

The more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go. ---Dr. Seuss The more you read, the more you read,



**Needham Public Schools
English/Language Arts Program Review
Report
2009-2010**

Executive Summary

This analysis of the K-12 English Language Arts program is part of the Needham Public Schools' comprehensive curriculum review process. The intent of the review is to assess the current program against local, state, and national standards in light of scholarly research, and community needs and expectations. This report represents a snapshot of the program and reflects its status at a particular point in time. The results of this review will help to establish areas of focus for continuous program improvement over the next three to five years.

Committee Charge

To review the K-12 English/Language Arts Program and to make recommendations regarding:

- The viability of the curriculum, instruction, assessment and administrative practices in the current program and directions the program should take in the future;
- The professional development, resources, and personnel requirements with respect to current and future core curriculum and instructional needs;
- Viable options for both short and long term programmatic improvements and associated funding.

Assumptions

Literacy in the 21st century means much more than deciphering words and writing sentences. The ability to access, evaluate, synthesize, and communicate information creates a foundation for learning across all academic domains. The assumptions on which we based this program review are grounded in current research on literacy practice and the vision statement (July 1998) for literacy in the Needham Public Schools (Appendix A).

- Literacy is a fundamental skill that is essential for success in all areas of academic and work life;
- Every academic area has its own set of characteristic literacy practices that students should understand;
- Success in academic, personal, and professional life requires the ability to read critically, to comprehend a variety of texts, to use increasingly complex reading, writing, and thinking skills, and to apply sophisticated comprehension and study strategies. It is important that these skills be explicitly taught K-12;
- Students live in technology, information, and media-rich environments that require new types of literacy skills that need to be part of a forward-thinking literacy program;
- Curriculum and instructional practices within the K-12 English/Language Arts program are aligned with current research and national and state frameworks;
- Professional development and instructional support are critical components to ensure classroom practices that promote literacy growth and development for students;
- Valid assessments are used to determine student growth and to tailor instruction.

Research & Methodology

As part of the K-12 English Language Arts (ELA) /Literacy Program Review, the committee reviewed current research on literacy practices as well as educational standards for English Language Arts. The occasion of this program review provides the Needham Public Schools an opportunity to look closely at how well our program aligns with recommendations for ELA standards and the research base on effective literacy practices.

Reading First is a United States federal education program (2002) mandated under the *No Child Left Behind Act*. It focuses on putting proven methods of early reading instruction in K-3 classrooms to ensure that all children learn to read well by the end of third grade and provided a comprehensive synopsis of the research on effective reading instruction.

In a 2002 joint position paper, the International Reading Association and the National Middle School Association acknowledged that American schools have put significant work into improving and strengthening reading programs in elementary schools, but that for students to succeed at the more complex literacy tasks that are demanded of today's

“Our nation’s educational system has scored many extraordinary successes in raising the level of reading and writing skills in younger children. Yet the pace of literacy improvement in our schools has not kept up with the accelerating demands of the global knowledge economy.”

--The Carnegie Council for Advancing Adolescent Literacy

Changing Curriculum Frameworks

“In short, students who meet the standards develop the skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any creative and purposeful expression in language.”

--Common Core State Standards

Committee Organization

citizens, research has demonstrated that middle schools must provide continuous direct instruction in literacy for all young adolescents, implement an assessment program that goes beyond large scale state and national assessments, and provide targeted intervention to struggling adolescent readers. There has been increased attention in recent years in educational research to adolescent literacy practices and this research has strongly influenced new ELA standards. The current research base (summarized in Appendix B) informed the work of the committee in the design of data collection tools, the analysis of results, and in recommendations for program enhancements.

The methodology for our review of the K-12 English/Language Arts program is summarized in Appendix C. We recognize the limitations of various data sources used in this review. Therefore, we focused our attention on areas with common findings across data sources, or areas where similar data differed across different constituencies in order to form our recommendations.

Many components of the K-12 English/Language Arts curriculum were aligned to the 2001 MA curriculum frameworks and its 2004 supplement. In 2008, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education began revisions of those frameworks. In 2008-10, they issued various drafts of the newly proposed frameworks. Subsequently, the Common Core State Standards Initiative began as a multi-state effort to establish a shared set of clear educational standards for English Language Arts and mathematics. At the same time, the DESE staff and review panels continued to refine these working drafts of the new MA frameworks. These drafts were used as resource material by the Common Core State Standards writing teams. One of the unique features of the Common Core Standards is that they clearly communicate what is expected of students at each grade. Among the strengths that distinguish the Common Core Standards are:

- The focus on reading and writing across the curriculum, which are skills that colleges and employers value;
- The attention to speaking, listening, and vocabulary;
- The focus on analytical and persuasive writing;
- The treatment of text complexity and approaches to matching with student reading skills;
- The consideration of emerging, new literacies (digital and print sources) for research and production and distribution of ideas and messages.

By the end of the 2011-2012 school year, the DESE will expect all districts to have aligned their curricula to these new standards.

This review occurred as the 2004 state frameworks were being revised and updated (2009 and 2010) and the Common Core Standards introduced. In the midst of these transitions, this review provided an opportunity to re-examine the curriculum based on the updated state frameworks and the Common Core standards. For the purposes of this review, our emphasis was on reading and writing genres, the areas with most substantial changes to the frameworks.

In response to our request for broad-based representation on the committee, we had fifteen people volunteer. As with previous program reviews, the expertise of our parent volunteers—an academic researcher in current literacy practice, an educational publisher, and an educator—along with our teachers, literacy specialists and principals, proved invaluable. English/Language Arts program leaders, Barbara Collins (Elementary), Kathleen Harris (Middle School), Frances Fleming (High School), along with the Director of Program Development, Terry Duggan, formed a steering committee that organized and led the process. The program review committee divided itself into three small task groups chaired by a program leader. Each sub-committee examined the program at their respective levels and periodically shared the results of their work during full committee meetings over the course of the 2009-2010 school year.

Committee Membership

Beth Ackroyd	Literacy Specialist/Elementary Teacher
Amy Baron	Parent/Community Member/Educational Publisher
Rita Bissonnette-Clark	Interim Principal, Newman School
Heidi Black	Parent/School Committee Member
Liz Brown	High School English Teacher
Maggie Charron	Literacy Specialist/High Rock
Jennifer Collings	Elementary Teacher
Barbara Laites Collins	Elementary Literacy Instructional Leader
Terry Duggan	Director of Program Development
Frances Fleming	High School English Department Chairperson
Kathleen Harris	Middle School English/Social Studies Coordinator
Joan Kelley	Parent/Community Member/Literacy Researcher
Steve Koup	High School English Teacher
Ken Lundberg	Middle School English/Language Arts Teacher
Karen McCalley	High School English Teacher
Vanessa Scanzillo	Elementary Literacy Specialist
Jenny Orlando	Elementary Teacher
Laurie Sullivan	Middle School English/Language Arts Teacher

Conclusions

We want to thank everyone who participated in this review. The multiple perspectives and data sources gave us a more complete picture of the K-12 ELA/Literacy program. The time, honest reflections, and extensive feedback that constituencies throughout the district provided enabled us to conduct this comprehensive review. Our hope is that this report recognizes the strengths and best practices within our schools and provides direction for areas of future growth. Emerging from the data are some key conclusions:

- There are numerous strengths in the ELA/Literacy program and overall student achievement is strong.
- Teachers are committed to student learning and their own professional growth.
- Suggestions for improvement point toward expanding current best practices so that they are more consistent across grade levels and classes.
- Other suggestions for improvement entail updating our curriculum to align with changes to state and Common Core standards and to adjust time spent on curriculum and instruction to align with most effective practices in literacy development.
- We must continue to look for ways to support the achievement of all students, at all grade levels, especially those struggling with reading
- How we assess student progress and use that information to inform practice, provide feedback, and report achievement must be more clearly articulated.
- Content area literacy instruction and the inclusion of reading/writing of expository texts in the ELA curriculum are priority areas.
- There is a need for further K-12 vertical articulation and clarity around the curriculum.
- There is clear research on best practices to guide our work.
- Collaboration among the elementary, middle, and high school levels will help address concerns about transitions and vertical curriculum articulation. It will also ensure an appropriately rigorous program.
- Teachers, principals, and instructional leaders must partner to turn this review into an action plan with measurable, achievable goals and outcomes.

We see this review as an opportunity for the Needham Public Schools to take a leading role in the Commonwealth in implementing an updated, research based district and school wide ELA/literacy program that responds to the needs of 21st century learners and prepares all students for the demands of high school, college, and the workforce. We hope to build not only skilled, but also excited, lifelong readers and writers.

The recommendations in this report will take time to implement in a thoughtful, coherent way. Further research and data collection may be necessary in some areas. Time and support for teacher professional development and additional funding for instructional resources, staff, and technology are critical to the successful implementation of these recommendations.

Elementary Literacy Program

Program Context

"We believe that we must implement consistent theory, approach, and practice to ensure that all children will master the skills and strategies of literacy at every grade level."

--Vision statement for the literacy program in the Needham Public Schools, 1998

At the elementary level, classroom teachers are responsible for the delivery of the English Language Arts Program. The staff is nearly evenly divided among those who have taught for less than three years (30%), those who are in mid career (28%), and those who have more than ten years experience (42%).

The district subscribes to a Balanced Literacy approach for literacy instruction from kindergarten through the fifth grade (Appendix A). Balance provides the key to the teaching of reading and writing including, balancing reading with writing, explicit instruction with application, and assessment with instruction. Within a balanced literacy program, students grow from teacher-supported instruction toward independent learning. All teachers are considered as teachers of reading by principals, teachers, and parents.

Reader's Workshop and **Writer's Workshop** form the basis of literacy practice within this framework. In Reader's and Writer's Workshop, the readers learn to read by being actively engaged in reading and writers learn to write by being actively engaged in writing.

Reading instruction consists of independent reading, small group/guided reading instruction, literature study, and word/language study.

- During independent reading, individual students read, with a specific purpose, a text of their own choice at their independent reading level. The teachers provide mini lessons, guide text selection, confer with students, and facilitate shared discussions.
- In small group/guided reading instruction, a small group of students, who are acquiring similar reading strategies, works with the teacher to learn more about reading. The teacher purposefully chooses the appropriate leveled books for guided reading from each school's collection, usually located in a central school "Book Room." The texts are leveled according to a standardized gradient of text constructed by noted national reading experts, Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell. Texts are matched to readers based on knowledge of the readers, the texts, and the reading process. Within the small group model, inquiry circles provide students with the opportunity to ask questions and find answers to topics of interest across the curriculum.
- In literature study, a group of readers discusses various aspects of a text or a set of related texts and sometimes works on projects that extend their book knowledge. Literature circles and book clubs may serve as the structure for these discussion groups.
- During word/language study, students are explicitly taught phonics, spelling, and vocabulary skills using the Wilson-based FUNDATIONS Program that was introduced in grades K-3 in 2006. This program offers research-validated instructional strategies that are incorporated into daily lessons. FUNDATIONS incorporates a handwriting program that is used in all K-2 classes. A complete set of FUNDATIONS materials was purchased for each K-3 classroom.
- In Writer's Workshop, students develop writing strategies, learn about the craft of writing, and use writing as a tool for learning and communication. Students receive instruction and practice writing in different genres. The structure of the writing workshop is very similar to the structure of reading workshop, including independent writing and guided writing, with the teacher modeling at the beginning of the workshop and students sharing at the close.

In 2008 the Elementary Literacy Task Force was re-created. Through the efforts of this group the elementary writing program is now aligned to the Massachusetts state frameworks, curriculum maps have been developed for each genre of writing by grade level, and representative samples of students' work have been selected to serve as exemplars and anchor papers for each genre at every grade level. This material is accessible online through ATLAS to all teachers as of this fall.

Literacy Specialists, located in each school, serve to support the balanced literacy instruction in the schools and deliver direct service to struggling students in the regular education program. The purpose and role of these literacy specialists varies among the schools. These specialists, along with the Elementary Curriculum Instructional Leader, form the elementary literacy department for the district.

Since a guaranteed and viable curriculum has been a long-standing value within the district, the extent to which the literacy program is able to provide students with access to the same essential learning opportunities, regardless of classroom or school, was an important component of this review.

K-5 Curriculum Expectations

Although results vary among the schools, classroom teachers' and literacy specialists' survey responses raise questions as to the expectations for consistency in curriculum and support that is provided to implement the curriculum.

	Classroom Teachers <i>(strongly agree/agree)</i>	Literacy Specialists <i>(strongly agree/agree)</i>
"I receive clear direction about what the grade level literacy curriculum should be."	55%	54% (agree)
"I feel that there is a clear expectation that literacy curriculum should be consistent across the district."	39%	69%
"I feel that I receive appropriate support on literacy curriculum and instructional practices."	62%	58%

"The curriculum maps for writing are a clear beginning in the direction that we need to go for reading."

--Elementary Classroom Teacher

Contributing to this finding may be the fact that the English Language Arts curriculum frameworks have been in flux at the state level. Although the frameworks adopted in 2001/2004 were the official guidelines, new drafts were issued in March 2009, then in early 2010 and finally the new state Common Core English Language Arts standards were adopted this past July 2010. Although there has been some alignment to the 2001/2004 state curriculum frameworks in the district, more detailed work will be needed to align to the standards for English Language Arts that the state has just adopted. Since the Common Core for English Language Arts also incorporates standards for literacy within other content areas, alignment to these new standards within these subject areas will need attention as well.

Nonetheless, district-wide work on improving literacy instruction has been an ongoing process over the last five years. The adoption of the FOUNDATIONS program and the work of the Literacy Task Force, mentioned earlier, coupled with the work of the literacy specialists and kindergarten teachers this past year to align end-of-year kindergarten literacy expectations to the state standards, has helped in gaining clarity of expectations within the program.

Strengths

- Alignment of writing genre to the updated state standards has provided for a broader range of genre to be taught in each grade, moving beyond an over-reliance on the personal narrative.
- This past year, we have expanded our instruction to include additional genre at different grade levels. For example, persuasive writing genre has successfully begun to be taught beginning in the first grade.
- The introduction of the FOUNDATIONS program in grades K-3 has brought a consistent expectation for phonics instruction throughout the district in these grades.

“Greater consistency among all five schools with clear communication of expectations for each grade is necessary. Teachers are seeking a path to follow.”

--Several -Literacy Specialists

Areas of Concern

- Degree of alignment of reading curriculum to the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts (July, 2010) for all grades.
- Continuation of the work between the kindergarten teachers and literacy specialists to establish end-of-year literacy expectations that are aligned with the Common Core Standards.
- Degree of integration existing in all areas of literacy (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) as required by the Common Core Standards.
- Several areas of inconsistency were noted including, grade level literacy curriculum expectations across the district and support of best literacy curriculum and instructional practices.

Recommendations

- Review the reading curriculum to determine alignment to the new Common Core Standards for English Language Arts.
- Re-examine the writing curriculum to ensure its alignment to the new Common Core Standards for English Language Arts.
- Determine a consistent alignment that does not dictate “how teachers should teach” but defines “what all students are expected to know and be able to do.” (Common Core)
- Examine curriculum in history and science to ensure alignment to subject area literacy standards within the new Common Core Standards for English Language Arts.
- Review and define the role of literacy specialists in the district to ensure consistency of literacy support among the schools based on standard expectations in the field.

Elementary Curriculum

Reading

Within the balanced literacy model for reading, wide ranges of curriculum materials are used among all the elementary schools.

	Classroom Teachers	Literacy Specialists
Classroom Libraries	74%	55%
Book Rooms	63%	45%
School Library	59%	45%

The classroom libraries, followed by school book rooms and school libraries, were the most often used sources of reading materials for the curriculum. At least 30% of the classroom teachers and specialists also cited the Town Library as a source of curriculum materials for teaching and planning, with the highest usage being reported by ELL teachers (40%).

Other reading curriculum materials used by classroom teachers included:

	Classroom Teachers
Graphic Organizers	74%
Reading/Writing Journals	64%
School Designed Materials	49%
Spelling Books	39%
Basal Readers	27%

“We love FUNDATIONS, and I believe that teaching it to all kids is a fantastic way to meet the needs of a wide range of students.”

--Parent

Graphic organizers and reading/writing journals are the instructional resources used by most teachers. Close to half of classroom teachers also rely on school-designed instructional activities (online programs/computer resources). Close to half of classroom teachers also rely on school-designed curriculum (online programs/computer resources).

In grades K-3, where the FUNDATIONS program is used, 60% of kindergarten, 67% of the first grade teachers, 58% of the grade 2 teachers, and 48% of the grade 3 teachers use the materials provided by the program for instruction. Approximately 70% of the kindergarten and 90% of the first grade teachers use the results of the assessments provided by the program to guide their instruction. For second and third grade teachers, this number is 93% and 72% respectively. Further examination into the use of materials is needed.

Although 70% of the district's classroom teachers and 85% of the literacy specialists feel that they have adequate curriculum materials available for literacy instruction, variability exists among the schools and among programs. For example, ELL specialists reported that materials to support the needs of the ELL student population were less than adequate.

Strengths

- All constituencies cited the balanced literacy approach to literacy instruction as a strength. It provides for independent reading at each child's independent level and guided reading/small group reading instruction at each child's instructional level.
- Teachers and specialists value the quantity and quality of books available to teach the components of guided reading, independent reading and shared reading. They also appreciated having the choice among curriculum materials within the balanced literacy model so instruction can be more individualized and differentiated to include all students.
- The adoption of the FOUNDATIONS program in grades K-3 has enabled the district to have consistent phonics instruction in place even though there is programmatic inconsistency in the use of the materials.

Areas of Concern

- There is inconsistency among schools in the quantity, quality, and organizational systems of the book collections. This is particularly evident with respect to the book rooms or in locations where multiple sets of books are housed for the purpose of guided reading/small groups reading instruction and shared reading.
- Although the variety of curriculum materials is seen as a strength, it also may be seen as an area of concern. Inconsistency in materials may lead to inconsistency in instruction and student learning. This is particularly evident in the areas of word study, grammar, spelling, and vocabulary.
- There is inconsistency among schools in the quality, quantity, and appropriateness of curriculum materials for all students, including those who need differentiated instruction and academic intervention, most specifically our special education and ELL students.
- Much work has been done in the district to support cultural diversity ensuring that all our students see themselves and the global community reflected in our curriculum materials, most specifically in the books and magazines that are used for all areas of literacy development. As we continue to assess our curriculum materials we need to keep this understanding in the forefront of our work.

Recommendations

- Review the book collections to determine needs and establish consistency in the following areas:
 - Collections that offer a range of reading and text complexity levels in both literary (stories, dramas, poems, myths) and informational (history/social studies, science and other disciplines) texts
 - Range of genre, including short text and student magazines
 - Current editions of nonfiction books
 - Condition of the books
 - Size of collection
 - Additional materials connected to content curriculum areas
 - Range of mentor texts
 - Text that reflect diverse cultures and perspectives beyond those of our immediate community
 - Texts that reflect different time periods
- Establish a periodic schedule to continuously review the book collections.
- Assess the organizational systems within the Book Rooms to ensure they are teacher friendly.
- Examine how the use of technology could contribute to increased opportunities for student learning.
- Review the curriculum materials currently used for grammar instruction, spelling, handwriting (cursive), and vocabulary instruction, in grades four and five for alignment with the Common Core standards.
- Explore factors that are contributing to the inconsistent use of the FOUNDATIONS materials.

Writing

The *Writer's Workshop* model, which incorporates the five step writing process, is seen as an area of strength by parents and teachers alike.

About eight years ago, literacy consultants from Tufts University introduced the *Writer's Workshop* model in the district. The units of study that they initiated were based on the work of Lucy Calkins. Since then schools have individually focused on aspects of the writing workshop model that they determined were most needed in their own schools to support their students' writing instruction. The influence of this work on current instruction varies among the schools but has led to a common practice that focuses heavily on the writing of personal narratives. Over the last several years, the Literacy Task Force has worked to align the units taught in the classrooms to the state standards to ensure that all genres are taught in the writing curriculum.

The 6+1 trait writing rubrics have been introduced into the district over the last two years. These writing rubrics are drawn from the 6+1 Trait Writing analytical model for assessing and teaching writing and clearly state the 6+1 key qualities that define strong writing. These rubrics were introduced to achieve consistency in scoring student writing and assessing performance.

Although there was variability among the schools, notable in the survey was the response from approximately 50% of classroom teachers who stated that they did not believe there was adequate training on using protocols to look at student work.

Within this model a variety of curriculum materials are used to teach writing:

- 42% of the classroom teachers use the resources from the Lucy Calkins workshop model, including K-2 and 3-5 primary writing kits.
- 34% of classroom teachers use the 6+1 trait materials that have been introduced through the incorporation of the 6+1 writing rubrics.
- 13% of literacy specialists use the Lucy Calkins material.
- 20% of literacy specialists use the 6+1 writing trait material.

The influence and role of the literacy specialists with respect to the writing curriculum also varies among the schools.

Traditionally, the teaching of handwriting is addressed in the elementary schools. The results of the survey indicate an inconsistency in practice, beyond that which is taught within the FOUNDATIONS program at grades K-2. Informal data received from the middle and high school teachers indicated that a growing number of our students cannot read cursive writing. This is particularly problematic since teachers at those levels use cursive script to provide feedback to their students on their writing.

Strengths

- The alignment of the writing curriculum to the 2004/2009 state frameworks through the work of the Literacy Task Force has established units of study at each grade level, broadened the range of genres being taught, and has positioned the curriculum for the integration of writing across content areas.
- Exemplar and anchor papers of authentic student work from our own students by genre and trait are now electronically available to teachers to support their writing instruction.
- While focusing on what is most essential for our students to know and understand within the writing workshop model, educators have been able to have some autonomy within several aspects of the curriculum.

Areas of Concern

- Inconsistent use of protocols to look at student work.
- Developing, though still inconsistent, instruction in the teaching writing within all genres.
- Inconsistent teaching of terminology as it has developed among the schools, which has added to inconsistent curriculum.
- Inconsistent teaching of grammar and spelling, beyond that which is taught within the FOUNDATIONS program.
- Inconsistent use of the writer's workshop model.
- Inconsistent handwriting instruction beyond that which is taught within the FOUNDATIONS program at grades K-2.

Recommendations

- Ensure that all teachers in grades 1-5 are familiar with the new writing maps, anchor papers and exemplars, as well as how best to use them to inform instruction.
- Ensure the writing curriculum is aligned to the new Common Core English Language Arts standards and writing is authentically integrated into other curriculum areas.
- Review the spelling, grammar, and handwriting components of the writing program and establish a consistent curriculum in each area.
- Examine how the curriculum addresses the needs of the students who are struggling with their writing instruction. Remediation currently happens in a variety of venues, such as with special educators and literacy specialists, and with a variety of materials being used among the schools, often delivered as separate program or series of separate programs.
- Examine handwriting curriculum and its relationship to the keyboarding program.

Elementary Instruction

Reader's Workshop

(I liked) "...when teachers helped (me) find books that relate to (me) and made reading fun."

--Student

An assumption in the district is that reading instruction (including phonics, language, & word study) occurs for 90 minutes each day and writing instruction for approximately 60 minutes each day. We were interested in the extent to which this practice was occurring across all elementary classrooms.

During a typical week, 66% of the classroom teachers indicate that their students receive five plus hours of direct reading instruction per week or about 60 minutes per day. (Note: this did not specify whether it was a consistent uninterrupted block of instructional time.) The remaining 34% of the teachers reported spending four hours or less per week on reading instruction. Students in grades 2, 3, and 4 spend the greatest amount of time engaged in direct reading instruction with 70% or more spending 5+ hours. In addition to the variability among the grades, variability is also seen among the schools.

We also examined the extent to which teachers were devoting appropriate instructional time to the critical components of reading instruction (independent reading, guided reading, strategy groups, literature circles, literacy centers, shared reading, interactive read-alouds). In addition to variations in time, there was also variability in the degree to which the components of Reading Workshop (i.e. independent reading and small group/guided reading) are integrated into classroom instruction. (Note: Clarity as to what specific components of reader's workshop are intentionally being integrated into instruction was not ascertained through this survey and needs to be examined.)

The data raises the question of whether all our teachers are spending the appropriate amount of time on instruction in critical areas. It suggests we need to again assess the time allocations spent on uninterrupted literacy instruction in all grades, most especially in light of the Common Core Standards and the competing demands for instructional time for other curriculum areas. As part of this assessment, the most current research on student learning needs to be incorporated for all areas of literacy instruction, including reading and writing. Consistency among all grades within all schools needs to be achieved.

Writer's Workshop

"Overall at the beginning of the year, my students are prepared to learn the curriculum for my course."

--6th Grade ELA Teachers

During a typical week, 68% of the classroom teachers indicate that their students receive four plus hours of direct writing instruction within writer's workshop. (Note: this did not specify whether it was a consistent uninterrupted block of instructional time.) 32% of the classroom teachers indicate that their students receive three or fewer hours of direct writing instruction per week. Among the grade levels, students in grades 1, 2, and 5 spend the greatest amount of time on direct writing instruction, with 70% or more spending four plus hours per week. In addition to variability among the grades, there is variability among the schools.

Since current research stresses the importance of writing across the curriculum, we also looked into the amount of time teachers spent integrating other content areas into literacy instruction. During a typical week, 43% of the classroom teachers stated that they spent 26+% of their time integrating other content areas into literacy instruction. Again, variability was seen among grade levels and among schools.

As was raised in the reader's workshop discussion, we need to further look at the degree to which specific essential components of effective writing instruction are employed on a consistent and ongoing basis in the classroom. We need to incorporate current research and the Common Core Standards into our determination of the amount of time we should be devoting across the district to writing instruction across all content areas.

(Teachers) "...want children to feel the love of reading and feel the joy that can be found there."

--Staff and Parents

Strengths

- Elementary parents cited one of the strengths of the program as being the differentiated instruction through balanced literacy that provides for children reading books at their appropriate instructional and independent levels. This instruction has helped engender a love of reading and writing among students. According to parents, "The children love learning." This sentiment is consistent with those expressed by principals, teachers, literacy specialists, other specialists, and staff who indicated that they "...want children to feel the love of reading and feel the joy that can be found there." Teachers pride themselves on instruction that engages and is geared to all students.
- Our eighth grade students shared that in elementary school they enjoyed reading chapter and picture books. They liked having an abundance of books and appreciated when teachers and literacy specialists helped them find books at the correct readability and interest level. They also felt they read more in elementary school than in middle school.
- Elementary teachers and principals shared, during their focus groups, that they are beginning to see some consistency in the instructional strategies that are used in guided reading/small group reading instruction. Direct, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies was an area often cited by the focus groups. This trend in the district may be connected to the consistent use of the *Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment* that has provided some of the data, along with anecdotal data we have gathered to inform instruction.
- As in reader's workshop, writer's workshop offers the opportunity for differentiated instruction that allows focus on the individual needs of all students.

Areas of Concern

Each constituency also expressed areas in which they thought instruction could improve.

Parents suggested that we:

- Differentiate instruction for capable students who need to be challenged.
- Provide additional instruction in the mechanics of writing, particularly spelling and grammar.
- Provide more reading instruction in kindergarten (Pre-K through grade 2 parents).

The staff shared a need for:

- Consistency in expectations for literacy instructional practices.
- Increased communication both vertically and horizontally in and among the grades.
- Continued focus on small group reading/guided reading instruction, which ensures a greater likelihood students will develop reading strategies.
- Time for communication among staff to create consistency in instructional practice.
- Greater integration of literacy into content area instruction.
- More consistency in the role that literacy specialists play within each of the schools.

Data revealed that:

- The role of the literacy specialist has developed independently in each elementary school.
- As shared in the teachers' and specialists' focus groups, the inconsistency in the functions performed by specialists may be contributing to the inconsistency in literacy practices across the district. Redefining the role of literacy specialists, according to research and best practice, to be used less as teachers of remedial reading and more as literacy coaches will have the greatest impact on teacher and then on student learning.

Recommendations

- Review the actual components of reader's and writer's workshop as they are incorporated into instruction.
- Review the amount of instructional time spent on the various practices of balanced literacy instruction within the classrooms to ensure consistency/appropriateness for student learning.
- Determine roles that service providers, most especially literacy specialists, play in supporting student learning.

Elementary Assessment

At least 80% of our students in grades 1 through 4 are reading at or above grade level expectations.

Teachers use a wide range of strategies and tools to assess student performance. These tools include formal standardized tests such as the MCAS, *Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment* and end of unit tests from the FOUNDATIONS Program. In addition, protocols to look collaboratively at students' work and more informal assessments, such as listening to and monitoring children's verbal responses, are employed. Using a combination of their own assessments, standardized assessments and student self-reflection, teachers are able to determine student progress with respect to literacy skill development and gauge instructional practice accordingly.

Several years ago, the *Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment* was introduced in all the elementary schools. This formal assessment has provided principals, classroom teachers, literacy specialists, and parents much needed reliable data beyond that which is provided by the MCAS. This assessment also defines clear and consistent mid- and end-of-year reading benchmarks for students.

The assessment was first introduced several years ago to teachers in grades 3-5. They were trained to administer and interpret this assessment battery. Then, grade 1 and 2 teachers were introduced to this assessment. Since this test is administered individually, literacy specialists assist classroom teachers with the task.

Each year the test is administered during the fall and in the early spring. Data is systematically collected and analyzed at the school and district level. Principals are provided with information about their respective school's performance. In 2009-2010 we began to compare fall and spring grade level test results to determine the percentage of students performing below, at, and above grade level.

Principals, curricular leaders and classroom teachers at all grade levels analyze the results for all students of the MCAS to identify anyone who may need additional help, as well as to look for changes which we may need to make in our curriculum or instruction. Individual Success Plans are developed for students who are given a warning on the MCAS as well as for other selected students who do not perform up to expectations.

Common assessments are becoming part of our ongoing focus on student achievement. Through the structure of Professional Learning Communities in several schools, common assessments are designed and administered at a grade level. These assessments specifically target student growth by frequently analyzing learning and subsequently setting achievement goals for the next unit of instruction. The residual effect of this practice is to ensure that a common curriculum is taught and consistent expectations exist at each grade level.

Instruction Based on Data

Using the information obtained from this range of assessments helps teachers to understand their students' individual prior knowledge as well as that which is gained from the ongoing instruction.

Now that the *Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment* is a regular part of the literacy assessment process in grades 1-5, 27% of teachers report that they often use the data from this assessment to guide their instruction. 45% of teachers report that they sometimes do so. Not surprisingly, literacy specialists (97%) are the most frequent users of this data. The timeline for administering the *Fountas & Pinnell Assessment* was purposely designed so that data would be available to support its use to guide instruction.

Although only 50% of the teachers are using the practice of looking collaboratively at student work on a regular basis, our goal is to significantly increase the numbers of teachers who use this practice. The writing maps/exemplars and anchor papers that have just been completed by the Literacy Task Force will help to promote this effort.

The Kindergarten Literacy Assessment Battery, based on newly created consistent end-of-year literacy expectations, was successfully piloted last spring. This battery will now become an integral part of our kindergarten work. After a review of teacher and literacy specialist feedback this past summer, a consistent fall assessment was created.

Common Assessments

"One of the most powerful, high leverage strategies for improving student learning available to schools is the creation of frequent, common, high quality formative assessment by teachers who are working collaboratively to help a group of students develop agreed-upon knowledge and skills." (Fullan, 2005, et. al)

In addition to the assessments mentioned earlier, teachers at a grade level in each school are encouraged to develop common assessments for measuring discrete learning goals associated with the units they are teaching and to adjust instruction accordingly. Although this practice is beginning to take hold in many places throughout the district, it is not pervasive. 28% of teachers report engaging in this practice on at least a monthly basis. 32% report doing it quarterly, and the remaining 39% report not doing it at all.

Strengths

- Adoption and consistent use of the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Benchmark Assessment Battery.
- Systematic collection of data to track individual student reading performance.
- Increased use of the resulting data to guide reading instruction.
- The extent to which formalized reading assessments that reflect student learning goals are in place, being implemented, and used to inform instruction.

Areas of Concern

- Inconsistent use of common assessments beyond those that are required.
- Inconsistent use of data to inform practice.
- Sufficient time for teachers to understand and apply common protocols for looking at student work.

Recommendations

- Continue helping teachers to use instructional strategies based on Fountas and Pinnell assessment data to guide instruction.
- Ensure teachers at all the schools use the writing maps, exemplars, and anchor papers as part of their writing instruction.
- Ensure teachers have the skills to assess student writing using the 6+ 1 Traits and other appropriate rubrics.
- Ensure all teachers have the skills to analyze data and apply results to practice.

Elementary Organizational Systems

This area of the program review focuses on the current support systems in place that enable instruction to take place in a coordinated, cohesive, and equitable manner among the five elementary schools. It includes: Leadership, Professional Development and Professional Community.

Leadership

We examined the extent to which there is leadership in place to ensure that the program is managed and that resources are used in ways that promote an effective teaching and learning environment. Leadership for the elementary literacy program lies primarily with Principals, Literacy Specialists, and the Elementary Literacy Curriculum Instructional Leader, with support from the Director of Program Development (who manages all curriculum areas K-12).

With respect to leadership:

- The majority of teachers (79%) and specialists (69%) feel supported by school leadership on individual student literacy needs. This was consistent among all grades and all schools.
- The majority of teachers (89%) and specialists (79%) state that they are encouraged to grow professionally in the area of literacy instruction. This was consistent among all grades and all schools.
- The majority of teachers (93%) state that they are actively involved in the selection of literacy materials for classroom and grade level. Again, this was consistent among all grades and all schools.
- The majority of specialists (84%) felt that there is a clear expectation in their school that the literacy curriculum should be consistent across the grade level.

With respect to support:

- Teachers were divided as to whether they received clear direction about what their grade-level literacy curriculum should be. There was a great deal of variability among grades and schools. Specialists were similarly split.
- 62% of teachers felt they receive appropriate support on literacy curriculum and instructional practices. This was particularly evident among the primary grade teachers in grades Kindergarten through third grade. (89%, 58%, 79%, 57% respectively). However, discrepancy among the schools was again evident. Specialists' responses were similar to that of teachers.

With respect to expectations regarding program implementation:

- 67% of the teachers feel they receive clear directions about appropriate forms and frequency of literacy assessment. Again, there is a great variability among schools.
- 62% of district teachers feel that there are clear expectations that the literacy curriculum at their own school should be consistent across grade levels. Variability among grades and among schools was also evident.
- 61% of teachers do not feel that there are clear expectations that the literacy curriculum should be consistent across the district.
- 67% of teachers do not feel that they are aware of what other teachers at their own grade levels are doing across the district in literacy instruction.
- Teachers are divided as to whether they are exposed to "best literacy practices" across their district grade level. Slightly more literacy specialists (63%) feel this is the case.
- Although there is growing clarity of expectations at the school level, this clarity has not translated across the district.
- Teachers feel supported by leadership in many important aspects of the literacy program, including the individual literacy needs of their students, encouragement to grow professionally, and the ability to choose literacy materials.

Strengths

- Teachers feel supported on matters of addressing individual student literacy needs, in selection of literacy materials, and on being encouraged to grow professionally.
- Given the variability in practice that still exists across the district, teachers value the impact of the literacy leader's work.

Areas of Concern

- Inconsistency across the district in expectations for curriculum, awareness of what other "job-alike" teachers are doing across the district in literacy instruction, and in the sharing of "best practices".
- Inconsistent expectations by all administrators of literacy curriculum and instruction.
- The reduction in the Elementary Curriculum and Instructional Leader position by 20% coupled with the position assuming responsibility for coordination of the Title 1 Literacy grant (which was previously a stipend position) has limited the capacity for the leader to effect programmatic goals.

Recommendations

- Develop consistency across the district in literacy expectations and in the sharing of best practices.
- Review the district-wide supports for all teaching staff.
- Provide adequate time to share practice with job-alike colleagues.
- Reinstate the full-time position for the Elementary Curriculum and Instructional Leader.

Professional Development

Professional development is a lifelong, collaborative learning process that supports the growth of individuals, teams, and the schools through a combination of courses, workshops, and a daily job-embedded, learner-centered focused approach. While 90% of the teachers generally feel quite confident that they have the content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge to implement the curriculum, there is some variability among grade levels, schools, and specialists.

Our teachers are actively engaged in learning about literacy and participate in professional development in a variety of settings and structures. Over the last three years:

- 60% of the teachers have taken one of the graduate courses offered by the district each year.
- 22% have taken three or more graduate level courses in literacy instruction beyond those offered by the district.
- 77% have attended at least one literacy conference or workshop.
- 40% participated in teacher study groups, networks, or collaboratives to discuss literacy practice.
- 34% take classes in literacy instruction through the TEC Collaborative.

In addition to the graduate course mentioned previously, literacy related professional development within the district takes many forms. Teachers feel that participation in self-directed learning with colleagues (93%), grade level meetings during the school day (62%), coaching/mentoring (46%), and observing demonstrations of literacy teaching techniques (40%) all contribute to their comfort level and understanding of current literacy practice.

Similarly, our literacy specialists are also actively engaged in furthering their own understanding of current practice. They participate in grade level meetings during the school day (72%), observe literacy practice (71%), coach or mentor (72%), participate in teacher study groups (86%) and attend monthly department meetings (100%).

Two new professional development initiatives that began last year are the *Summer Literacy Institute* and district wide professional development in FUNDATIONS and the *Fountas & Pinnell* assessment for teachers, teaching assistants, ELL teachers, and special education liaisons who are new to a grade level or to the district.

The *Summer Literacy Institute* focuses on developing effective small group differentiated reading instruction and the use of data to inform instruction. This past summer's course included an optional fall coaching component that will provide opportunities for feedback on practice and mutual professional support through a professional learning community structure. The Summer Institute and the PLC work have been fully subscribed and received extremely positive reviews. We hope that it will become one of the cornerstones of our summer professional development program.

We have also introduced as a regular part of our literacy professional development program, day-long professional development in both the FUNDATIONS program and in the *Fountas & Pinnell* reading assessment. These sessions, taught by literacy specialists, will ensure that both of these effective programs will remain integral parts of our literacy program over time because staff who are new to a grade level or to the district will have the appropriate skills to use the FUNDATIONS program and to administer the *Fountas & Pinnell* reading assessment consistently.

The Literacy Leader provides ongoing support of the literacy program throughout the school year in all the elementary schools. This support includes staff development in all the schools.

Strengths

- Teachers' understanding of content knowledge in literacy.
- Teacher and specialists' participation in literacy related professional development.
- The use of teacher and administrator feedback as well as student data to shape our professional development program.
- District-wide training for staff new to Needham or to a grade level in the use of the *Fountas & Pinnell* Assessment and the use of the FUNDATIONS program.
- Job-embedded learning opportunities.

Areas of Concern

- Need for more ongoing, consistent professional development.
- More dedicated time during the school day needed for professional development and consulting.

Recommendations

- Review the professional development offerings to ensure alignment with the district's literacy program and goals of the School Improvement Plans.
- Expand the practice of having literacy specialists facilitate professional development opportunities.

Professional Learning Community

"One of the most powerful, high leverage strategies for improving student learning available to schools is the creation of frequent, common, high quality formative assessment by teachers who are working collaboratively to help a group of students develop agreed-upon knowledge and skills." (Fullan, 2005, et. al)

The Needham School district understands that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for teachers. Thus, the district is committed to promoting educators working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective learning and research to achieve better results for their students. We examined the extent to which these practices were happening throughout the district.

The data indicated that teachers in Needham enjoy collaborating and perceive the benefits of sharing and discussing their practices. This collaboration has continued and strengthened within the structure of the Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)

The PLCs in which teachers share and collaborate, have developed in a variety of ways. The majority of teachers understand looking at student work as a way to improve literacy instruction and providing timely feedback.

Ensuring consistency in how to look at student work continues to be a need for all teachers and specialists. As part of this work, the use of protocols to look at student work again surfaced as an area of need with slightly less than half of the teachers (45%) feeling that they have had adequate training on the use of protocols to look at student work. Once again, perspectives varied from school to school and grade to grade. Having adequate time to look at student work and collaboratively reflect on it with grade level colleagues during the school day remains an area of concern for teachers.

The data showed that the majority of teachers felt that:

- Looking at student work is a way to improve literacy instruction and provide timely feedback (93% of teachers and 94% of specialists, respectively).
- There is adequate leadership and clear direction around establishing a PLC at their grade levels (76% of teachers and 63% of specialists).
- Their grade level has had adequate training in defining a PLC (72% of teachers and 64% of specialists).
- They do not have adequate time during the regular school week to work with peers on literacy curriculum and instruction or to look at student data to inform instruction (89%).

Strengths

- Clear understanding that looking at student work is a way to improve literacy instruction and provide timely feedback
- Most teachers believe that they have had clear leadership and direction around establishing a PLC at their grade level as well as training in defining a PLC, with some variability among the schools.

Areas of Concern

- Inconsistency in establishment of PLCs.
- Inconsistency in adequate training looking at student work.
- Providing adequate time to look at student work within the school day.

Recommendations

- Review professional development strategies for looking at student work.
- Support all teachers and specialists in their understanding of PLC work.

Elementary Student Performance

MCAS

To examine student performance, we looked at two data sources that show the effectiveness of the elementary literacy program. These include four years of MCAS data along with the spring 2009 and 2010 *Fountas & Pinnell* reading scores.

The last four-year MCAS district review continues to show that the performance of Needham students as a group, on this one measure, continues to be very good; indeed, the scores are among the best in the Commonwealth. The table below provides a summary of the percentage of students scoring advanced and proficient during that time period.

	2007	2008	2009	2010
Grade 3	80	76	74	83
Grade 4	67	62	69	73
Grade 5	87	85	84	84

The percentage of grade 3 students scoring at proficient and above proficient increased this year from 74% to 83%. This is a significant change in performance on this test. The third grade English Language Arts MCAS scores reflect a 9% increase in children in the above proficient and proficient performance categories and a 10% decrease in children in the needs improvement category. Clear and significant growth is seen between 2009 and 2010.

The grade 4 students' performance has been increasing as well. Over the last three years, the percentage of grade 4 students scoring advanced and proficient steadily went from 62% to 73%.

The fifth grade results indicated continued high performance, with little change in the percentages of students scoring at the advanced and proficient levels.

A complete four-year history of student scores in each of the four categories (advanced, proficient, needs improvement, warning) is summarized in Appendix D.

Along with MCAS scores, since 2008 the Department of Education provides schools with comparative data using Average Performance Index results. Under this system, performance points are awarded to a school or district for each student in the MCAS test group based upon their level of performance on the test. The Composite Performance Index (CPI) is designed to give schools a means to measure their progress towards achieving the goal of the No Child Left Behind law that all students be *Proficient* by 2014. A score of 100 would indicate that all students scored advanced or proficient. The table below provides a summary of the CPI index for each grade level during that time period.

	2008	2009	2010
Grade 3	92.3	90.9	93.5
Grade 4	86.8	89.3	90.1
Grade 5	94.3	94.8	94.4

Over the last three years, the CPI's have ranged from 86.8 to 94.8, thus rating our schools as high (80-89.9) to very high (90-100).

Fountas & Pinnell

In addition to informing instruction for individual students, the implementation of the *Fountas & Pinnell* assessment in 2009 has enabled us to track student reading development for each grade level across the district. The data for grades one through five, shown in the table below, outlines the percentage of students reading *at and above grade level* at the time of the administration of the test in the spring (Feb./Mar. end-of-year benchmark levels)

	Spring 2010
Grade 1	66
Grade 2	83
Grade 3	88
Grade 4	87
Grade 5	74

As the data from 2010 represents the second administration of the test and may reflect the fact that staff was still in the process of learning the complexities of this one-to-one assessment tool, we look to the results from the spring 2011 administration to inform the instructional aspect of our reading program. With this said, the test results do seem to support the fact that, overall, our students are doing well

Middle School Literacy Program

Program Context

ELA teachers at the middle schools value collaboration and share a passion for their content area and working with adolescents. The Grades 6-8 English Language Arts Department at High Rock and Pollard Middle Schools includes five 6th grade teachers, a 6th grade literacy specialist, five 7th grade teachers, and four 8th grade teachers. The ELA teaching staff have various years of experience, with one-third of the staff having taught for more than twelve years and one-third of the staff having between six and twelve years of experience. The remaining staff has five or fewer years of teaching experience. For many years, the department was headed by a lead teacher who was responsible for a full-time teaching load in addition to the responsibilities of leading the department.

English Language Arts teachers work in a cluster with math, science, social studies, and special education teachers who share instructional responsibility for the students assigned to that cluster. ELA classes meet for 45-55 minutes daily. Classes are heterogeneous, with the exception of a small number of students with Individualized Education Programs receiving specially designed instruction in classes taught by special educators.

“Through a wide variety of classroom learning experiences which are largely literature based, our goal in the middle school ELA department has been to teach children how to fully comprehend and respond to what they read and teach them how to use the English language most effectively in their writing and speaking. Along with gaining skills in comprehending text on a factual level, students also learn how to think critically while they read and are given the tools to respond analytically and personally. In all three grades, emphasis is placed on using a writing process. In all the writing they do, students are encouraged to develop their own individual voices and styles”

(Pollard Middle School Program of Studies 2010-2011).

The 2009-2010 school year brought a number of changes for the department and the middle schools in general. High Rock School opened for the 6th grade while the 7th and 8th grades remained at Pollard. High Rock has a new part-time literacy specialist who coaches teachers in all content areas and teaches an enrichment course, *“Literacy and Media Studies.”* This is a trimester course that focuses on nonfiction reading and research strategies and choosing literature for enjoyment. The opening of High Rock also brought additional technology resources for grade 6: each of the five clusters at High Rock has a laptop cart and all classrooms are equipped with a smart board. At Pollard, there are five laptop carts and one computer lab available for sign out, and four out of nine ELA classrooms have smartboards.

To ensure coordination of the middle school program across two schools, the district also hired new instructional leaders as an alternative to the head teacher model. Beginning with the 2009-2010 school year, Curriculum Coordinators for English Language Arts/Social Studies and Science/Math are now responsible for leadership of these grade 6-8 departments and are members of the K-12 curriculum cabinet.

The main impetus for the opening of High Rock was growing student enrollment, which will continue over the coming years at the middle schools. This growing enrollment will require ongoing work to ensure we have the appropriate staffing, programs, and resources to provide a rigorous, developmentally appropriate ELA curriculum at both middle schools.

Middle School Curriculum

The Needham Public Schools 2009-2010 Parent Survey asked parents/guardians to rate their level of satisfaction with all major subject areas. Parents who responded to the survey had a satisfaction level of 81.2% with ELA at the middle school level. System-wide satisfaction with ELA was 86.0%. In addition, the survey included three open response questions for parents/guardians related to the ELA Program Review. Within these, parents/guardians highlighted strengths and suggestions for improvement (Appendix C).

“[There are] Lots of good things that go on... Are they thoughtfully placed and built up to and from grade to grade?”

*--Middle School
Faculty/Administrator Interviewee*

A few key themes around curricular strengths and areas for improvement emerged across data sources. Multiple data sources highlighted particular units at each grade level as areas of strength. Having some distinct writing units or novels at each grade was considered a strength because the skills/curriculum for these have been well developed and there has been extensive collaboration among teachers. Some of these units also build upon one another from grade to grade, such as units that develop students' skills in oral presentation. Students, parents, and middle school faculty/administrator interviewees mentioned special events such as a Poetry Day and author visits as strengths (Appendix C).

Another common theme in middle school faculty/administrator interviews, parent surveys, and ELA teacher surveys was that “best practices” in curriculum and instruction that exist in certain classes should be implemented more consistently across the middle school program.

The need for greater clarity and consistency emerged in multiple data points. In middle school faculty/administrator interviews, 59% commented on inconsistency in the curriculum and believe there is a lack of clarity on what students should know and be able to do at each grade. Some middle school faculty/administrators interviewed also stated they think it is important for the curriculum to maintain some teacher choice and individuality. Some also speculated that concerns about losing this choice may be holding back work on curriculum mapping. In the parent survey, respondents commented on the need for greater consistency in the curriculum. Middle school faculty/administrator interviews and parent survey responses indicated that not all constituents are aware of what is in the ELA curriculum.

While 80% of ELA teachers agreed that they have collectively “identified the skills and content that we agree we want students to know and be able to do by the end of our course,” additional ELA teacher survey responses revealed that the amount of common agreement varies by unit and suggested differing understandings of what it means to have common agreement. Middle School ELA teachers were asked to “name your major units of study and list the approximate number of weeks for each unit.” Each grade had some core units listed by all teachers and also had units that varied across teachers. Not all respondents listed approximate timeframes; the number of weeks that were listed for common units varied, with some units more consistent than others. All middle school teachers listed short stories and novels as areas of study.

*“Preserve 10-15%(of the curriculum)
for teacher choice ”*

*--Middle School
Faculty/Administrator
Interviewee*

ELA Teachers were surveyed on what “revisions you would like to see in the curriculum for your grade.” The most frequent areas mentioned by ELA teachers for revisions to the curriculum were:

- Common assessments/rubrics (36%)
- Work on defining standards and units/lessons aligned to these (43%)
- Grammar and/or writing (36%)
- Components of reading/vocabulary instruction (29%)
- Vertical alignment/sequencing of units/novels (21%)
- Two teachers (14% of respondents) stated that they did not want to see any revisions to the curriculum.

ELA Teachers at the middle school are in the process of coming to agreement about curriculum and then recording their decisions into their curriculum maps logged on the ATLAS system. This curriculum mapping work has been ongoing for a few years and began prior to the introduction of ATLAS as a tool to support curriculum mapping. For example, each grade has articulated 1-2 common writing assignments for students and is now working towards creating common rubrics. Teachers utilize department meeting time and summer curriculum projects to work on articulating the curriculum. During the summer of 2010, teachers worked on multiple ELA curriculum projects including some vertical articulation. This fall, they have reviewed the vertical progression of instruction around short stories and literary elements. Further curriculum articulation remains to be done based on final revisions to state frameworks, outcomes of this program review, and through further examination of the vertical sequencing of curriculum maps.

*“We work on this every year
[curriculum mapping/alignment] as a
department and are doing quite well.
We still have work to do.”*

– Middle School ELA Teacher

This year, a new enrichment course, *Literacy and Media Studies*, was implemented at the 6th grade. “This trimester course is designed to ensure that students have the range of reading, writing, and research skills needed for the more complex literacy tasks that they will encounter in the various academic areas throughout middle school. This course is a collaboration between the literacy and the library media specialists. In this course students learn strategies that enable them to read a range of non-fiction texts in both

print and electronic formats, refine skills that enable them to develop effective strategies to search for information in books, databases and web sites, and learn to evaluate sources and practice note-taking skills” (High Rock School Program of Studies 2010-2011). This course, as well as the addition of the literacy specialist at High Rock, was mentioned as strengths by both parents and middle school faculty/administrator interviewees.

We collected data with an eye towards comparing what is taught in our ELA curriculum to the Massachusetts ELA Curriculum Frameworks and have reported more detailed data below in the areas of reading and writing. Because many components of the ELA curriculum at the middle school were delineated prior to the revisions to the state frameworks, this review provided an opportunity to re-examine the curriculum based on the updated state frameworks and the Common Core standards. For the purposes of this review, our emphasis was on reading and writing genres, the areas with most substantial changes to the frameworks.

Strengths

- Special events such as Poetry Day and author visits related to the ELA curriculum serve to engage students and enrich the curriculum.
- Teachers are engaged in ongoing work to clarify the curriculum, including what students should know and be able to do at each grade. This has led to the development of some core units at each grade taught by all teachers. Two strengths highlighted by parents and interviewees were that some units have interdisciplinary connections and that units build upon one another from grade to grade.
- The addition of the *Literacy and Media Studies* course for grade 6 students provides additional direct instruction in reading comprehension strategies, especially for nonfiction.

Areas of Concern

- Faculty/administrator interviewees and parents perceive that the curriculum is inconsistent. At the same time, the majority of teachers reported that their curriculum is consistent; however, among teachers there are differing views on how much consistency currently exists and how much consistency is necessary.
- A close analysis of specific ELA teacher survey questions regarding curriculum and instruction indicates that there is significant variation in some areas of curriculum and instruction. Because some inconsistencies do exist, students do not all receive a consistent ELA experience
- Some aspects of the state frameworks are heavily emphasized in our curriculum while others receive much less attention (i.e. reading and writing of expository and persuasive texts, research skills).

Recommendations

- Continue ongoing conversation to ensure we have created an “organized, articulated, up to date curriculum” that is “aligned to frameworks and is articulated vertically and horizontally.” Ensure that the department has a clear vision and understanding of the expectations for a standards based curriculum.
- The department should continue its work on vertical alignment of the curriculum to address areas of overlap and omission in the curriculum, especially in light of state and Common Core frameworks. Time on various aspects of the curriculum may need to be adjusted to ensure adequate instructional time for writing and reading of informational/persuasive texts, vocabulary, and reading comprehension instruction.
- Ensure that curriculum decisions delineate the core curriculum and accommodate for flexibility in instructional style.
- Explore ways to enhance communication with parents/guardians and middle school faculty/administrators to provide more information about the ELA curriculum.

Writing

“Great opportunities for the students to share ideas and writing styles.”

– Middle School Parent/Guardian

ELA Teacher survey responses indicate that most writing assignments are personal or literary in nature: students write journals/reflections, responses to literature, personal essays, poetry, and short stories. There is significantly less writing of expository and persuasive texts across the middle school program. When students write expository or persuasive texts, assignments commonly take the form of book reviews, summaries, essays, and reports. The ELA teacher survey also showed that there is consistent direct instruction in most steps of the writing process yet the amount of time spent on this

instruction varies. Data from ELA teacher surveys indicates that the amount of writing assigned varies. Middle school faculty/administrator interviewees reported that instruction in the writing process is a strength of the ELA curriculum in many classrooms and that teachers make connections between reading and writing.

“In preparation for high school, the middle school English program needs to be more rigorous.”

– Middle School Parent/Guardian

About 32% of parents/guardians who answered the survey identified writing as an area for improvement, making it the most frequent suggestion for improvement from parents. Within the area of writing, the most frequent concerns parents identified were: variation across grades/teachers especially in expectations for writing, a desire for more writing assignments, more attention to grammar/spelling/mechanics, and more feedback on writing for students. Parent/guardian survey responses also included praise for writing: 13% of respondents mentioned some aspect of the writing program as a strength. Grade 8 students in focus groups felt that feedback from teachers (in the form of individual conferences and written feedback) and direct instruction helped them. In fact, individual conferences with teachers and written feedback on writing were considered helpful by all constituencies.

“I think middle school students should do more writing in English class, and should receive feedback on drafts from the teacher more often.”

– Middle School Parent/Guardian

Based on ELA teacher survey responses, there is inconsistent direct instruction in grammar, mechanics, and editing for conventions at the middle school level. Some parents want to see more instruction around grammar and editing. High school students also mentioned that there should be more grammar instruction at the middle or high school level.

Strengths

- Students have multiple opportunities to write personal narratives, reflections, and responses to literature. Students write literary texts in the form of poems and short stories.
- Connections are made between reading and writing in the ELA curriculum.

Areas of Concern

- The need for more direct instruction in writing and more volume of writing were strong sentiments from many faculty/administrator interviewees.
- There are very few opportunities for persuasive and expository writing instruction and assignments in the current curriculum.
- While each grade has developed one to two common writing assignments within the curriculum, more work is needed to align additional writing assignments and to reach common agreements on expectations and grading. (see Assessment section for further information)

Recommendations

- As a 6-8 department, articulate a minimum number of core writing assignments as well as genres to be written so that students receive a consistent amount of writing practice and a consistent writing curriculum across the middle schools. To ensure that the curriculum is aligned with the state curriculum frameworks, more emphasis will be needed on persuasive and expository writing.
- Incorporate a consistent systematic grammar instruction strand in the middle school curriculum that reflects current research and best practices for grammar instruction.

Reading

“I am forever emphasizing the importance of developing a love for reading- they know I value free reading.”

–Middle School ELA Teacher

We collected data about the genres students are reading in English Language Arts and about the components of reading instruction within the curriculum. Most reading in the ELA curriculum is of literary texts, especially novels and short stories (with less attention to drama and folktales). Further breakdown is provided below:

% of Reading Time spent on:	Less than 10%	Less than 25%	26-50%	50% or more
Informational Texts	35%	36%	29%	-
Persuasive Texts	35%	43%	14%	7%
Literary Texts	-	-	50%	50%

ELA Teacher survey questions regarding instructional practice indicate that there is significant direct instruction in recognizing literary devices, engaging in literary analysis, and using textual evidence to support a position. Responses also indicate that while direct instruction in reading comprehension occurs at the middle level, the amount of instructional time and the reading strategies that are taught are not consistent.

“With reading, there isn’t a real focus on reading skills instruction. Kids are thinking about the literature and are talking about it and reacting to it, but for struggling readers who are having a hard time understanding the text, it is really hard. There could be more direct instruction on skills.”

--Middle School Faculty/Administrator Interviewee

“When you have to go back into the text and find the answer (and don’t know how to do it) it is very frustrating.”

-- Middle School Student

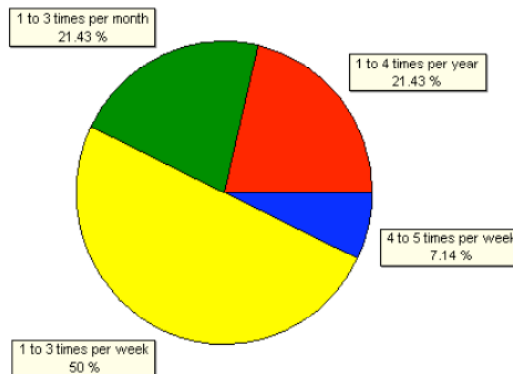
Vocabulary instruction focuses mainly on word definition and meaning from context, with 79% of teachers spending less than 25% of their vocabulary instruction on suffixes, prefixes and root words, word origins, and synonyms/antonyms.

ELA teachers were in strong agreement that students should be engaged in outside or independent reading at all times and that students should always have their books available to read in class. Not all teachers specified quantities of in class or out of class time they expected students to read independently. Teachers varied in how much class time was allotted for independent reading. Assessment and accountability practices for outside reading also varied.

A strong theme in middle school faculty/administrator interviews was a need for more reading comprehension instruction and time for independent reading. Students interviewed identified many factors that help them develop as readers and shared insights into their reading habits. They found read a-louds and reading groups/literature discussion helpful to their development. Access to many books was critical. Students liked when there was an abundance of books in many genre/levels (in classrooms and libraries). They appreciated when teachers and media specialists helped them find the best books for readability level and interest. Parent/guardians offered both praise (20%) and suggestions for improvement (16%) related to reading. Praise most often described a child’s love of reading or the book choices, and suggestions for improvement most often related to having students do more independent reading or having more book choices.

ELA Teacher Survey Question about Class Time Spent on Instructional Activities:

7. Silently read books, magazines, articles, or other written material of their own choice



“I actually do [read] a lot for fun but don’t have time for a book...I read lots of articles every morning ...”

-- Middle School Student

Strengths

- Teachers and media specialists value independent reading and help students identify independent reading books.
- Students regularly engage in literary analysis of novels and short stories.
- Media centers have appropriate materials and media specialists have much interest in supporting the ELA curriculum.

Areas of Concern

- The amount of instructional time on teaching literary elements may be limiting time available for direct instruction in reading comprehension. Time spent on independent reading and accountability for student independent reading vary from teacher to teacher and grade to grade.
- There is limited emphasis on reading informational or persuasive texts in the middle school ELA curriculum.
- Instruction in active reading strategies and vocabulary instruction vary from teacher to teacher and grade to grade.

“He loves to read and ELA book choices expands his reading repertoire.”

-- Middle School Parent/Guardian

Recommendations

- Develop a scope and sequence for reading strategy instruction to ensure direct instruction is provided consistently. Reading strategies need to be practiced regularly over a period of time in order to assist students with their reading growth.
- Develop a scope and sequence for vocabulary instruction in ELA and content areas classes at the middle school level.
- Using current research on adolescent literacy, determine an approach that balances whole-class novels, literature circles, and independent reading that will be most effective for student growth in understanding literature and improving their independent reading comprehension. Expand data collection on student reading habits to inform our independent reading practices.
- Ensure that reading materials are balanced between narrative, expository, and persuasive texts to better align with the state frameworks and to prepare students for the literacy tasks they will face in middle and high school and beyond.
- Secure additional resources to support changes/additions made to reading materials for the ELA curriculum that result from recommendations of this review.

Middle School Instruction

Here, we explored how well our instructional practices align with our stated curriculum and research on best practices. We also looked at student expectations, supports available to students, and academic transitions from grade to grade. When implementing standards based education, educators must ensure instruction matches intended outcomes and provide supports for students struggling to master concepts as well as challenges for students who have already mastered portions of the curriculum (i.e. differentiated instruction). As part of vertical alignment of the curriculum, attention must be paid to how we are increasing the complexity of benchmarks or expectations so that students are successful at academic transitions. For this reason, we gathered data specific to transition points. Finally, we collected data about instructional materials in the ELA curriculum.

Meeting the Needs of All Students: Expectations/Supports

Of ELA Teachers, 79% felt that, for the most part, their curriculum meets the needs of their students. Those who felt it did not meet the needs of students identified these concerns:

- The curriculum does not adequately address the needs of students who struggle with reading and writing.
- The selected reading is not challenging enough for some students.
- The need to 'cover' material means less attention is given to student interests.

When asked whether there were sufficient support systems available for students who have difficulty with reading/writing, 36% of ELA teachers agreed and 36% disagreed. ELA teachers reported greater comfort in differentiating instruction to offer challenge than with providing remediation/additional support:

	Agree	Disagree
"I am comfortable differentiating ELA/literacy instruction for students needing remediation."	64%	21%
"I am comfortable differentiating ELA/literacy instruction for students needing more challenging work in ELA/Literacy."	85%	7%

In focus groups, students were asked to talk about a time when a teacher provided a challenging learning experience. Not all students shared an experience. However, those who did recalled personal, individual encouragement to write more in a journal, to read aloud, or to read a more challenging book. Additionally, roughly 10% of parent respondents identified the need for more rigor/challenge as an area for improvement, making it the second most frequent parent recommendation following writing.

Middle School interviewees offered suggestions for ways to improve work with ELA and Special Education teachers/departments to best serve students' needs. These included:

- More time for collaboration
- More differentiated instruction
- Involving special educators in instruction more- move towards more co-teaching rather than teachers acting as assistants

Transitions

Students encounter numerous academic transitions: from elementary to 6th grade, from High Rock to Pollard Middle School, and from 8th grade to the High School. As students get older and gain greater proficiency, expectations for students often increase and the curriculum becomes more complex. Ensuring that students experience successful transitions in the ELA program is critical to meeting students' needs from grades K-12. Ninth grade students answered the following survey questions related to their transition to ELA at the high school:

Grade 9 Students: *When you entered the high school, how well prepared were you for the reading/writing expectations for your English class?*

	Reading	Writing
Very well prepared	22%	<1%
Well prepared	31%	26%
Somewhat prepared	41%	62%
Not at all prepared	6%	11%

ELA teachers also answered survey questions regarding student preparation and transitions.

	Agree	Disagree	Neither
"Overall, at the beginning of the year, my students are prepared to learn the curriculum for my course."	64%	7%	29%
"I communicate/collaborate with teachers at the grade level above me to support a smooth transition for students."	28%	42%	29%

Middle school faculty/administrator interviewees and parents expressed concerns about transitions, sharing their perception that there is a large increase in expectations for students in ELA classes as they move from grade to grade in middle school, and then move on to Needham High School.

Instructional Practices/Time

"...dedicated to the kids and to learning."

"My child has become an engaged reader."

"...incredibly dedicated to improving each student's writing abilities."

"...responsive to different learning styles, and helps students find their voices as writers."

--Middle School Parent/Guardian comments regarding ELA Teachers and their impact

Middle School interviewees praised teachers for the connections they make with students and for their passion for and knowledge of ELA. They also praised special events like Poetry Day and author visits. Middle School interviewees mentioned practices that are helpful to working with students with Individualized Education Programs: standards based instruction/feedback, rubrics/organizers given in advance, and immersion in reading followed by a writing assignment. They also stated that they would like to see more interdisciplinary connections between ELA and other content area classes.

Some strong instructional practices were highlighted in Middle School faculty/administrator interviews. One example was the use of technology including interactive whiteboards to model writing in class (editing, drafting, mechanics). Another was that teachers connect reading and writing instruction. As one stakeholder explained, students are asked to "*read with the mind and eye of a writer (i.e. reading for literary devices, read with post-its)*".

Parents mentioned a number of instructional strategies they have found helpful to their children including opportunities to write in class and collaborative teaching efforts that allowed for connections to be made between classes and for skills to transfer. Parents also commented on the growth they have seen in their children, citing improved skills in reading or writing and noting that their children have a greater interest in reading. Many parents' comments included specific praise for ELA teachers who had a positive impact on their children's development.

Students in focus groups also talked about choice, including the choice of a book or a topic for writing, as something that helps them learn. Student responses also showed the importance of personal connections to their success as learners. Students expressed that they benefited from personal connections with teachers, with books, with writing assignments, and with classmates. Students liked individual conferences in addition to written feedback to support their writing. They also talked about being part of a classroom learning community and about how they benefited from having others around them working and sharing ideas. Students named activities they thought were enjoyable around reading and writing and said they wanted to do more of these types of tasks (acting out a play, declamations, poetry, games/competitions).

"[I'm] Struggling with taking notes on books because it makes me stop when reading and write something down. Then I get confused.
" – Middle School Student

ELA teachers responded to a number of questions that asked about the types of instructional activities used. Some areas of consistent use of research-based instructional practices include:

- Use structured, full class discussion or Socratic seminars
- Write a response or explanation to a specific prompt using brief constructed responses of several sentences or more
- Relate text to personal experience
- Analyze information to make inferences or draw conclusions

At the same time, responses also revealed large variation or infrequent use of other research-based instructional practices.

	1-4 times/yr.	1-3 times/mo.	>= 1-3 times/wk.
Listen to the teacher read aloud	21%	29%	50%
Participate in a student-teacher conference	57%	29%	14%
Practice reading comprehension strategies	21%	14%	--
Read and analyze mentor/model texts	36%	29%	--
Engage in small group literature circles	43%	29%	29%

"We should do more homework assignments that you really have to think about not just answers on a paper and finding them in book.
"- Middle School Student

ELA teachers were asked to state their level of agreement with the following statements related to instruction:

	Agree	Disagree	Neither Agree/Disagree
"I implement anti-racist teaching practices in my course."	100%	--	--
"I believe I need to explicitly teach reading and writing strategies."	86%	7%	7%
"The state curriculum frameworks influence what I teach."	79%	--	21%
"The MCAS test results influence what I teach."	78%	7%	14%

Technology

As discussed in the Program Context, there is more technology available to ELA classrooms at High Rock than at Pollard. ELA Teachers were surveyed on the frequency with which students "use computers or other technology to learn/practice/explore language arts content." All grade 6 teachers responded that their use is 1 to 3 times per month or more frequently. With the exception of one teacher who reported use at a frequency of 1 to 3 times per month, 7th and 8th grade teachers reported either not at all or 1 to 4 times per year. Therefore, 6th grade students have greater access and more frequent use of technology in the ELA classroom.

Resources- Choice of Materials and Availability

" I would like the content to become common concepts that can be taught using whatever books or means the teacher would like to use. A few common titles would still be a good thing."

--Middle School ELA Teacher

When surveyed about instructional materials, 57% of ELA teachers agreed that they have adequate resources to teach their curriculum, but 21% disagreed. While 71% felt that the primary resources for their course are at an appropriate reading level for most of their students, only 57% of ELA teachers agreed with the statement "I have additional/supplemental content materials at different grade/reading levels for meeting the needs of students." Middle School interviewees suggested adding more variety of perspectives/diversity in literature and more variety and choice overall in literature selections. They also suggested providing more resources for students who struggle (dictionaries, electronic spellers, version of book at different reading levels) and using literature circles or similar books on the same theme to meet the needs of learners.

“We need more diversity of perspective- ethnically in authors read, across genre.”

*--Middle School
Faculty/Administrator
Interviewees*

Strengths

- Teachers make connections with students and are knowledgeable/passionate about their content, both of which positively impact how instruction is delivered and received at the middle school level.
- Teachers utilize a variety of instructional strategies to engage learners.
- There are areas of consistent instructional practice including: discussion of texts, relating text to personal experience, making inferences and drawing conclusions, and writing responses to prompts.
- Grade 6 students have numerous opportunities to utilize technology in the ELA classroom.

Areas of Concern

- There is varied access to and therefore use of technology, especially laptops and smart boards, in the ELA program from grades 6-8.
- A need was identified for more differentiation/supports for students with IEPs, students with reading struggles, and students needing more challenge.
- Targeted intervention programs for struggling readers and appropriate staffing levels needed for teaching such programs/classes, are not in place at the middle school level.
- Concerns were raised about the appropriateness of increases in expectations between grades.
- Data indicates that insufficient time is being allotted for some critical components of the ELA curriculum, specifically instruction in reading comprehension skills, reading expository texts, read- alouds, and increasing writing. Further data reveals varied or infrequent use of certain instructional practices tied to these areas (practicing reading comprehension strategies, etc) and variation in time devoted to major units of study.

Recommendations

- Examine expectations for students at each grade level and at transitions to ensure an appropriate sequence of expectations for students.
- Secure additional staffing in order to provide small-group, targeted reading interventions for struggling readers.
- In conjunction with the special education department, explore ways to further involve special educators in the planning and teaching of the ELA curriculum in order to maximize opportunities for co teaching and differentiation.
- Further examine how the ELA program can best support English Language Learners. During this review, we do not believe we collected adequate data to make specific recommendations. However, the unique needs of this subgroup should be included in the planning for curriculum and instruction.
- Continue discussion and offer professional development around ways to differentiate instruction to support students who are struggling and to provide challenge opportunities for all students.
- Further examine the ELA teacher survey responses on questions about instructional practices to facilitate discussion around best practices and areas for further consistency. One potential outcome of this discussion could be consensus on approximate amount of instructional time to be spent on various aspects of the curriculum (i.e. vocabulary, nonfiction reading, literature circles, etc) in order to ensure our enacted curriculum aligns with our stated curriculum and best practices.
- Ensure students are exposed to a variety of genres and diverse perspectives and minimize repetition across grades 6-8 (and K-12) curricular materials. Come to an agreement regarding the criteria/process for making choices about new novels and literature circle titles.
- Advocate for further technology for ELA classrooms particularly at Pollard.
- Secure funding to update and expand selection of reading materials to include more nonfiction, more genres/perspectives, and varied reading levels. Ensure that alternative texts and supports (i.e. books on CD) are readily available.

Content Area Literacy

As students enter middle school, the literacy tasks they face increase in complexity and variety across content areas. To equip students with the skills to meet these demands, literacy instruction must be incorporated across disciplines. Middle school teachers in content areas/disciplines other than ELA completed a brief survey regarding their beliefs around literacy instruction, literacy practices in their courses, and their professional

development needs. Data reported here includes responses from 44 middle school world language, fine and performing arts, math, science, and social studies teachers. The goal of data collection was to identify trends in beliefs and instructional practice in order to provide direction for overall literacy work at the middle school level. In general, data revealed significant consistency among beliefs around content area literacy, varied instructional practices and assignments, and a desire for professional development. Other highlights of the data included:

Literacy Beliefs

"Every content area requires different reading and writing strategies."
73% agreed.

"Content area reading/writing strategies should be taught in the ELA curriculum."
66% agreed, 20% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 14% disagreed.

"Content area reading/writing strategies should be taught in content area classes."
93% agreed.

"I believe that in my class, I need to explicitly teach reading and writing strategies for my content area."
68% agreed, 20% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 11% disagreed.

Assignments and Direct Instruction

Teachers were surveyed regarding the frequency with which students complete a variety of reading and writing assignments in their courses and the frequency with which direct instruction is provided in these reading and writing tasks.

There were some literacy tasks where both assignment and direct instruction were frequent and consistent:

- Determining important ideas
- Answering questions about the text
- Activating background knowledge
- Learning vocabulary
- Writing short answers/paragraphs

Other literacy tasks were infrequently assigned to students and students did not receive much direction instruction.

- Previewing texts before reading
- Using a writing process
- Writing longer essays
- Completing research papers or projects

The survey results revealed large variation in both the frequency of assigning and directly instructing students in the following tasks:

- Generating questions about the text
- Identifying their purpose for reading
- Using text structure and organizational features to aid their comprehension
- Monitoring their comprehension during reading
- Previewing texts before reading
- Using a writing process

This data suggests that students complete a variety of literacy tasks in their content area classes. They also receive direct instruction in some literacy strategies. However, there is not a coherent, systematic plan for content area literacy instruction and assignments.

Materials

"Primary texts for my class are written at an appropriate reading level."
59% of respondents agreed

"I have additional/supplemental content materials in my classroom on different grade levels for meeting needs of students."
43% of respondents agreed, 36% disagreed, and 20% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Professional Development

	Not at All	Somewhat	Very Much
"I feel prepared to teach reading/writing literacy skills in my content area."	3%	73%	24%
"I would like professional development for teaching reading/writing/literacy skills in my content area."	16%	43%	40%

Strengths

- There is a literacy specialist at High Rock to coach teachers in literacy instruction. Teachers have already worked with the literacy specialist and wish to continue to do so going forward.
- Teachers believe that the development of literacy in the content area classes is important. There is a strong general consensus among content area teachers that reading and writing strategies should be taught as part of content area classes.
- Students are being assigned many reading and writing tasks in content area classes.

Areas of Concern

- While most teachers queried felt that strategies for reading and writing should be part of content area classes in general, there was less agreement among teachers that they, personally, need to be teaching those strategies to the students in their own classes.
- The variability in instructional practices and literacy tasks suggests that there are not clear expectations or direction provided to teachers for content area literacy at the middle level.
- Teachers assign more literacy tasks but do not always provide direct instruction to students in the skills and strategies necessary. Teachers may be incorrectly assuming that students have already received direct instruction in these skills. Therefore, all students may not be receiving direct instruction in the content area literacy skills that they need to succeed at the middle school and high school level.

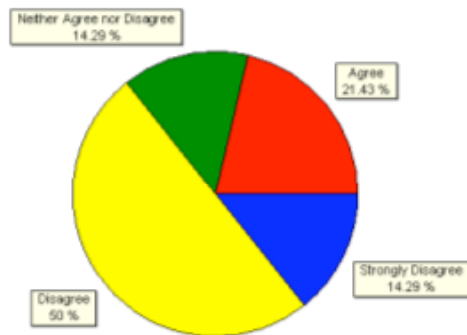
Recommendations

- A scope and sequence for reading/writing skill instruction, including research and note-taking skills, in content areas should be developed collaboratively. This should include clear expectations for the literacy strategy instruction and types of assignments that will occur in each content area/grade.
- Professional development time and additional instructional materials must be provided to support content area literacy.

Middle School Assessment

Assessment practices provide the data necessary to determine whether the curriculum and instructional practices are resulting in desired student learning. Common assessments and collaborative examination of student work/scoring of assessments help ensure consistent grade-level expectations for student learning. At the elementary school, there are common reading assessments. The Middle School ELA Department currently does not administer reading assessments. However, for the first time during the 2009-2010 school year, 6th grade teachers received *Fountas and Pinnell* Benchmark Reading Assessment scores from 5th grade. Teachers can now use this data to help identify areas of need and support students in developing their reading comprehension. Each fall ELA teachers examine MCAS data in order to make curricular revisions and identify students in need of additional support during the current school year. Currently, the department does not use a common rubric or set of criteria for assessing writing. However, ELA teachers at each grade utilize similar rubrics for some assignments and they are working on developing more common assessments/rubrics. The department has also begun to explore the 6 + 1 Traits program for assessing writing.

173. I score student writing with other ELA teachers at my grade.



Teachers use a range of assessment practices including: student self-assessment, monitoring/assessing student responses and interactions during discussion, quizzes/tests with objective questions, formative assessments, student presentations, creative projects, responses to writing prompts, journals/free writes, and essays. There was substantial variation in the reported use of the following types of assessment practices:

- Student-teacher conferences
- Essays
- Rewrites and Retakes

Teachers use assessment results in many ways including:

- To provide feedback to students
- To check for understanding
- To shape/inform subsequent instruction
- To inform a summative evaluation of student learning
- To refine teaching practice/assess effectiveness- during unit, at end
- To decide what to re-teach/reinforce and to whom (full class vs. individuals)
- To give feedback to students/parents about strengths, areas to grow

While the majority of data collected related to assessment was through the ELA teacher survey, other data sources offered this additional information. Parent suggestions for improvement related to assessment included sending home more work (especially graded writing), telling parents more about student progress, and updating class websites. Middle school faculty/administrator interviewees suggested that teachers develop rubrics and look at student work together more regularly.

Strengths

- Teachers analyze MCAS data collaboratively each year.
- Grade 6 teachers received and reviewed Grade 5 *Fountas and Pinnell* Benchmark reading assessment data for the first time during the 2009-2010 school year.
- There is a strong desire on the part of most teachers to develop common assessments and some teachers utilized summer curriculum project days this past summer to work on common rubrics.
- Teachers use a variety of assessment methods and use these to inform instruction.

Areas of Concern

- Consistent rubrics for assessing student writing are not in place at the middle school level.
- The middle schools do not have a reading assessment plan.
- Collaborative scoring and analysis of student work is infrequent.

Recommendations

- Continue to analyze and use both MCAS and *Fountas & Pinnell* data to inform instruction.
- Develop common formative and summative assessments.
- Create/refine grade level and department wide rubrics, especially for writing, with consideration to rubrics in place at the elementary and high school levels, which are largely based on the 6 Plus 1 Trait Writing Model of Instruction and Assessment.
- Investigate reading assessment tools, both diagnostic and progress monitoring, for grade 6 students.

Middle School Organizational Systems

Leadership

“They [instructional leaders] push ways we can improve but also support ideas that come up from the roots up. They also work to encourage/require collegial consensus building around curriculum and pedagogy decisions.”

-- Middle School ELA Teacher

Instructional leaders must play a critical role in supporting teaching and learning in ELA/literacy and they will be critical in the implementation of this review's recommendations. Parents commented most about the need to address the following areas of improvement, all of which would be important for program leadership to oversee the implementation of: too much variation/more consistency needed in curriculum and instruction, improvements warranted/ need for an increased amount of writing instruction, and the necessity for more challenging learning experiences. Middle School faculty/administrators interviewed responded that the program needs to look at curricular consistency and instructional best practices so that students have similar experiences. They mentioned the addition of a curriculum coordinator as a first step towards greater consistency, specifically by having a curriculum/instructional leader in a supervisory role. Seventy one percent of ELA teachers agreed that there is a clear expectation that the curricula at each grade level should be consistent.

ELA teachers reported receiving varying amounts of feedback about their teaching: 35% of teachers agreed that they receive clear and regular feedback on their teaching while 28 % disagreed and 35% neither agreed or disagreed. ELA teachers identified supports and professional development provided by instructional leaders including: providing materials/resources, observing classes and giving feedback, answering questions, supporting teacher ideas, pushing teachers to improve, following up on requests, offering ideas and sharing articles, encouraging/requiring consensus around pedagogy/curriculum, and providing time for conversation and collaboration. Specific comments show that some teachers would like to see more and different support from instructional leaders. Specifically, teachers stated they felt there has been too much work on standards based education/data and too many initiatives.

“Our time is VERY consumed with data collection and framework aligning and has very little to do with our work in ELA/Literacy.”

-- Middle School ELA Teacher

Teachers identified ways they would like instructional leaders to support their work going forward:

- Supporting collaboration between grades/schools (including with the high school)
- Help with aligning curriculum around writing and other areas
- More open time at meetings for sharing of ideas and materials
- More outcome-related discussions
- Giving suggestions for rubrics/exemplars/common grading
- Help finding outside professional development
- Increased classroom observations and feedback.

Because this was the first year with a part-time literacy specialist, we gathered teacher input (from Grade 6 ELA and content-area teachers) to determine ways the literacy specialist can support their work. Some of the ways teachers (in ELA and other content areas) have worked with the literacy specialist included help with reading response notes, reading and note taking skills, help with research projects and evaluation sources, providing book recommendations, exchanging professional books, sharing ideas, support with lesson planning, evaluating sources, and research projects. Teachers were also asked to share suggestions for the ongoing role of the literacy specialist. These suggestions included:

“This is a transitional year.”

- Middle School ELA Teacher

- Focusing on content reading skills for social studies and science
- Working in classrooms
- Lesson ideas to help teach skills
- Providing materials
- Help with grammar/feedback on writing so it is consistent
- Help build literacy instruction into content area units
- Spend time in classrooms supporting students
- Discuss topics coming up in classes (i.e.- Literacy and Media Studies and content area/ELA classes.).

Some grade 6 teachers also mentioned a desire for a reading teacher to provide direct instruction to struggling readers, which would require additional staffing beyond the literacy specialist.

Strengths

- The addition of a part-time literacy coach at High Rock provides another instructional leader to support teachers in English Language Arts as well as content area literacy.
- The addition of a curriculum coordinator provides more curriculum leadership from a supervisory position.
- Teachers play leadership roles within the department.

Areas of Concern

- Not all teachers feel they receive clear and regular feedback on their teaching.
- Parents survey results and middle school faculty/administrator interviews reveal a lack of knowledge about the ELA curriculum at the middle school level.

Recommendations

- In order to implement the recommendations from this review, instructional leaders must provide accountability and oversight.
- Continue to balance teachers' need/desire for open time for sharing at meetings with their need/desire for more work on curriculum alignment and assessment practices.
- Develop and implement strategies to inform all stakeholders about the ELA curriculum and to provide clarity in expectations for student learning.
- Utilize suggestions from ELA and content area surveys to continue to shape the roles and responsibilities of the literacy specialist at High Rock, the ELA/Social Studies curriculum coordinator, and other middle level administrators, as they relate to supporting literacy/ ELA at the middle school level.

Professional Development

"I think grades 6-8 need to spend more time together to discuss curriculum and how the learning in one grade impacts the next. There seem to be gaps in communication between the three grades that I would like to see closed."
-- Middle School English Language Arts Teacher

"The workshops we have done through Needham have helped, especially in the sense that they provided an opportunity to communicate with other teachers."
-- Middle School English Language Arts Teacher

ELA teachers were asked to list their recent professional development activities and comment on their usefulness. Teachers were also asked to identify the professional development they would like to take in the future, as well as their ideas for professional development for the overall department going forward. Recent professional development topics and courses included:

- EMI/Multicultural Curriculum/METCO Directors Conference
- Reading workshops/courses
- Standards Based Education/Curriculum Design
- Technology Classes
- Writing Classes
- Teachers as Scholars

Commenting on the usefulness, 64% wrote that they have found their professional development activities useful while 7% did not find the activities useful and 14% did not respond. Within their comments, 14% wrote specifically that Needham-sponsored workshops were not helpful and 7% commented that Needham-sponsored workshops were helpful. Teachers named specific ways professional development has been helpful, especially unit planning and meeting with other teachers, and highlighted specific courses/topics as useful: standards based education, writing workshops, and workshops offered through Primary Source and Teachers as Scholars.

When asked what professional development they would like in the future, 43% of teachers listed that they would like professional development around writing and 21% of teachers wanted more professional development similar to Teachers as Scholars workshops (in which teachers are 'students' and learn a piece of content of interest). For future professional development as an ELA department, 50% of teachers identified professional development related to standards based education, including common unit planning, common assessments, and vertical alignment, as a direction they would like for the department to take. Components of the curriculum specifically mentioned for revision or vertical alignment by ELA teachers included: grammar, discussion, response to literature, independent reading choices, writing goals and assessments, vocabulary, and vertical agreement on core novels.

By contrast, 14% stated that they want professional development to focus on content or topics that inspire teachers and not on standards based education. Additionally, 14% listed literacy/reading comprehension and 21% listed antiracist teaching practices as directions for the department.

Middle School faculty/administrators interviewed identified the need to involve special educators further in curriculum planning and professional development for English Language Arts. As discussed earlier, 40% of content area teachers very much agreed and 43% somewhat agreed that they would like professional development about literacy.

“The standards work has taken focus off of deepening teacher’s academic content driven learning. The assumption is common standards will improve teacher instruction therefore student learning. I disagree. ...More time for content, content, content at the middle and high school levels is what is needed.”

-- Middle School English Language Arts Teacher

“Let us pick the sort of Professional Development we need instead of basing it on initiatives.”

-- Middle School English Language Arts Teacher

Professional Community

Strengths

- Teachers have participated in a wide array of professional development activities and identified further opportunities they would like to pursue.
- The majority of teachers in the ELA department want further professional development related to components of standards based education and writing. At the same time, however, a few teachers are concerned with the focus on standards based education.
- Most teachers have found the professional development they have taken in the past three years helpful.

Areas of Concern

- Some teachers feel there have been too many initiatives in professional development or feel that there could be a better connection between their individual professional development needs/interests and the offerings of the district.

Recommendations

- Continue professional development around writing and standards based education, specifically assessments; these two areas were mentioned frequently by teachers and also identified as areas of need based on other data collected in this review.
- Incorporate antiracist teaching practices and reading/literacy instruction into professional development.
- Find ways to balance and connect teachers’ individual professional development needs with department wide professional development needs/priorities. Provide opportunities for choice when appropriate and continue to seek teacher input and feedback on professional development. Support outside professional development opportunities for teachers. Ensure that professional development is ongoing, job-embedded and tied to the goals of a PLC.
- Tie professional development to the examination of student work.
- Continue to assess professional development needs and ensure adequate professional development and time is provided to facilitate the implementation of the recommendations in this review.
- Offer literacy professional development not just to ELA teachers but also to content area teachers, paraprofessionals, special educators, ELL teachers, instructional leaders, and other members of the administrative team.
- Seek funding to expand literacy coaching/staffing at both schools.

A collaborative professional learning community (PLC) benefits students, parents, and teachers. In a PLC, educators regularly collaborate to discuss what they want students to know and be able to do, how they will assess it, and how they will support all students in their learning. There is a commitment to continuous improvement in instruction and student learning. Much of the data related to this category has been reported in earlier sections, specifically around assessments and professional development. The ELA teacher survey explored the use of PLC practices at the middle school level, including those reported previously on the agreement to use common standards and assessments and to engage in collaborative scoring of student work.

ELA Teachers were also asked their level of agreement with the following statements:

	Agree	Disagree	Neither
“My grade level ELA colleagues use common planning time to discuss instructional strategies.”	64%	14%	21%
“I collaborate with other teachers in my cluster to plan literacy instruction.”	57%	36%	7%

The media specialists play a critical role in supporting the ELA curriculum. Middle School faculty/administrators interviewed spoke positively about the collaboration between media specialists and ELA teachers around curriculum, instruction, and resources.

English Language Arts teachers at grades 7 and 8 have regular common planning time during the school day. Because of the varied schedule at the High Rock School, this common planning time is not embedded in the school day for grade 6 teachers. There

“If one teacher is doing something new others want to try it.”

– Middle School Administrator/Staff

are also monthly ELA department meetings after school and department-based professional development work on early release days. At times these meetings are based at grade-level and at other times the department meets across grades 6-8. The development of professional learning communities at the middle level is also enhanced by additional time for collaborative work: one ELA teacher specifically noted that he/she finds paid summer curriculum time helpful for professional development.

Strengths

- ELA teachers at Pollard have common planning time during the school day. Grades 6-8 teachers have monthly department meetings.
- ELA Teachers value collaboration and want more time to work together.
- ELA Teachers regularly share lesson ideas and classroom resources with one another.

Areas of Concern

- The PLC practice of collaboratively scoring student work is infrequent at the middle school level.
- Grade 6 ELA teachers do not have common planning time in the school day.

Recommendations

- Continue to maintain common planning time for ELA teachers at Pollard and look for ways in which collaboration time can be provided for teachers at High Rock.
- As department assessment rubrics are refined/created, implement a regular practice of collaboratively scoring student work.

Middle School Student Learning

To examine student performance, we looked at student recognitions and an extensive analysis of the MCAS test to assess the effectiveness of the middle school literacy program.

MCAS

The last four-year MCAS data review continues to show that the performance of middle school students as a group, on this one measure, continues to be strong. The table below provides a summary of the percentage of students scoring advanced and proficient during that time period.

	2007	2008	2009	2010
Grade 6	88	89	86	89
Grade 7	88	91	90	91
Grade 8	94	89	95	93

Grade 6 and grade 7 students' performance improved over the last year but has remained fairly stable over the last four years. Grade 8 students' performance decreased slightly in 2010, but it too has had virtually no change in the percentages of students scoring at the advanced and proficient levels over that time period. Needham middle school student have performed very well overall on the ELA MCAS exam. A complete four-year history of student scores in each of the four categories (advanced, proficient, needs improvement, warning) is summarized in Appendix D.

CPI

In the aggregate, Needham has met or exceeded the Composite Performance Index (CPI) and therefore met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) each year since 2001. On open response questions, Needham students exceeded the state average. Seventh grade students also exceeded the state average for both conventions and topic development on the long composition. Needham Middle Schools CPI (Composite Performance Index)- ELA MCAS

	2010	2009	2008
Aggregate	97.0 Pollard 96.0 High Rock	96.5	95.7
Special Education	84.2 Pollard 81.3 High Rock	81.5	80
State Target	90.2	90.2	85.4

Special Education

MCAS reports provide detail of the progress of various subgroups, depending on the size of those groups in a particular school or district. In 2007 and 2008 Pollard did not meet its AYP target for the ELA special education subgroup on the MCAS exam. However, in 2009 and 2010, Pollard's special education subgroup did meet the improvement targets for AYP. Therefore, Pollard Middle School currently has no AYP accountability status for ELA.

High Rock School's 2010 MCAS data was compared solely against the state CPI target because it has no past performance to create AYP improvement targets for the school. In the case of High Rock's special education subgroup, AYP was based solely on performance targets and this subgroup did not meet the given target in ELA. High Rock did not make AYP in 2010 for the special education subgroup. However, since 2010 was High Rock's first year, it does not have an official status yet for AYP.

Multi-Town Comparison

In its annual performance report, the Needham Public Schools compares itself to similar communities on a number of different indicators. Needham middle schools rank 10th out of the 20 towns for CPI for ELA in grades 6-8 and 12th for CPI for the special education subgroup.

Summary

MCAS data shows consistent strong achievement in the English Language Arts by Needham Middle School students and improved performance of our special education subgroup in recent years. The data also suggests two main areas for continued attention and growth, which are common across the Commonwealth: the performance of our special education subgroup and open responses/long composition. Further analysis of MCAS data, including performance on specific standards and questions types, is performed each year by ELA teachers and instructional leaders in order to inform instruction and curricular revisions.

Honors/Awards

Teachers provide students with opportunities to participate in various literary competitions. Needham Middle school students have been published in *Stone Soup* and have won awards in the national Letters about Literature contest sponsored by the Library of Congress.

High School English Program

Program Context

The English Department at Needham High School has a defined curriculum that allows for teacher flexibility both in content and in method of instruction. It is aligned to the 2001/2004 Massachusetts Frameworks. The department adheres to the vision guiding the standards of the NCTE:

All students must have the opportunities and resources to develop the language skills they need to pursue life's goals and to participate fully as informed, productive members of society. These standards assume that literacy growth begins before children enter school as they experience and experiment with literacy activities – reading and writing, and associating spoken words with their graphic representations. Recognizing this fact, these standards encourage the development of curriculum and instruction that make productive use of the emerging literacy abilities that children bring to school. Furthermore, the standards provide ample room for the innovation and creativity essential to teaching and learning. They are not prescriptions for particular curriculum and instruction (Standards for the English Language Arts).

Four years of English is a high school requirement, so every student is enrolled in an English class each year. Teachers place students in either the accelerated, honors, or standard level, depending upon their skill level. Parental overrides are honored. In all grades, 9-12, and at each level, English teachers stress the development of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking as essentials of the English curriculum. Each grade has required texts with a lengthy list of titles to augment each unit.

Parents, NHS faculty, and students view the department as one that is strong on writing instruction and its emphasis on developing students' analytical skills. (Parent Survey, Faculty Focus Groups, Student Focus Groups and Surveys). Grammar lessons are incorporated with the writing assignments as needed, and vocabulary is taught at each grade level. The literature is traditional with a few contemporary titles. While teacher autonomy within the department enables individuals to demonstrate unique instructional approaches, it can also be viewed as a weakness. Teacher autonomy may result in a varied and inconsistent learning experience for the students.

In recent years the department has undertaken a number of initiatives, including the revision of the summer reading program, the inclusion of "The Immigrant Experience" as a unit in American Literature, the updating of the World Literature curriculum, the establishment of learning objectives for each grade with corresponding rubrics. The department is currently working on mapping the curriculum in the Atlas program and creating common formative and summative assessments for the summer reading requirement. Additionally, the department purchased a program called Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) in order to help identify struggling readers. Teachers are able to use results from this assessment to design curriculum and instructional practices in order to meet student needs. This SRI program should be implemented each year for 9th graders; the program does need support from the technology department.

Currently, there are fifteen full-time teachers and two part time teachers. With the exception of one teacher who has been teaching for more than twenty years, the majority of teachers have experience ranging from three to fifteen years. Every member of the department values and seeks out professional development opportunities. Tech Camp is a particular favorite, as many members understand the need to stay current with technology. Teachers see themselves as collaborative and collegial.

High School Curriculum

Reading/Literature

At each grade level students read, interpret, and analyze a broad range of texts. The summer reading requirement has one required text for each grade with the choice of two others from a lengthy list (ELA teachers, parents and students express satisfaction with the summer reading requirement).

Grade Nine is a collection of literary works that explore specific themes and issues, including: Growing-up/The Search of Self; Understanding Cultural Values; Gender Roles in Society; Politics, Power and Man's Inhumanity to Man; The Value of Friendship and Family; and Social Castes and Outcasts. Despite this written curriculum, there appears to be so much variation in what is being taught that the students do not have a clear understanding of these units. Thirty-eight percent of ninth grade students interviewed said that their teacher had clearly defined the curriculum. Students in focus groups stated, "Grade 9 is too book specific with the book serving as the focus." The teachers of ninth grade reported that they "organize their course instruction around texts, rather than units." The variation in the teaching of the literature results in ninth grade students having different experiences based on the teacher they have.

Grade Ten is seen as a much more clearly defined and delivered curriculum. Both teachers and students express satisfaction with the curriculum that is focused on the study of literary genres: comedy, tragedy, romance, satire and irony. Students surveyed commented, "Sophomore year is clearer with a specific theme (genres) and clearer goals." All tenth grade teachers reported adhering closely to the curriculum.

Grade Eleven is the study of American Literature. Like grade ten, both teachers and students express satisfaction with the clearly defined units of study. Seventy-three percent of students surveyed stated that the grade 11 curriculum was "very clearly defined." Teachers did express concern about the variation in the amount of time spent on each unit and stated that "time constraints make it difficult to address all aspects of the curriculum." They also expressed a desire "To diversify the curriculum and offer a more multi-cultural perspective" (English Teacher Curriculum Survey).

Grade Twelve has three options for students: AP English, World Literature, and Humanities, so there is an understandable variation in the curriculum. However, teachers noted that there is considerable variation in the teaching of the Humanities course. Regardless of the course, fifty-four percent of the students stated that the teacher had clearly defined the curriculum. Struggling to find ways to engage their seniors for the entire year, teachers of seniors have expressed a desire to explore the possibility of semester electives for seniors as an alternative to the World Literature and Humanities. Fifty-six percent of students surveyed reported that such an alternative would interest them.

Vocabulary

Students noted that vocabulary instruction occurs at all levels, is usually in conjunction with the literature, and is helpful preparation for the SATs (ELA Student Survey).

Writing

"My child has learned a great deal about literary analysis and writing effectively – a real strength of the department"

-- Parent Survey

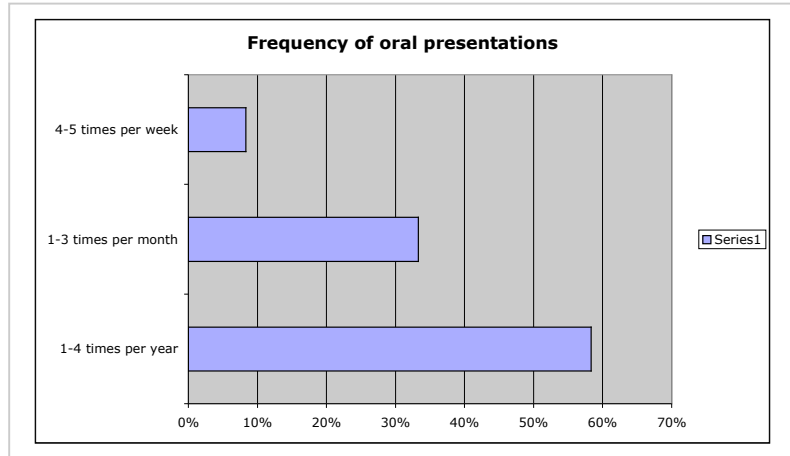
Students write the equivalent of four essays each term (English Department requirement). The nature of these varies according to grade and skill level, but it is generally grounded in the literature. Both parents and students comment on the strength of the analytical writing. "A strength of the department is they encourage analytical thinking and writing. This helps me to put my thoughts into words" (ELA Student Survey). "My child has learned a great deal about literary analysis and writing effectively – a real strength of the department" (Parent Survey). In addition, teachers engage their students in creative and persuasive writing assignments (Fifty percent of English teachers surveyed reported assigning creative writing 1-4 times a year; the other fifty percent assign these 1-3 times per month).

Grammar

Lessons in grammar are included as needed and are usually integrated with the writing assignments. Parents, teachers of other disciplines, and students express a concern about the lack of direct instruction (Parent, content area teacher survey, and student surveys).

Speaking/Listening

While all sophomores are required to do a research project and oral presentation for their culminating assignment, students at every grade are involved in oral presentations and performances. Teachers provide opportunities at all grades and levels for students to develop their speaking and listening skills.



Strengths

- Knowledgeable teachers
- Good overview of classics
- Required writing assignments
- Development of analytical thinking and writing
- Ample opportunities to develop speaking and listening skills
- Clearly defined summer reading program with choice

Areas of Concern

- Curriculum implementation: classes at the same grade and level can vary considerably, depending on the teacher.
- Learning outcomes are too similar for many units and courses.
- Grade nine teachers differ in their delivery of the curriculum.
- Book selections: are they representative of different voices and perspectives with a range of genres? Does the curriculum include a representative number of non-fiction titles?
- Senioritis: Will a more relevant senior curriculum help to combat this condition?

Recommendations

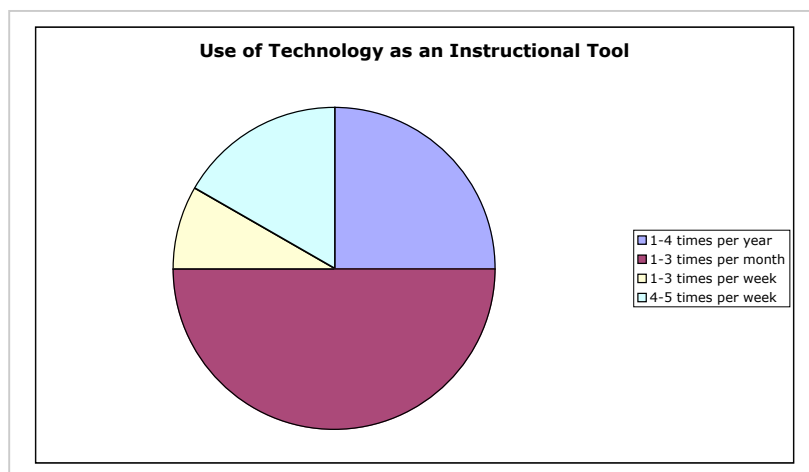
- Teachers of the same levels and grades need to be more consistent in what they teach to ensure an equitable learning experience for all students.
- Content and skills need to be clearly articulated and differentiated for all units and courses. This is particularly important with the adoption of the new Common Core ELA standards in Massachusetts.
- The English Department needs to reach agreement about the ninth grade curriculum.
- Teachers should provide their students with a diverse choice of literature, especially in grade 11, the study of American Literature.
- The English Department should explore replacing World Literature and Humanities with semester electives, as a way to better engage seniors.

High School Instruction

Teachers employ a number of different approaches and techniques, including direct instruction, dramatic skits, artistic responses, jigsaw, carousel, instructional games, whole class discussion, group discussion, literary circles, and Socratic seminars. (Seventy-five percent of English teachers surveyed reported that they engage their students in such discussions four to five times per week). The students in focus groups at all grade levels identified discussions as the best part of their ELA instruction. They emphasized the insights they gain from their teachers as well as from their peers.

Technology as a Learning Tool

According to the ELA Teachers survey, the use of technology as an instructional tool varies considerably.



Every teacher has a computer and a Smartboard in his/her classroom and has access to the Media Center and the Writing Labs. Students commented, "Use of Smartboard varies by teacher, but use is not a major part of instruction."

Many teachers regularly consult with and co-design instruction with Media Center staff that combines traditional curriculum with 21st century skills. These skills-building activities include working with Google apps and introducing students to the latest online research and presentation tools.

Reading Comprehension and Literary Analysis

One hundred percent of English teachers believe they need to teach reading strategies; however, there is a noticeable difference in the degree to which they believe this based on grade level. Fifty percent of ninth grade teachers "strongly agree," while twenty-five percent of twelfth grade teachers "strongly agree." The instruction in the ninth and tenth grades standard level classes is the most explicit. Using Tovani's, *I Read It, But I Don't Get It*, teachers employ suggested strategies such as questioning, clarifying, predicting, and summarizing. They also engage their students in metacognition, helping them to better understand how they read and comprehend. These techniques have been found to be among the most successful in improving comprehension (Reading Next: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York, 14). Fifty percent of English teachers provide their students with the opportunity for silent pleasure reading one - three times a week. Fifty-eight percent have their students read aloud between one - three times a month. Ninety percent of students surveyed reported that the reading instruction they receive in their English classes help them perform in other disciplines.

In all English classes, teachers focus on developing literal and inferential understanding, as well as critical evaluation of the literature, skills that are identified in the ELA Frameworks.

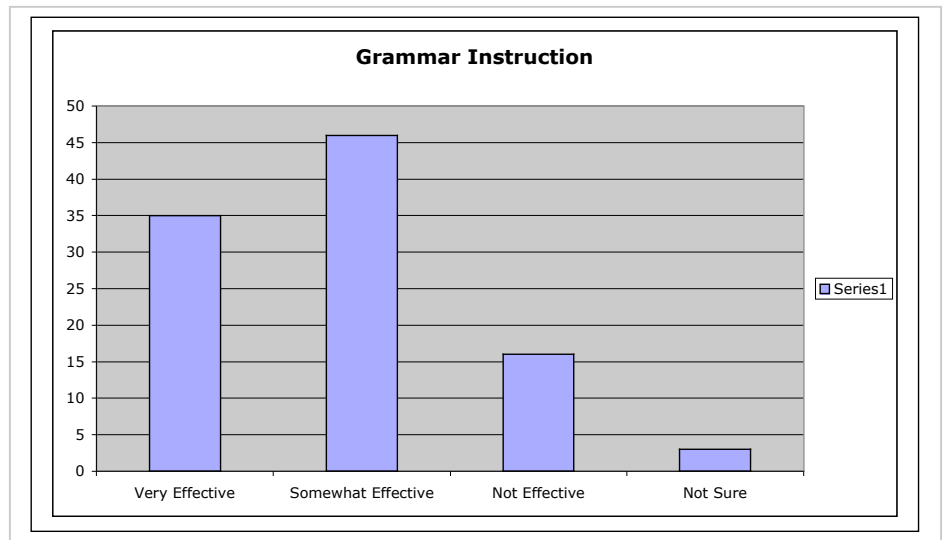
Writing

One hundred percent of English teachers believe they need to teach writing strategies. Similar to the reading response, the degree to which they agreed with this statement lessens at the higher grade. Ninth grade teachers would like to see specific writing skills identified in the curriculum so they can develop units to teach these skills. Tenth grade teachers noted that their students have varying degrees of preparation, especially in terms of writing skills. Teachers of grades 11 and 12 did not make note of a significant variation in the writing preparation of their students. Sixty-seven percent of English teachers reported using process writing with their students between 1-3 times a month. Teachers assign different types of writing, including analytical, creative, persuasive, and reflective, demonstrated through reading logs, journals, writing prompt responses, and passage analyses.

Grammar Instruction

Fifty percent of English teachers reported instructing their students on grammar and punctuation between 1-3 times a month. As noted earlier, there is no explicit grammar curriculum, and each teacher approaches it as the need arises. Although the information in the student survey does not indicate a concern with grammar instruction, the narrative responses from students and

parents, as well as the surveys from the content area teachers indicate a genuine concern about the lack of effective grammar instruction throughout the K-12 ELA curriculum. There is a need for collaboration with the K-5, middle school, and high school ELA program in order to ensure that grammar instruction is vertically aligned.



Content area teachers at all grade levels remarked that there is a need for “more grammar instruction.” Parents commented, “Go back to the basics and teach English grammar.” Students wrote, “There needs to be a more effective way of teaching students grammar.” “Grammar, as boring as it is to learn, needs to be taught more, as evidenced by the lack of some students’ ability to convey ideas effectively.”

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is taught at all grades and levels in conjunction with the literature. Teachers help students develop strategies to define words through context. In addition, teachers of ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades use the *Sadlier* vocabulary books to better prepare students for the SATs. One student commented, “Teaching vocabulary is a strength because it helps to understand the literature we read.” Students appear to find the vocabulary instruction to be useful.

Strengths

- Wide variety of instructional practices to appeal to and to meet the needs of all types of learners
- Explicit reading instruction where needed
- Opportunities for pleasure reading, silent reading, and read aloud
- Teaching of vocabulary in context
- Effective literary discussions

Areas of Concern

- Lack of effective integration of technology as an instructional tool.
- Lack of vertical alignment of writing skills, especially from 9-10.
- Lack of K-12 vertical alignment of grammar skills.
- Lack of explicit grammar instruction.

Recommendations

- Although many English teachers are frequent flyers at Tech Camp, there needs to be a more concerted effort by all to utilize all the available technology more consistently in a meaningful way to enhance and further student learning.
- We need to identify the specific writing skills that should be taught/mastered at each grade level.
- We need to identify specific grammar skills to be taught at each grade level and ensure they occur regularly as part of instruction.

Content Area Literacy

High school students are regularly asked to complete a variety of literacy tasks across a number of content areas. To ensure students are acquiring the complex literacy skills that allow them to be successful learners in each discipline requires literacy instruction to be incorporated across all subject areas. Since literacy instruction in the content areas will become a requirement under the recent adoption of the Common Core English/Language Arts Standards in Massachusetts, we decided to explore the extent to which this was already happening at the High School and to determine areas of potential needs. Teachers in content areas other than English completed a brief survey regarding their beliefs and instructional practices with respect to literacy in their respective disciplines. Data reported here includes responses from 43 teachers with the majority of responses coming from the mathematics, science, and social studies departments. In general, data revealed consistency in beliefs around content area literacy, varied literacy instructional practices and assignments occurring within each discipline, an emerging interest for further professional development. Highlights of this data include:

Literacy Beliefs

	Agree	Disagree	Neither
"Every content area requires different reading and writing strategies."	77%	9%	14%
"Content area reading/writing strategies should be taught in the ELA curriculum."	54%	26%	21%
"Content area reading/writing strategies should be taught in content area classes."	81%	5%	14%
"I believe that in my class, I need to explicitly teach reading and writing strategies for my content area."	67%	14%	19%

Assignments and Direct Instruction

Teachers were surveyed regarding the frequency with which students complete a variety of reading and writing assignments in their courses and the frequency with which direct instruction is provided in these reading and writing tasks.

Literacy is an important component of the instructional process in all content areas with most teachers assigning both in-class (77%) and out of class (86%) reading assignments. Content area teachers report that about 30% of their students struggle with the reading and 40% struggle with the writing tasks that they assign. While teachers feel that the texts they assign are written at the appropriate level for most students (79%), many also have supplemental content materials at different reading levels for students who need them (65%).

With respect to writing, content area teachers report that they are assigning the students various forms of writing on a regular basis. Seventy-four percent ask students to write a paragraph in response to a prompt on a regular weekly or monthly basis. Student writing is assessed primarily with respect to content (88%) and less frequently (53%) on mechanics or organization.

The most frequently assigned reading and writing tasks in the content areas are:

- Answering questions about the text
- Determining important ideas
- Writing short answers/paragraphs
- Applying knowledge of vocabulary
- Activating background knowledge
- Learning vocabulary through context
- Research projects or papers
- Summarizing

On average, content area teachers provide direct instruction slightly less than half of the time for each of the frequently assigned literacy tasks.

Fewer teachers assigned a number of other literacy tasks and consequently students received minimal direct instruction in applying a variety of literacy strategies.

- Taking notes or making outlines for what they read
- Using a writing process
- Monitoring comprehension during reading
- Using text structure & organization features to aid comprehension

Teacher Expertise

When asked about their comfort level in teaching literacy strategies in their respective content areas, most teachers felt somewhat (73%) to very (24%) prepared. Yet most indicated that they were somewhat (43%) to very much (40%) interested in learning more.

Overall, this data suggests that students are asked to complete a variety of literacy tasks in their content area classes. They receive some direct instruction in particular literacy strategies and much less in others. Teachers are interested in learning more about teaching literacy skills in their respective content areas.

Strengths

- Teachers believe that the development of literacy in the content area classes is important. There is a strong general consensus among content area teachers that reading and writing strategies should be taught as part of content area classes.
- Students are being assigned many reading and writing tasks in content area classes.

Areas of Concern

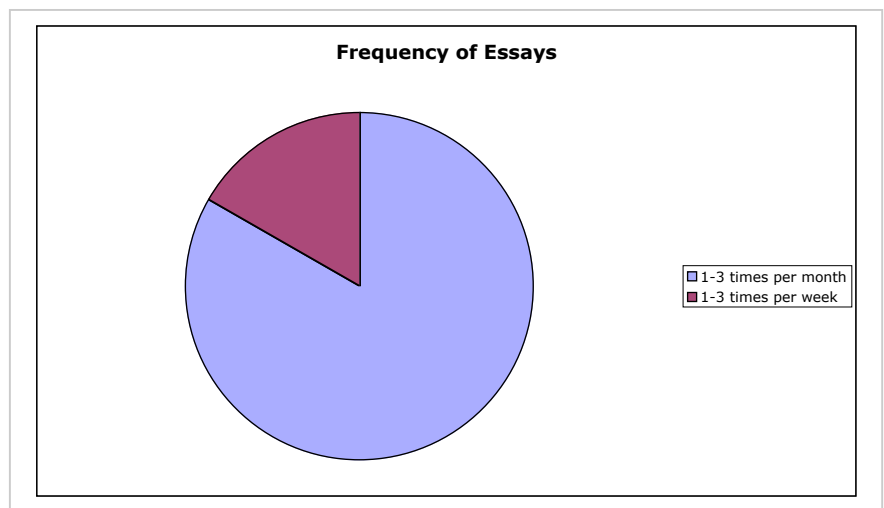
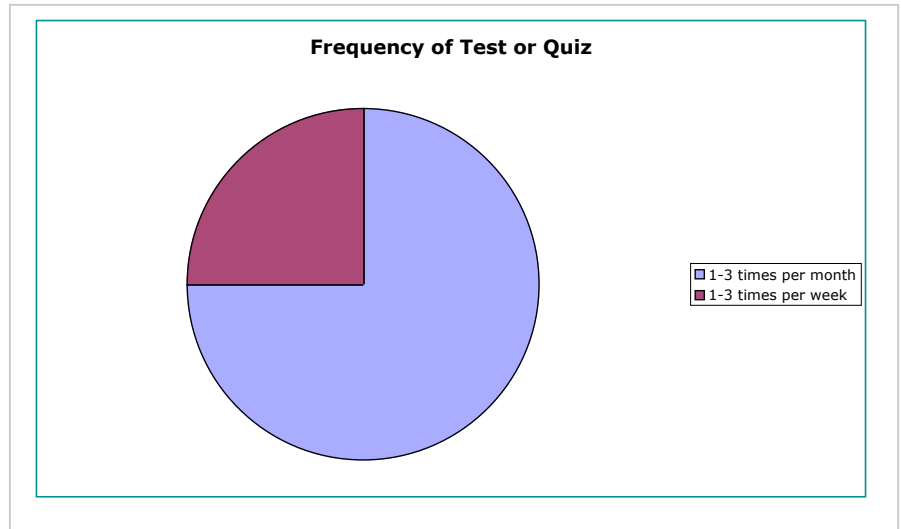
- The variability in instructional practices and literacy tasks suggests that there are not clear expectations or direction provided to teachers for content area literacy at the high school.
- Teachers assign literacy tasks but do not always provide direct instruction to students in the skills and strategies necessary to complete those tasks. Teachers may be assuming that students have already received direct instruction in these skills. Therefore, all students may not be receiving direct instruction in the content area literacy skills that they need to succeed at the high school level.

Recommendations

- A scope and sequence for reading/writing skill instruction, including research and note-taking skills, in content areas should be developed collaboratively with the middle school. This should include clear expectations for the literacy strategy instruction and types of assignments that will occur in each content area/grade and align to the new Common Core ELA standards.
- Professional development time and additional instructional materials must be provided to support content area literacy.

High School Assessments

The English Department utilizes a variety of assessments in its curriculum including essays, in-class tests/writing assignments, quizzes, research projects, vocabulary assessments, and presentations; and each is designed to address course-specific learning goals. For example, a great emphasis is placed on the development of critical reading and writing skills as well as those involving research and presentation. While teachers do maintain a sense of autonomy over the assessments they administer (for example: different essay questions, tests, etc.) teacher surveys show that there is a great deal of consistency in both the types of assignments given and their frequency. The Department's requirement of assigning four essays per term for each student certainly accounts for some of the data listed below.



In addition, 100% of English teachers reported assigning research projects and papers 1-4 times a year. An extensive research paper is required in both ninth and eleventh grades with an emphasis on teaching the process of gathering, analyzing, synthesizing, and documenting information.

The frequency of formative assessments allows teachers to consistently evaluate student performance and progress throughout each making period. Also, this provides teachers with an opportunity to inform their own instruction by immediately recognizing

which learning goals are being met and which ones require greater emphasis and remediation. For example, poor student performance on a particular test may lead to additional review of writing strategies or more preparation for the class's next writing assignment. These assessments allow teachers to modify the pacing of a course as well as what is worked on in the classroom.

When surveyed, teachers reported the following use of common assessments:

	1-4 times/yr.	Not at All
Entire department	50%	33%
Grade 9	33%	50%
Grade 10	67%	16%
Grade 11	Junior Research Project	
Grade 12	50%	--

The fact that 50% of grade 12 teachers use a common assessment 1 to 4 times per year may be due to the different course offerings (Humanities, World Literature, AP English) for senior year. Nevertheless, these responses reflect teacher understanding of what constitutes a common assessment. If assignments that assess competency in specific skills and evaluate student progress towards specific learning goals while dealing with the same piece of literature are to be considered "common," then the department makes an extensive use of them. It must be noted, however, that this view of common assessment does not allow for teachers to collaboratively examine and score student work according to an agreed upon rubric. It makes it difficult to inform practice and to ensure consistency in expectations and grading. Using the accepted definition of common assessments, the Junior Research Project, Sophomore Oral Project, and Freshman Research Project are examples of common assessment practices that regularly occur within the department.

Feedback

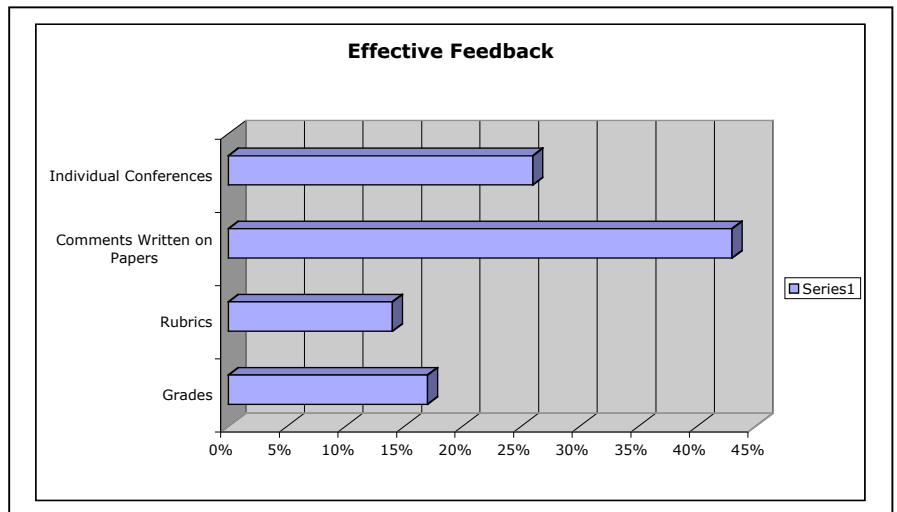
"There is inconsistency in expectations (for students)."

*--Administration &
Faculty Interviews*

Teachers provide feedback in a number of ways, including one-on-one conferencing, written comments on tests and writing assignments, rubrics for specific learning goals, and grades. Fifty-eight percent of teachers participate in student-teacher conferences 1-4 times per year, while 42% participate in these 1-3 times per month. Eighty-one percent of students surveyed said the feedback they receive from teachers is helpful in developing their writing skills. Students identified comments on papers as being the most useful.

"...grades in English are purely opinion and certain teachers are much easier graders than others are."

--HS Student



"English classes vary by teacher. I do think that English especially is prone to some serious unfairness in terms of grading."

--HS Student Survey

Other significant student comments about grading focused on the inconsistency from teacher to teacher. "Grading varies between teachers, and a school wide rubric needs to be issued, because grades in English are purely opinion and certain teachers are much easier graders than others are." "English classes vary by teacher. I do think that English especially is prone to some serious unfairness in terms of grading" (High School Student). Teachers and administrators also noted that, "There is inconsistency in expectations" (Administration/Faculty Interviews).

more “immediate” feedbackas a means to improvement in essay writing.

--Parent

In the ELA Parent Survey, some parents spoke of the usefulness of teacher feedback on written work, while some felt more feedback could have been provided. One parent felt that “*example essays*” would make assessments more useful for students by showing them exactly how and where their work excelled and fell short. Also, parents commented that the regular writing exercises are helpful. One parent believed that while written essay feedback has improved her child’s performance, many students do not take the time to read it and suggests that perhaps a “1 on 1” review of the essay would be more helpful and lead to more “adequate progress.” Also, One parent praised “standards based learning” as an effective way to identify specific strengths and weaknesses in a student’s work. Like their children, parents are often looking for different things from teachers’ assessment practices.

Strengths

- Frequency and variety of assessments
- Clear commitment to student improvement
- Four essays per term requirement
- Effective feedback that helps to develop student writing skills
- Written comments on papers

Areas of Concern

- Common assessments: definition and frequency?
- High degree of variation in assessment practices among grade 9 teachers
- Lack of clarity about how rubrics and comments work together to provide coherent feedback for students on their work
- Perception of inconsistent grading practices

Recommendations

- As per the NHS School Improvement Plan, the Department will begin requiring the administration of one common assessment per course per term.
- More immediate feedback on student work is needed from all teachers.
- The English Department needs to explore how to make rubrics work with their individual comments. English teachers need to create common assessments, to look at student work, to calibrate grading practices in order to ensure that students have a more consistent learning experience at each grade and each level.

High School Organizational Systems

Leadership

Seventy-five percent of English teachers reported that district leadership strikes the appropriate balance between “top down” mandates and school flexibility for English instruction. Ninety-two percent stated that the district leadership allows department chairs to make decisions that are appropriate for the department.

With regard to school and department leadership, 100% of English teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they receive clear direction about what the English curriculum should be. Ninety-two percent agreed or strongly agreed that they receive appropriate support on curriculum and instructional practices. Ninety-two percent see their department chair as a leader in English instruction, while sixty-seven percent see the school principal as an instructional leader.

Professional Development

Needham has a healthy and generous professional development program that includes courses, workshops, and seminars. Two programs that are particularly valued are the Teachers as Scholars and the summer Tech Camp. Everyone in the department has benefited from either one or both of these learning experiences.

One hundred percent of the English teachers partake in professional development opportunities either during the school year or during the summer months. Ninety-two percent state that their professional development experiences influence what they teach. A concern expressed by all, however, is that with the exception of the Teachers as Scholars seminars, there appears to be a dearth of content-specific offerings. The offerings that the District provides are usually focused on elementary education and/or teaching strategies and techniques. As a result, those who wish to take an English course that would expand their content knowledge and develop their skills must look elsewhere.

The District also provides funding for summer curriculum work, which is an opportunity for teachers to work together on designing curriculum, creating projects, etc. Teachers and departments are encouraged to submit meaningful proposals that will advance the goals of the District.

Strengths

- District promotes professional development.
- Teachers value professional development and seek opportunities in the district and elsewhere.
- The Teachers as Scholars program provides meaningful and enriching learning experiences.
- Tech Camp provides opportunities for teachers to advance their technological skills.
- Summer curriculum work promotes collaboration and creativity.

Areas of Concern

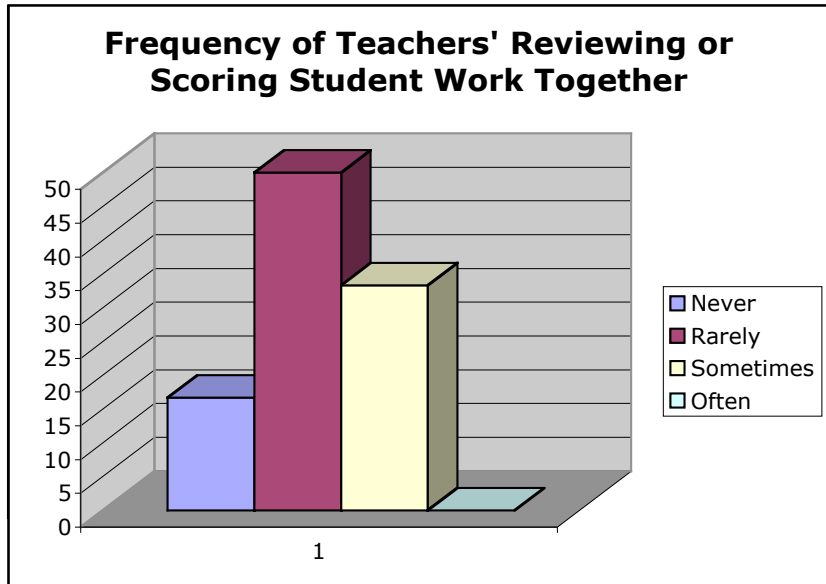
- District does not provide content-specific professional development opportunities.
- Professional Development lacks a cohesiveness;

Recommendations

- Encourage teachers to participate in Tech Camp with an emphasis on learning ways to integrate technology as part of daily instruction.
- Provide meaningful course-specific offerings for high school teachers.
- Promote professional development offerings according to their alignment with district's goals.

Professional Learning Community

The English Department has pieces of a professional learning community, but has definite areas that need improvement. The department has begun to identify content and skills for units in some courses, have written department rubrics for reading and writing, will be creating, analyzing and scoring common assessments.



Ninety-two percent of English teachers responded that, "students' special needs influence what they teach." Teachers collaborate by sharing assignments, lessons, tests, etc. One hundred percent of English teachers surveyed responded that they are able to work in collaborative teams to clarify the essential knowledge and skills students must acquire. However, the graphs indicate that more time is needed for collaborative efforts that will ensure a more consistent learning experience for students.

"Our department is collaborative by nature, though I don't think the school or schedule structure operates in a way that is conducive to collaboration. I'm speaking mainly about time issues."

--High School Teacher

In the English teacher survey one teacher explains these graphs. *"Our department is collaborative by nature, though I don't think the school or schedule structure operates in a way that is conducive to collaboration. I'm speaking mainly about time issues."* When asked if English teachers are provided with time to collaborate during the school day, 100% responded that they were not. With regard to materials and resources, one hundred percent reported that they are actively involved in selection of teaching materials.

Strengths

- Collaborative spirit of English Department
- Commitment of teachers to ensure that all students learn
- Established learning goals for all courses
- Department rubrics
- Willingness to work together on common assessments
- Ample teaching materials
- Positive leadership from district, principal, and department head

Areas of Concern

- The schedule does not allow for common planning time.
- Meetings are focused on designated topics, not allowing for collaborative efforts that are needed for a true PLC.

Recommendations

- Find ways to give teachers the common planning time to improve their collaborative efforts.
- Early release days, professional days, and meetings, both departmental and whole faculty, should have a clear focus that results in effective teaching and enhanced student learning.

High School Student Learning

The High School has a number of data sources that show the effectiveness of the English program. These include MCAS scores, SAT scores, AP scores, and NCTE recognition.

MCAS

The last four-year MCAS review continues to show that the performance of high school students as a group, on this one measure, continues to do very well. The table below provides a summary of the percentage of students scoring advanced and proficient during that time period.

	2007	2008	2009	2010
Grade 10	94	94	96	97

Our students continue to do well on the MCAS test in grade 10. Students' performance improved slightly in 2010, but has remained fairly stable over the last four years. A complete four-year history of students' scores in each of the four categories (advanced, proficient, needs improvement, warning) is summarized in Appendix D.

CPI

Along with MCAS scores, since 2005 the Department of Education provides high schools with comparative data using average Proficiency Index results. As described previously, the Composite Performance Index (CPI) is designed to give schools a measure of their progress towards achieving the goal of the *No Child Left Behind* law that all students be *proficient* by 2014.

In the aggregate, Needham High School continues to be rated very high. The school continues to perform well as noted in the following table, which indicates the percentage of students achieving *proficiency*.

Grade 10	CPI
2005	96.3
2006	97.1
2007	98.2
2008	98.8
2009	98.0
2010	98.3

Over the last five years, the CPI's have ranged from 96.3 to 98.3, thus rating our high school as very high (90-100).

SAT

The average SAT scores for the last two years:

	Critical Reading	Writing
2009	594	598
2010	602	610

AP Scores

In the spring of 2010, 100% of our students taking the AP English exams passed with a score of 3 or higher, making them eligible for college credit.

Thirty-four students took the Literature and Composition AP Exam; the average score was 4.579 out of a possible 5.0.

Score	# Students
5	23
4	9
3	2
2	0
1	0

Seventeen students took the Language and Composition AP Exam; the average score was 4.500 out of a possible 5.0.

Score	# Students
5	12
4	5
3	0
2	0
1	0

Awards/Recognitions

The National Council of Teachers of English commended Needham High's English teachers for excellence in writing instruction. In an awards program recognizing student writers from public and private schools across the country, Needham students received three of the twelve awards given to Massachusetts' students.

Summary

The teachers in the English Department at Needham High School are intelligent, creative individuals who are committed to student learning. They do an excellent job of educating the majority of students as evidenced by test scores and student awards and recognitions. One graduating student from the class of 2010 wrote the following in the student survey:

"The English Department on the whole at NHS is really quite incredible... It has more than adequately prepared me to write at a level beyond what most of my peers at other schools are able to, and I am very confident as I head to Yale that the tools I have learned will prepare me to succeed at the next level."

This report recognizes the strengths and best practices that exist within the high school. It also acknowledges that there are areas in need of future growth. While it is important to recognize and appreciate teacher autonomy and the talents that each individual teacher brings to the classroom, the department must ensure that students are receiving an equitable and consistent learning experience regardless of the teacher they have. To do this the department needs to become more consistent in what they teach, what they assign, and how they grade. The district and the school need to provide teachers the time and opportunities to effect this change as well as to address the other recommendations listed in this document.

Appendix A

LITERACY IN THE NEEDHAM PUBLIC SCHOOLS VISION STATEMENT

Literacy is a series of acquired skills that include reading, writing, speaking, and listening. These strategies must be taught to and applied by all students in kindergarten through grade 12. Literacy provides the pathway for learning.

We believe that all teachers are teachers of literacy. Therefore, the support and development of literacy in all forms and contexts is the responsibility of all teachers. While the classroom teacher is the primary facilitator in the acquisition of literacy skills and applied strategies, we believe that active collaboration among all instructional support team members is a critical component of this process. Literacy recognizes the individuality and varied learning styles of students and seeks to develop active, independent learners.

We believe that we must implement consistent theory, approach, and practice to ensure that all children will master the skills and strategies of literacy at every grade level. We must integrate reading, writing, and oral language as mutually supportive components of literacy. We believe that children who experience a rich and varied literacy program will master the skills and strategies necessary to become competent learners.

WE BELIEVE THAT AN EFFECTIVE LITERACY PROGRAM IS BUILT UPON THE FOLLOWING:

- All children can and want to be literate.
- Effective instruction overrides perceived ability.
- Effective instruction considers the child's strengths and weaknesses.
- Children should be challenged to make connections and take intellectual risks.
- Children should gain confidence in their own ability and strengths through carefully selected reading that is appropriate for them.
- Children learn to read and write by reading and writing.
- Children should be encouraged to perceive themselves as readers, writers, speakers and listeners.

WE BELIEVE THAT AN EFFECTIVE PROGRAM IS:

1. ACTIVE

- involves students in their own learning by accentuating their own interests and developmental levels
- provides opportunities for the child to express his/her own voice
- involves students in the development, understanding and assessment of their own work through criteria which determines acceptable performance
- provides extended on-task time in writing activities and in actual reading at their instructional/independent level
- provides opportunity throughout the day for meaningful speaking and listening activities
- uses packets and workbooks judiciously

2. BALANCED in Literacy Opportunities

- provides all students in a classroom with a rich and diverse selection of reading at their independent and instructional level
- provides the student a rich variety of reading materials from authors of diverse background and culture
- provides opportunity to write for a variety of purposes
- includes the full spectrum of genres: literature, poetry, biography, nonfiction, factual, etc.
- BALANCED in the Instruction Provided
- includes explicit teacher-directed and student-initiated instruction
- presents skills and lessons systematically, supporting a long-term, well-defined orderly plan, while allowing for the "teachable moment" or student need
- allows for individual teacher styles, but includes systemwide terminology, approaches and goals
- provides strategy-based instruction
- provides a physical environment that is conducive to a wide-range of learning activities and learning styles
- provides for whole group, flexible small group, and independent activities
- provides time for students to work at their independent and instructional levels, as well as opportunities to challenge and stretch a child's capabilities

3. INTEGRATED

- provides interactive reading/writing, spelling/phonics, and listening/reading activities which support one another
- connects, when possible, to student interests and real world experience
- is inclusive, when appropriate, of student studies in the arts and other content areas provides opportunities to practice reading/writing/speaking skills and strategies in content areas
- provides instruction and assessment which flow directly from one another

4. CONSISTENT

- is systematic and thoughtful
- uses common language

In addition, if a child is to be successful, the learning experience must include the following:

The Parents and Community

Success is dependent upon their support in:

- providing role models from both the home and community
- creating a literate home environment
- providing opportunity for access to a wide variety of reading resources and writing opportunities
- providing regular shared reading and writing experiences
- providing opportunity for independent reading and writing
- maintaining and developing the oral traditions of story telling and listening
- equipping the schools with resources to provide a rich classroom environment including:
 - a wide selection of books at different reading levels, basal readers, multicultural books, books supporting thematic studies in other content areas, books (printed material) representing multi-genres
- providing a focused plan of partnership among the school, parents and community

The Student

Success is dependent upon:

- reading a variety of material daily
- writing daily
- understanding the phonetic/structural analysis principles
- reflecting regularly on own performance
- taking responsibility for own learning
- discussing and relating reading/writing to life

The Teacher

Success is dependent upon:

- connecting instruction and material to student interest and ability
- providing systematic and explicit instruction through a broad repertoire of teaching techniques
- adapting instruction through strategy, materials and flexible grouping to meet the needs of the individual
- providing adequate time for practice and assignment completion
- providing physical environments conducive to varied learning styles
- providing literary experiences in a variety of genres at appropriate student reading levels
- providing opportunity for various forms of writing
- guiding student exploration, critical thinking, and problem solving
- using systemwide expectations and criteria to involve students in their own assessment of process (metacognition) and progress
- using student assessment to plan, reflect and assess the direction of learning
- working collaboratively with the reading specialists, special education teachers and other support personnel in planning and implementing effective programs for individuals or groups of students

The School Committee and Administration

Success is dependent upon their support and guidance in:

- providing sufficient resources within the classroom to provide a rich literate environment
- providing sufficient support staff for students needing more time or differentiated instruction
- providing opportunities for short and long term staff development in targeted areas
- supporting teacher development within the classroom
- maintaining ongoing evaluation of program and programmatic changes
- providing the resources for development and implementation of a comprehensive K-12 Literacy Curriculum

Appendix B

Research/Literature Review

Early Literacy

Reading First is a United States federal education program (2002) mandated under the *No Child Left Behind Act*. It focuses on putting proven methods of early reading instruction in K-3 classrooms to ensure that all children learn to read well by the end of third grade. While an internal review in 2006 by the Department of Education's Office of Inspector General found the Reading First program exhibited conflicts of interest in some aspects of how the program was administered, it nonetheless, provided a comprehensive synopsis of the research on effective practices of basic reading instruction. *Reading First* identified five essential components of effective reading instruction. To ensure that children learn to read well, explicit and systematic instruction must be provided in these five areas:

1. **Phonemic Awareness:** The ability to hear, identify and manipulate the individual sounds – phonemes – in spoken words. Phonemic awareness is the understanding that the sounds of spoken language work together to make words.
2. **Phonics:** The understanding that there is a predictable relationship between phonemes – the sounds of spoken language – and graphemes – the letters and spellings that represent those sounds in written language. Readers use these relationships to recognize familiar words accurately and automatically and to decode unfamiliar words.
3. **Vocabulary Development:** Development of stored information about the meanings and pronunciation of words necessary for communication. There are four types of vocabulary:
 - a. Listening vocabulary – the words needed to understand what is heard
 - b. Speaking vocabulary – the words used when speaking
 - c. Reading vocabulary – the words needed to understand what is read
 - d. Writing vocabulary – the words used in writing
4. **Reading fluency,** including oral reading skills: Fluency is the ability to read text accurately and quickly. It provides a bridge between word recognition and comprehension. Fluent readers recognize words and comprehend at the same time.
5. **Reading comprehension strategies:** Strategies for understanding, remembering, and communicating with others about what has been read.
6. **Comprehension strategies** are sets of steps that purposeful, active readers use to make sense of text.

A high-quality reading program that is based on scientifically based research must include:

- instructional content based on these five essential components of reading
- instruction integrated into a coherent instructional design which includes:
- explicit instructional strategies that address students' specific strengths and weaknesses, coordinated instructional sequences
- ample practice opportunities and aligned student materials
- the use of targeted, instructional strategies as appropriate.
- the allocation of time, including a protected, uninterrupted block of time for reading instruction of more than 90 minutes per day
- assessment strategies for diagnosing student needs and measuring progress
- a professional development plan that ensures teachers have the skills and support necessary to implement the program effectively and to meet the reading needs of individual students.

Our nation's educational system has scored many extraordinary successes in raising the level of reading and writing skills in younger children. Yet the pace of literacy improvement in our schools has not kept up with the accelerating demands of the global knowledge economy.
--The Carnegie Council for Advancing Adolescent Literacy

Adolescent Literacy

In 2009, the Carnegie Corporation published "*A Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success.*" The report explained how literacy tasks encountered by adolescents differ significantly from those that younger students face:

By contrast, secondary grade students are expected to learn new words, new facts, and new ideas from reading, as well as to interpret, critique, and summarize the texts they read. The literate practices embedded in these tasks, combining literacy skills and content knowledge, are often invisible (or taken for granted) and yet require a high level of sophistication, making adolescents especially vulnerable to underperformance and failure (10).

Given these challenging literacy tasks, the Carnegie Corporation (2009) concluded that "*adolescent students need explicit instruction in reading and writing all the way through grade 12, as well as comprehensive forms of assessment and rigorously aligned standards detailing what they need to know and what they must be able to do both within and across content areas*"(18).

There is a strong research base to guide schools in addressing adolescent literacy needs. Current research on adolescent

literacy instruction has implications for both the English Language Arts curriculum and for instruction in other content areas. In "Reading Next," the authors identified a common problem in literacy instruction at the secondary level:

Too often reading and writing instruction focuses solely on literature and does not promote the transfer of the skills into the context of content area materials. Furthermore, learning from reading in content-area texts requires skills that are different than the skills needed to comprehend literature. Language arts teachers need to expand their instruction to include approaches and texts that will facilitate not only comprehension but also learning from texts. (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, 15)

This shifting emphasis towards the inclusion of more expository texts in the ELA curriculum is reflected in the MCAS examination; in both 2009 and 2010, two of the four reading passages given at each grade 6-8 were nonfiction texts. Adolescent literacy instruction, particularly for expository texts, requires a partnership between English Language Arts and other content areas.

When instructional principles are embedded in content, subject-area teachers provide or reinforce instruction in the skills and strategies that are particularly effective in their subject areas. This instruction should be coordinated with the language arts teachers, literacy coaches, and other subject-area teachers. The idea is not that content-area teachers should become reading and writing teachers, but rather that they should emphasize the reading and writing practices that are specific to their subjects, so students are encouraged to read and write like historians, scientists, mathematicians, and other subject-area experts. (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, 15). While the focus of this report is primarily on the ELA curriculum, as the above indicates, adolescent literacy instruction must be guided by a coherent, school wide plan.

Overview of Adolescent Literacy Instruction

In their report to the Carnegie Corporation about the research surrounding adolescent literacy needs, "Reading Next," Biancarosa and Snow (2006) advocate for a number of improvements to be made in educational instruction and infrastructure for adolescents. Effective school literacy programs should provide:

- Direct and specific comprehension instruction
- Embedded reading instruction within content areas
- Opportunities for adolescents to self-direct their learning and increase motivation
- Text-based collaborative learning
- Strategic tutoring for most needy students
- Diverse texts (matching texts to needs of adolescent readers, teaching the reader not the book).
- Intensive writing
- Technology component (both as a tool and a topic, e.g. 21st century literacies)
- Ongoing formative assessments
- Extended time for literacy instruction (2-4 hours of literacy connected instruction per day).
- Professional development opportunities targeted toward teacher needs
- Ongoing summative assessment of students and programs beyond state and national testing.
- Teacher teams (example—cluster model)
- Leadership (principal as instructional leader for literacy)
- Comprehensive and coordinated literacy programs.

In the report entitled, "Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools," Graham and Perin (2007) identified eleven components of successful writing instruction based on multiple research studies:

Writing Strategies

- Summarization
- Collaborative Writing
- Specific Product Goals
- Word Processing
- Sentence Combining, "which involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences"
- Prewriting
- Inquiry Activities
- Process Writing Approach, "which interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing"
- Study of Models
- Writing for Content Learning (Graham & Perin, 2007)

In its 2008 policy research brief entitled "Writing Now," the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) made recommendations for writing instruction, especially in light of new technologies and the 21st century world. NCTE wrote: "The 21st century requires writers who can move easily between genres, think critically about new writing tasks, exercise audience awareness, and be able to identify and improve areas of weakness" (NCTE, 4). The recommendations emphasized by the NCTE were that writing instruction should be "holistic, authentic, and varied" (NCTE, 2008, 4-5). Effective assessment of writing must include feedback to help students "develop their writing and expand their ideas" and that "a carefully organized system of classroom documentation of student learning, through portfolios or other methods of collecting student work samples, is the most useful for demonstrating student writing achievement" (NCTE, 2008, 5).

These recommendations for adolescent literacy, further articulated below, are echoed throughout current educational research and form the basis of our report and our recommendations for improvement of the Needham Public Schools English Language Arts/Literacy program.

Research –Based Instruction and Intervention Practices

In August of 2008, Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger, and Torgenson released a report entitled *“Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices.”* Their practice guide reviews numerous literacy practices and the body of evidence to support each practice. This report echoes many of the recommendations from *“Reading Next,”* and then focuses on the literacy practices for which there is strong, quantitative evidence. They recommend the implementation of five best practices for adolescent literacy instruction. According to Kamil et al, secondary schools should:

- Provide explicit vocabulary instruction
- Provide direct and explicit comprehension instruction
- Provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation
- Increase student motivation and engagement in literacy learning
- Make available intensive and individualized interventions for struggling readers that can be provided by trained specialists.

There is a clear need for explicit vocabulary instruction for middle school students. The Kamil report advocates for such vocabulary instruction to be embedded in daily lessons across the curriculum. They argue that new words need to be presented repeatedly and in a variety of contexts and that students must have ample opportunity to use their new vocabulary in writing, discussion and through extended reading. They advocate for the inclusion of vocabulary strategies such as morphemic analysis and root words as part of the explicit instructional program. (Kamil et al, 2008) Research by Kieffer & Lesaux (2007) highlights the need to pay particular attention to academic vocabulary, the types of words that help to deliver the content in every subject area. They point out that *“as the vocabulary demands of texts increase in the upper elementary and middle school grades, [and] many students struggle with comprehension...a particular source of trouble is their academic vocabulary...”* (Kieffer & Lesaux, , 2007, 35)

The need for direct and specific instruction in reading comprehension is emphasized across the research. In secondary schools, many students have a difficult time comprehending their content area textbooks and so this should be a focus of secondary school reading comprehension instruction (Kamil, 2008). While the Kamil report cited powerful comprehension strategies such as summarizing text, generating questions and using graphic organizers to help build comprehension, they claimed that there is no research to support the superiority of particular strategies over others. Rather, they say, explicitly teaching students multiple strategies for active reading and increasing comprehension of texts will benefit students the most. They also advocated for the careful selection of texts, and the importance of matching the texts to the needs and reading level of the students. (Kamil, 2008)

One area of English and Language Arts that stakeholders are often concerned about is grammar instruction. A review of the research has indicated that the approach of teaching grammar through the context of real reading and writing tasks is most beneficial to student growth. In *“Reading Next”*, researchers reported that, *“traditional explicit grammar instruction is not effective and may actually be harmful to writing development, whereas instruction in sentence combining, summarization and writing strategies significantly improves students’ writing”* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006, p. 19).

For many students, middle school is a time period where students either “make it or break it” terms of literacy development. Guthrie and Davis (2003) studied what practices will increase the motivation of middle school students to engage with text and actively build their literacy skills. They found that introducing reading material around a common theme; encouraging choice and personal relevance in text selection; utilizing high interest texts such as trade books, culturally responsive and multimedia texts; direct instruction of key comprehension strategies such as questioning, summarizing, utilizing graphic organizers, and monitoring comprehension; and collaboration among students toward a common goal were all practices that increased student motivation and achievement in literacy.

There is strong research-based evidence that struggling adolescents need direct intervention by qualified reading specialists. Kamil et al (2008) recommend that this process begin with an assessment program that augments required state testing. Students who fail to meet a given benchmark on a diagnostic reading test should be followed up for assessment with a reading specialist. After assessing the needs of the student, a specific intervention program should be chosen that meets the area of need that is revealed through assessment. While Kamil et al acknowledge that budgetary concerns make this recommendation difficult for many schools to implement, they make the argument that many classroom teachers at the middle and high school level do not come to the classroom prepared to meet the needs of struggling readers. They advocated for a combination of professional development for content area teachers in reading instruction as well as intervention programming for struggling readers (Kamil, 2008).

Appendix C

Methodology

Data collection included the following:

<p>Materials Reviewed Curricula, both online and paper State frameworks Needham curriculum maps Curriculum materials Assessment results Class assignments, rubrics, other assessments</p>	<p>Surveys* High School English Teachers High School Content Area, Specials & Sped Teachers Middle School English Teachers Middle School Content Area Teachers K-5 Literacy Specialists, ELL & Sped Teachers K-5 Classroom Teachers K-12 Parents</p>
<p>Individual Interviews Sampling of Elementary Principals High School Principal Middle School Principals Middle School Grade level Administrators Middle School Media Specialists/Sped Teachers Program Directors/Coordinators, Sped, METCO, ELL</p>	<p>Focus Groups High School Students (grades 9-10) High School Students (Grade 12) High School ELL Students Middle School Students (Grade 8) K-5 Literacy Specialists K-5 Principals Elementary Classroom & Sped Teachers (K-2) Elementary Classroom & Sped Teachers (3-5) Program Directors & Specialists (ELL, METCO, Media, Sped)</p>

*Survey questions were excerpted from the "Surveys of Enacted Curriculum for English, Language Arts, and Reading" developed by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

Appendix D

GRADE 10 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS				
PERFORMANCE LEVEL	2007	2008	2009	2010
ADVANCED	50	59	59	51
PROFICIENT	45	36	37	42
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	5	3	3	5
FAILING	1	2	1	2

GRADE 05 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS				
PERFORMANCE LEVEL	2007	2008	2009	2010
ADVANCED	37	23	26	27
PROFICIENT	50	62	58	57
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	11	13	14	15
WARNING	2	2	1	2

GRADE 08 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS				
PERFORMANCE LEVEL	2007	2008	2009	2010
ADVANCED	25	22	25	32
PROFICIENT	69	67	70	61
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	5	8	4	5
WARNING	1	3	1	1

GRADE 04 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS				
PERFORMANCE LEVEL	2007	2008	2009	2010
ADVANCED	17	12	16	19
PROFICIENT	60	50	53	54
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	21	34	28	26
WARNING	2	3	3	2

GRADE 07 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS				
PERFORMANCE LEVEL	2007	2008	2009	2010
ADVANCED	21	29	29	27
PROFICIENT	67	62	61	64
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	9	6	9	7
WARNING	2	2	1	2

GRADE 03 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS				
PERFORMANCE LEVEL	2007	2008	2009	2010
ABOVE PROFICIENT	26	28	21	25
PROFICIENT	54	48	53	58
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	18	21	24	14
WARNING	2	3	2	3

GRADE 06 - ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS				
PERFORMANCE LEVEL	2007	2008	2009	2010
ADVANCED	17	35	31	30
PROFICIENT	71	54	55	59
NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	12	9	11	9
WARNING	1	1	3	2

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