrators with final approval of the School Council.
- Aligned between the evidence of need (current status), the evidence of success (desired status) and the strategies to get from one to the other.
- Assigns responsibility for various tasks with timelines.
- Has ownership by the faculty and staff.
- Shared with all stake holders (students, parents, community) for review and suggested revisions.

Establish written policies for grading and homework.

- To be developed by teachers with approval by administrators.
- These should be for all subjects with a few exceptions based on the needs of various programs of study. For example, mathematics teachers typically assign more homework; English teachers typically assign more writing assignments.

Establish and document in writing clear expectations for planning, delivery of instruction, and checking for understanding.

- Planning
 - Guidelines for daily and long range lesson planning should be developed.
 - Plans should be collected with feedback provided. The frequency of the plan checks should depend on the degree to which expectations are being met.
- Delivery of instruction and checking for understanding
 - The faculty should reach consensus regarding the characteristics of effective instruction.
 - These characteristics should include criteria such as communication of daily learning objectives, checking for prior knowledge, whole group questioning, student engagement, differentiated instruction, etc.

Develop common formative assessments for all subject areas.

- These assessments should initially be given at the end of each semester but eventually address shorter periods of time.
- These assessments should guide instruction and dictate remediation and acceleration efforts.

Provide on-going feedback to teachers.

- The characteristics of effective instruction that are developed should be the basis for walk-through observations. Teachers should receive feedback periodically as a group regarding the summaries of the walk-throughs.

- Every teacher should receive an extended observation each semester which is followed by a “learning conversation” with the observer that stimulates professional growth and is not evaluative.
- Administrators should be trained to hold “learning conversations” and receive feedback from a trained observer following the conversation.

Develop a plan for professional development.

- This plan should have teacher input and document the support that will address the areas of need in the school improvement plan.
- The plan should be data-driven and evaluated on a regular basis.

Provide consistent leadership.

- An instructional leader should be hired as the principal of the school who is most likely to remain in that position for at least three years.
- Curriculum leaders should be given the means to guide the instructional program. Currently the main impediment to this being accomplished is the lack of time for them to do such. At a minimum, they should be given one period a day to work with the school improvement plan, review and revise curriculum, develop common assessments, review data, and observe the delivery of instruction throughout the building.
- Teachers should be given the opportunity to provide input on a regular basis.

Increase communication with parents and the community at large.

- Develop a strategy to receive input from parent groups which are not typically represented.
- Provide data on a regular basis so that the successes and challenges of the educational program are known to all stakeholders.

Questions to be answered after further investigation

Is the current configuration of having two years of study housed in one school the best way to meet the needs of the students?

- The most common configuration offers three years of study in middle school within one building.
- The only concern the parents expressed was in regard to the social maturity of their children. This is a common feeling of most parents regardless when their child moves to the next level. This fear can be alleviated by limiting the exposure of younger students to older students by housing them in a separate part of the building and by scheduling separate lunch blocks.
- There are many benefits to having the three grades at the middle school as presented in the study provided by the superintendent. Some of the biggest benefits are the increase in rigor and the increase in articulation between teachers of the three grades.

Is the current practice of assigning Mathematics Extensions the best way to prepare students for algebra?

- What justification is there to not offer the most common course selection of pre-algebra in the 7th grade?

- The current practice was initiated to provide a means for minority students to have access to upper level mathematics courses and to close the achievement gap. According to an assistant principal, gains have been made in this area but there is still a significant gap in achievement.
- Students who are obviously ready for the challenges of pre-algebra could be assigned to that course to best prepare them for algebra in the 8th grade. Students in Mathematics 7 who demonstrate progress during the year could still receive Extensions in order to accelerate their learning and hopefully prepare for algebra in the 8th grade.
- The results of the study recently written by Tom Loveless and released by the Fordham Institute (December 10, 2009) need to be closely examined along with the rebuttals that followed such as that written by Kevin G. Welner (December 14, 2009).

Summary

By all indications, Amherst Middle School is a good school that could be very good or even great. The teachers are competent, hard working, and caring. The administrators are respected by the staff for their dedication and support. With few exceptions, students are well behaved and come to school each day for the purpose of learning. The setting at Amherst Regional Middle School is more than suitable for academic excellence to occur.

However, many characteristics of highly effective schools are not observable at Amherst Regional Middle School. Highly effective schools have data-driven school improvement plans that are developed annually. Teachers are required to develop daily lesson plan which contain the elements that are developed by the instructional leaders with input from teachers. Classroom observations are frequent and followed by conversations designed to promote professional growth. Most, if not all, departments have common assessments which guide instruction. In highly effective schools, the characteristics of effective instruction are clearly defined and communicated in writing to stakeholders. Although teachers make daily instructional decisions based on the needs of their students, consistency is the norm. Parents receive frequent updates regarding student achievement data. Policies and procedures are known by all and applied on a consistent basis.

The curriculum leaders and administrators have recently been receptive to the challenge of increasing expectations in an effort to improve student achievement. However, this is going to be a long journey. Many teachers have become accustomed to “doing it their way.” Some teachers choose to collaborate with their colleagues, but this is not the norm. It can be expected that there will be resistance to the standardization of some practices. The success of the recommended changes will depend on the willingness of the faculty to institutionalize “best practices.” In addition, the leaders of the school must be able to guide the change process and develop the capacity of the faculty to implement the changes.

To paraphrase Jim Collins in “Good to Great,” the right people are on the bus (assuming an instructional leader is hired as principal). It is now time for everyone to get on the same bus even though their seats are different.