

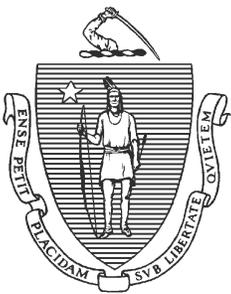
Massachusetts



Department of
Education

Massachusetts School Council Handbook

June 2001



Massachusetts Department of Education
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Massachusetts Department of Education

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Statement from the Commissioner of Education

Dear School Council Members and Other Interested Parties:



As we enter the second phase of Education Reform, the role of school councils becomes even more important. School councils provide a great opportunity for community partners, parents, teachers, and principals to come together both to share ideas and resources and to shape the direction their schools will take to strengthen teaching and learning. Over the past several years, I have heard inspirational stories from parents, teachers, and principals about the accomplishments and support their schools realized through the benefit of shared decision-making. This handbook is designed to assist you in your school's efforts to improve student performance.

Nowhere is the role of the school councils more important than in the development of the school improvement plan. Under the Massachusetts School and District Accountability System established by the Department of Education in 1999, school improvement plans become an essential tool in the evaluation of district and school performance. The new Recertification

Regulations require educators to develop professional development plans that are aligned with their school and district improvement plans. These developments promote coordination in goal setting and planning, bringing the entire school community together in their efforts to improve student achievement.

We are pleased to announce that we have established a school council web site, www.doe.mass.edu/schcouncil, in addition to this handbook, as a source for the latest educational information, news, and resources for council members. I hope these resources will be helpful to school councils as they carry on the important work of planning for continual improvement in achievement and educational success for all our students.

Sincerely,

David P. Driscoll
Commissioner of Education

NOTES

Foreword

The Massachusetts School Council Handbook is an expanded update of the *1994 Questions and Answers on School Councils*. It has been developed with the help of the Massachusetts Parent and Community Involvement Council, school council members from across the state, and Department of Education staff from Accountability and Targeted Assistance, School and Community Partnerships and the Massachusetts Parent Involvement Project.

A number of changes have taken place since the *Questions and Answers on School Councils* was issued in 1994. While this handbook contains much of the same information in that Q&A, you will also find new questions and answers, council anecdotes, and comments from the field. In addition, the content has been reorganized and condensed for increased readability. We hope *The Massachusetts School Council Handbook* will be a valuable resource as you work to support your school in planning for and implementing improvement.

The Massachusetts Department of Education would like to thank Karen DeCoster, Associate Executive Director, Commissioner's Office, Ann Hess, Special Assistant to the Board, and Joseph Andelman, Youth Tech Entrepreneurs (YTE) intern, for their work in developing and preparing this handbook. We would also like to thank the many educators, students, parents, and community members who have enhanced this document with their personal anecdotes, quotes, and recommendations.

This document and all Department documents and publications are available on our Internet site on the World Wide Web: www.doe.mass.edu. By accessing the document via our web site, you will find direct links to DOE resources relevant to school improvement planning for student achievement.

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Part One: An Overview

(*Bold print has been added for increased focus.)

A. The Law

Chapter 71: Section 59C. School councils; members; meetings; duties.

Section 59C. At each public elementary, secondary and independent vocational school in the commonwealth there shall be a school council consisting of the school principal, who shall co-chair the council; parents of students attending the school who shall be selected by the parents of students attending such school who will be chosen in elections held by the local recognized parent teacher organization under the direction of the principal, or if none exists, chosen by a representative process approved by the school committee. Said parents shall have parity with professional personnel on the school councils; teachers who shall be selected by the teachers in such school; other persons, not parents or teachers of students at the school, drawn from such groups or entities as municipal government, business and labor organizations, institutions of higher education, human services agencies or other interested groups including those from school age child care programs; and for schools containing any of the grades nine to twelve, at least one such student; provided, however, that not more than fifty percent of the council shall be non-school members. The principal, except as otherwise provided herein, shall have the responsibility for defining the composition of and forming the group pursuant to a representative process approved by the superintendent and school committee and for convening the first meeting no later than forty days after the first day of school, at which meeting a co-chairman shall be selected. School councils should be broadly representative of the racial and ethnic diversity of the school building and community. For purposes of this paragraph the term "non-school members" shall mean those members of the council, other than parents, teachers, students and staff of the school.

Nothing contained in this section shall require a new school council to be formed if an existing school council fulfills the intent of this section, the parent and teacher members thereof were selected in a manner consistent with the provisions of this section and the membership thereof complies with the aforesaid fifty percent requirement.

Meetings of the school council shall be subject to the provisions of sections twenty-three A, twenty-three B and twenty-three C of chapter thirty-nine [the open meeting law].

The school council, including the school principal, shall meet regularly and shall assist in the identification of the educational needs of the students attending the school, make recommendations to the principal for the development, implementation and assessment of the curriculum accommodation plan required pursuant to section 38Q1/2, shall assist in the review of the annual school budget and in the formulation of a school improvement plan, as provided below.

The principal of each school, in consultation with the school council established pursuant to this section shall adopt educational goals for the schools consistent with the goals and standards including the student performance standards, adopted by the board pursuant to section one D of chapter sixty-

Councils can access valuable information via the Internet. Ask a council member to serve as a "web ambassador" visiting the DOE web site regularly at www.doe.mass.edu for the latest information on policies, program, and grant opportunities. If your school has a web site, visit it too and see that it is up-dated, often.

nine, and consistent with any educational policies established for the district, shall assess the needs of the school in light of those goals, and shall formulate a school improvement plan to advance such goals, to address such needs and to improve student performance. The plan shall include an assessment of the impact of class size on student performance, and shall consider student to teacher ratios and other factors and supportive adult resources, and may include a scheduled plan for reducing class size. The plan shall address professional development for the school's professional staff, the allocation of any professional development funds in the annual school budget, the enhancement of parental involvement in the life of the school, safety and discipline, the establishment of a welcoming

School councils are the part of the Education Reform Law of 1993 that best ensures the meaningful involvement of parents and community members. In that regard, I consider it to be one of the most important provisions of the law and one that schools need to implement aggressively. For all the hard work of educators, if we do not engage and involve parents and the community in our overall success will be limited.

*David P. Driscoll,
Commissioner of Education*

school environment characterized by tolerance and respect for all groups, extracurricular activities, the development of means for meeting the diverse learning needs of as many children as possible, including children with special needs currently assigned to separate programs, within the regular education programs at the school, and such further subjects as the principal, in consultation with the school council, shall consider appropriate. In school districts with language minority student populations the professional development plan under this section shall specify how the plan will address the need for training and skills in second language acquisition and in working with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. Each school improvement plan shall be submitted to the school committee for review and approval every year. If said school improvement plan is not reviewed by the school committee within thirty days of said school committee receiving said school improvement plan, the plan shall be deemed to have been approved.

Nothing contained in this section shall prevent the school committee from granting a school council additional authority in the area of educational policy; provided, however, that school councils shall have no authority over matters which are subject to chapter one hundred and fifty E [collective bargaining].

As a member of the Parent and Community Involvement Advisory Council, I chose to attend a local council meeting to get a picture of shared decision-making. I went to a meeting at Somerville High School where I found a dedicated and well-informed group of parents, school staff, and community members actively working to foster and promote education reform. It was exciting to see site-based management working in my own district.

*Grace Healey
P&C Council Co-Chair*

The following Massachusetts statutes are also related to school councils. They have been included in the appendix for your consideration and review.

- Chapter 39: Section 23B. Open meetings of governmental bodies.
- Chapter 71: Section 37H. Policies relative to conduct of teachers or students; student handbooks.
- Chapter 71: Section 38Q. Professional development plans; statewide assistance plan.

B. General Questions

1. Which schools are required to establish a school council?

The law requires that there be a school council "at each public elementary, secondary, and independent vocational school in the Commonwealth." Charter schools are exempt from the school council mandate, because of their unique governance structure. Under the charter school law, G.L. c. 71, s. 89: "Notwithstanding section 59C, the internal form of governance of a charter school shall be determined by the school's charter."

2. What are the main areas of responsibility for school councils?

G.L. c.71, s.59C states that: "The school council shall **meet regularly with the principal** of the school and shall **assist in the identification of the educational needs of students** [...], in the **review of the annual school budget**, and in the **formulation of a school improvement plan**." In addition under G.L. c.71, s.37H, "In each school building containing the grades nine to twelve, inclusive, the principal, in consultation with the school council, **shall prepare and distribute to each student a student handbook** setting forth the rules pertaining to the conduct of students."

3. What is meant by "the school council [...] shall assist?"

The school council is an advisory body that works together to provide ideas and opinions to help the principal. In this context, council members assist by:

- ❖ *providing information and recommendations relevant to the educational needs of students;*
- ❖ *reading and discussing the budget with the principal to understand the implications for goals and activities in the school improvement plan; and*
- ❖ *participating actively in the process of analysis and planning that results in the identification of annual goals, activities, outcomes, and resources that will lead to school improvement.*

4. May councils make recommendations concerning district-wide policies or other schools in the district?

Yes. School councils may make non-binding recommendations to school committees on issues that are of great interest to the school and that have district-wide implications. In addition, school committees may give additional responsibilities to councils through the provision of the law that reads: "**Nothing contained in this section shall prevent the school committee from granting a school council additional authority in the area of educational policy, other than matters subject to collective bargaining.**"

5. What are some areas in which councils cannot be involved?

School councils may not: (1) be involved in the day to day process of management of the school; (2) permit special interests to dominate the agenda; (3) go beyond an advisory role without the permission of the principal and school committee; nor (4) **assume authority on** matters covered by Chapter 15OE of the General Laws. *

A council's review of the budget informs the council in planning activities that require funding. In school districts that encourage building-based budget planning, a school's improvement plan for one year can guide the development of the school's budget for the next.

1994 *Questions and Answers on School Councils*

* Chapter 15OE governs labor relations and collective bargaining for public employees including teacher contracts. This provision leaves such issues as compensation, workload, conditions of work, and employee evaluation procedures subject to collective bargaining.

C. Vision

1. What are school councils and why were they established?

School councils are representative advisory groups that collaborate in planning for and implementing school improvement. They are a form of *site-based management* that places the school at the center of planning, goal setting, and budgeting for improvement. Councils may take on other responsibilities including policy-making, but only as granted by the local school committee.

As education becomes an increasingly complex undertaking, it is important that educators and the public see themselves as collaborators. It makes sense to encourage internal and external ownership if we hope to reach our goals. If not, we administrators face the danger of people working against us rather than with us. In today's educational climate, consensus is key.

Marilyn Fratturelli, Assistant Superintendent, Leominster Public Schools

School councils were established to assist principals in planning for and implementing goals and practices that enhance the achievement of all students. They are the main instruments for practicing the site-based decision making called for in the 1993 Education Reform Act.

2. What is site based management?

A school council is one form of site based management. Site based management has three main features:

- ❖ Formal **authority is delegated** to principals or distributed among principals, teachers, parents, and others at the school site. A formal structure (e.g., council, committee, team, or board) is created so that a broad array of participants can be involved in decision making.
- ❖ There is **recognized authority** for making decisions.
- ❖ The **authority is defined** although limited by law and contractual agreements.

3. What are the educational benefits of site based management?

Students, parents, educators, and community members become more committed to improving and supporting their school when they have an opportunity to serve or be represented on a council with a role in shaping the direction their school might take.

Who benefits?	How?
Students gain...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional support and opportunities for achievement • Value/respect for education through observed involvement • For student representatives, an opportunity to shape policy decisions
Parents gain...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An opportunity to shape policy decisions • An opportunity to redefine parent involvement • A better understanding of the school's possibilities and challenges
Community members gain...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An opportunity to shape policy decisions • An opportunity to redefine community involvement • Increased value, awareness, and access of community resource(s)
Educators gain...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An opportunity to shape policy decisions • Increased public confidence and mutual support • Added insight re: community perceptions and expectations • A better understanding of the school's possibilities and challenges

I truly feel that when councils focus on the students, effective teams and supportive relationships are established. I value the work our council has done in creating a vision, setting goals, and solving problems.

*Nancy Bouthillette,
Principal Russell
Elementary School*

4. What are the key responsibilities of a council in Phase II of Education Reform?

The primary responsibility of the school council is, as it has been from its inception, to work with the principal to develop a sound plan for school improvement. The school improvement plan is at the heart of Education Reform, and it is a key component of the School and District Accountability System established by the Board of Education in 1999. The school council brings together the expertise of educators, parents, and community members to review data available from MCAS reports and other sources, and together with the principal, it develops a plan to address identified needs and improve the performance of students in the school.

Additionally, the connection between the school improvement plan and the professional development for educators within the school has been strengthened as a result of the 1999 amendment to the Recertification Regulations. The regulations require educators to design individual professional development plans for themselves that are aligned with the educational improvement goals of the school and the district. When the school improvement plan is sound, and the teachers and other educators within the school align their individual professional development plans with it, then all can work better together to improve student learning.

School councils ask principals to rethink the traditional model in which administrators make policy, teachers deliver instruction, and parents provide support. On an effective council the principal truly involves those closest to the students, teachers and parents, in identifying priorities and strategies for improvement.

*Colleen Tuson, Parent
Liaison
MA Parent Involvement
Project*

D. Representation and Participation

1. What is the school's responsibility for establishing councils that are broadly representative of the racial and ethnic diversity of the school community?

The law reads "school councils **should be broadly representative of the racial and ethnic diversity** of the school building and the community." Schools have a affirmative responsibility to ensure there are opportunities for all racial and ethnic groups to participate in the council. This responsibility may not involve setting quotas or developing proportional representation plans that guarantee seats on the council to members of particular racial or ethnic groups. There are, however, several strategies schools can use to enhance broad representation:

- ❖ Request existing parent groups to nominate candidates from their membership.
- ❖ Hold elections at the conclusion or beginning of a cultural assembly program, school play, open-house, or other event that brings a large number of parents into the school.
- ❖ Solicit nominations for parent and community members through strategic mailing and postings in community organizations, local newspapers, and radio and cable television announcements.
- ❖ Invite parents to nominate themselves or others for membership on the council. (This approach has been highly successful in generating candidates.)

We hold a fall welcome program, attended by roughly 75% of our families, in late September. At that time, we introduce our school council candidates and request those in attendance to vote for their council representatives. Family members who cannot attend this program are encouraged to return the ballot found in our first newsletter.

*Raymond O'Malley,
Principal,
Parker Middle School
Taunton*

2. In order to enhance representation, may parents and teachers be elected by "subgroups" within the parent or teacher community?

Initiated by a council member, the Brimfield Elementary School Advisory Council added improvement of the school library/media center as an annual goal. A subcommittee was created which included the principal, school librarian, school council member, and a number of parents. This subcommittee surveyed parents, teachers, and students on library usage, preferences, and needs; developed specific goals and objectives for the library/media center; performed a thorough "weeding" of the school library; and secured funding for new books, periodicals, and software for the library.

*Mike DeFalco, Brimfield
School Committee*

No. The election of parents and teachers must, by law, be open to all parents and teachers, respectively. However, to encourage representation from underrepresented parent or teacher groups, the nomination process may be designed to yield candidates from certain "subgroups." For example, if a citywide school lacks parent representation from certain regions of the city, or teachers from a particular grade level, the principal may solicit nominations from such "sub groups". However, all parents or teachers must be able to vote for all parents or teachers including candidates who wish to run "at-large." In other words, a council may not have "reserved" seats for subgroups of either the teacher or the parent population.

3. How can school councils become more inclusive in their decision making?

Inclusive decision making refers to a way of doing business that provides for continual contact between the council and the school community it represents. Councils can become more inclusive by:

- ❖ Exceeding the requirements of the open meeting law by giving more notice of the time and place than the law requires and including the agenda in such posted notice. Include meeting times and locations in the parent newsletter.
- ❖ Providing for a public comment period at every council meeting. During this period, council members and the school community at large may bring their issues to the attention of the council. The ground rules for

such sessions should rule out individual grievances (e.g., a parent's complaint about a class placement) and personnel issues requiring confidentiality.

- ❖ Setting aside the last few minutes of each council meeting to develop the agenda for the next meeting. In this way, council members can informally canvass the thoughts and opinions of the constituents they represent in between meetings.
- ❖ Establishing subcommittees with additional membership. This practice brings one or more members of the council together with other volunteers from the school and community to work on a specific issue for a specific period of time. This also provides an opportunity for involvement of parents, teachers, and community members who do not have the time or interest to serve on a permanent standing committee.
- ❖ Hold meetings at a time and place when parents and others are more likely to attend.

4. If the school council surveys parents, teachers, or others about issues related to school improvement, are the survey results available to the public?

Yes. Under the Public Records Law*, documents made or received by a state or local government agency, including a school council, are public records, unless they fall within one of the exemptions specified in the law. For example, memos or letters relating to policy positions still being developed by the agency are exempt, but "reasonably completed factual studies or reports on which the development of such policy positions has been or may be based" are public records. The final survey results would be a public record, available to any person upon request.

*For more information on the Public Records Law, including a definition of "public records" see G.L. c. 4, s. 7 and c. 66, s. 10, at www.state.ma.us/law.

Part Two: Establishing and Maintaining Effective Councils

A. General Expectations

1. What are the responsibilities of council membership?

In order to work in consultation with the school principal to adopt educational goals and plan for school improvement, council members are expected to:

- ❖ focus on the interests of the school and all its students;
- ❖ stay informed on issues that affect student success and achievement;
- ❖ attend and participate regularly in council meetings;
- ❖ communicate regularly with the population they represent (faculty, parents, community, students);
- ❖ promote the participation of the school community in support of the improvement plan;
- ❖ attend workshops and training programs for council members; and
- ❖ seek to reach consensus in the decision making process of the council.

[S]uccessful school improvement planning is a collaborative process that includes all those who are committed to education: administrators, teachers, parents, students, and support staff. Active participation of all individuals enhances school improvement efforts.

*Bobbie D'Alessandro
Superintendent,
Cambridge*

2. Who should serve on a school council?

A council is **composed of elected and appointed representatives** of the school and community. The law specifies that the council is to consist of: **(1)** parents of students attending the school; **(2)** teachers; and **(3)** other persons drawn from such groups or entities as municipal government, business and labor organizations, institutions of higher education, human service agencies or other interested groups, including those from school-age child care programs. For schools containing any of grades nine to twelve, there should be **(4) at least** one student on the council.

3. How many members should the council contain?

The law leaves it up to each principal to define the size and composition of the council. It does, however, make three stipulations about membership:

One of the strengths I see on our school council is the diversity of the group—parents, teachers, and students coming together to assist the school. A strong leader should know when a certain voice is not being heard and prompt for their input. I think this kind of leadership is critical in group work.

Vimal Vora, Wayland High School, Class of '99

= 10). Accordingly, the

- ❖ Parents "shall have **parity** [equality] with professional personnel on the school councils." Regardless of the size of the council, **the number of parent representatives must be equal to the number of professional school personnel** who serve on the council that is, teachers plus the principal. For example, if a council has three teachers and one principal (i.e., 3 + 1=4 professional educators) there must be four parent representatives for parity.

- ❖ "**Not more than fifty percent of the council shall be non-school members.**" Non-school members are defined as members who are "other than parents, teachers, students, and staff at the school" (e.g., local business partners, representatives from community based organizations, higher education partners). In the example above, the council has eight *school members* (i.e., 4 professional educators + 4 parents). If two high school students were added, there would be ten school members (i.e., 3 teachers + 1 principal + 4 parents + 2 students number of *non-school members* could not exceed ten.

- ❖ The membership of school councils (teachers, parents, and others) "**should be broadly representative** of the racial and ethnic diversity of the school building and community."

4. What is the reason for parity in representation between parents and school professionals?

Research on small group dynamics has shown that when lay people are outnumbered they are less likely to communicate their special perspective. "Parity" provides a critical mass in which parents can feel comfortable expressing their views while educators retain a strong voice on the council.

5. Are the composition, role, and functions of the school council subject to collective bargaining?

To the extent that the composition, role, and functions of the school council are defined by statute, those matters are not subject to collective bargaining.

6. May a school council designate co-chairs without having the principal serve as a co-chair?

No. The law requires that the school principal be one of the co-chairs of the council. The council, as a whole, selects the other co-chair(s). The prefix "co" means together, in conjunction with, or jointly. While it is most common for the principal and one other person to share the duties of chairing a school council, a council could decide to have more than two representative co-chairs (e.g., one administrator, one teacher, one parent). An interesting school council model in the Boston Public Schools involves not two but three co-chairs: the principal, a teacher, and a parent. Co-chairs rotate chairing the meeting and setting the agenda.

When a parent serves as co-chair on the school council other parents contribute more at the council meetings. In addition, from such a close up view parents see the challenges that school administrators face in planning for improvement.

*Charles Curry, Co-Chair
Bennett School Council,
Taunton*

7. Is it a requirement that parents serve as co-chair with the principal?

No. Although this is common practice among school councils, it is not a requirement. The council is to elect the other co-chair from those members expressing an interest in serving in this capacity. In the spirit of maintaining parity, councils may wish to encourage parents to serve as co-chairs.

8. What is the recommended term of office for council members?

There are two major considerations to weigh in regard to the length of council members' terms: (1) the value of continuity and experience with long term membership and (2) the value of fresh perspectives and increased participation with a greater turnover of members.

Establishing staggered terms for members of councils can provide both continuity and fresh perspective (i.e., one third of each membership category is elected for terms of one, two, and three years in the initial year of the council). These members can be re-elected for a full three-year term when their term expires.

Be sure to consider membership limitations when establishing terms. For example, while there is no statute-based limitation placed on teachers' or community members' terms, parents must have a child attending the school in order to serve on the council each year.

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9. Are school council members "public officials" and, as such, subject to conflict of interest provisions?

Yes. According to the State Ethics Commission's Opinion EC-COI-93-21 (October 19, 1993), school councils are considered municipal agencies and their members, although they serve without compensation, are considered municipal employees for purposes of the conflict of interest law. This provision may be especially relevant to parent and community members of councils who may serve on other municipal agencies, boards and commissions within the community or who may do business with the city or town agencies.

Because the circumstances of each case are different, the Department suggests that conflict of interest questions be directed to the State Ethics Commission, One Ashburton Place, Room 619, Boston, MA 02108. Telephone: (617) 727-0060.

FAX: (617) 723-5851.

B. Elections

1. How are members to be selected?

The law indicates that the principal "shall have the responsibility for defining the composition of and forming the group pursuant to a representative process approved by the superintendent and the school committee." While the law provides local leeway in the election process, it does affirm the principle of peer selection as follows:

- ❖ Parent members are to be **selected by the parents of students attending the school in elections** held by the local recognized parent-teacher organization (PTO). The parent-teacher organization responsible for holding elections for parent representatives to the school council is **that PTO which is most representative** of the entire parent constituency. The electing organization needs to be open to all parents of all children in the school.
- ❖ Teacher members are to **be selected by the teachers in the school**.
- ❖ **Student council elections or other representative processes** should be used to select the student member.
- ❖ **Non-school members may be recruited by the principal** directly or selected by the organizations that are invited to send representatives to the council.

School councils aim to help schools enhance the achievement of all students. As first-hand resources, student members offer an essential perspective to this end. Through their input and involvement in decision-making, student members increase the council's ability to draft and implement effective school improvement.

*Rachelle Engler
Director, Office of
Student Leadership,
MA Department of
Education*

2. Must the council election process be approved?

Yes, although there is no need to do this on a regular basis once the process is approved. The law reads that "the principal, except as otherwise provided herein, shall have the responsibility for defining the composition of and forming the group pursuant to a **representative process approved by the superintendent and school committee**." In addition, when parent elections are held by a locally recognized parent teacher organization, these **elections are held under the direction of the principal**. But the principal may not exert any influence over the nomination and election process.

3. Is it necessary to hold a formal election when the number of candidates for council vacancies equals the number of slots to be filled?

It may cause fewer problems and questions to hold an open election, but it is not necessary. Minimally the council should (1) establish policy on such matters; (2) document that policy in the minutes of the meetings; (3) hold a vote to appoint the members; and (4) notify constituents of the appointments.

School councils are new to me, a parent with third grade triplets. I'm just beginning to understand the level of involvement that I as a parent am able to have. I'm excited to begin a new school year working with our PTO to support the principal and our school council's plan for improvement.

*Lori Riley, PTO member
Hubbardston Elementary
School*

4. If a school has more than one parent-teacher organization, which organization holds the election of the parents to the council?

Schools that have more than one equally representative parent-teacher organization should **determine a collaborative process for electing the parent representatives** on the council. Two or more organizations may collaborate to hold an open school-wide election of parents. The primary consideration is that the election of parents be as open and inclusive as possible. Any parent, regardless of membership in a parent teacher organization, is free to run for election to and vote for parent representatives to the council.

5. What happens if there is no parent-teacher organization to hold the election of parents?

Developing a process to elect parents to the council in schools that do not have a formal parent-teacher organization can pose a special challenge. In such a case, the principal is responsible for **developing a representative election process**, subject to approval by the superintendent and school committee.

6. What can principals in small towns do to recruit “other members” for the school councils?

In recruiting other members for the school council, principals may reach out to people in organizations beyond their school district boundaries, including businesses, cultural institutions, colleges and universities, and human service agencies. In addition, nothing in the statute prohibits an individual from serving as an “other” member on more than one school council, as long as the individual has the time and energy to do so.

7. What are some ways of recruiting parents and non-school community members to the councils?

Principals can use several strategies in recruiting such members, among them:

- ❖ Posting recruitment notices in school and local papers, bulletin boards, and web-sites.
- ❖ Gathering recommendations for community organizations and constituencies from which council members may be recruited. These groups may include higher education, cultural and human service agencies, business, senior citizens, etc..
- ❖ Identifying a pool of community partners and representative organizations with an interest in supporting school improvement. Schools can select from this pool and invite organizations to send representatives to the council.
- ❖ Inviting parents and the community to an evening informational meeting at which the school council is explained and volunteer nominations are sought.
- ❖ Recruiting in conjunction with a forum, possibly with a respected guest speaker, on an issue of current concern to the community. Recruit volunteers at the conclusion of the forum.

As a working parent, the school council has been a great way to be involved with my children's education since I'm not available during the day... In my town, the school councils came together to discuss district-wide changes that are impacting the entire school community. Without the councils, this kind of "whole community" engagement wouldn't have happened.

*Christine Harris
Scituate School
Council Member*

One benefit of parent participation is that we are not as limited as teachers and administrators in what we can ask and say. Often parents raise questions and concerns that otherwise would not be heard. We are better able to do such things as bring an issue to light or advocate for funding if it is lacking.

*Charles Curry, Co-Chair
Bennett School Council,
Taunton*

8. What can be done when council members, elected by their peers, decline to participate or formally resign?

If members of the council simply do not show up for meetings, then meetings can go on without them, assuming there are enough attendees to constitute a quorum. When a member formally resigns from the council, the principal should notify the group from which the individual was selected that there is an opening on the council and take steps to fill that vacancy. If no one from the appropriate group is willing to participate after notice has been given of the opportunity, then the council can continue to function without representatives from this group.

9. How can vacancies be filled?

The law leaves this matter up to the principal to decide “pursuant to a representative process approved by the superintendent and school committee.” Several options can be considered, among them:

- (1) offering the seat to the **person with the second highest number of votes** (from the representative group) in the most recent election;
- (2) If s/he is unavailable, it can be offered to any of the other non-elected candidates;
- (3) If there are no remaining candidates, the principal may hold a special election to fill the vacancy;
- or (4) ask the parent or faculty organization to recruit someone to fill the position temporarily until the next election.

C. Council Eligibility

1. May a parent who is separated from a spouse and living in another community serve on the school council in the school that the child attends?

Yes. The law does not specify a residency requirement for school council membership. As long as the parent has a child attending the school, the parent may serve on the school council.

2. May administrators other than principals serve on the council?

Generally no. One obtains a seat on the council through election by one's peers (parents or teachers) or by appointment by the principal (as in the case of community members). The principal has ready access to the school's administrative team, so it is inappropriate for the principal to appoint administrators to the seats on the school council that are reserved for "other persons, not parents or teachers of students at the school." In some circumstances, however, a faculty member who performs some administrative duties may serve on the school council. Specifically, the teachers in the school may, if they choose to do so, select as a teacher representative on the council a faculty member such as a department head or assistant principal who is in the teachers' bargaining unit. The faculty member's administrative duties would not disqualify him or her from being selected by the teachers as one of their representatives on the council.

In order for teachers to help plan for school improvement, educational information from the State and the District should reach teachers as well as superintendents and principals. They are the ones in the classroom with first-hand knowledge. They are the ones that address students' needs and parents' concerns.

*Fall River Council Member,
1999 DOE School Council
workshop evaluation
comment*

3. May an individual who is a teacher at another school in the district serve as an "other person" community member of the council?

The law is silent on this matter. It defines the "other person" as someone who is "not a parent or teacher of students at the school." It further describes the "other persons" on the council as "drawn from such groups or entities as municipal government, business or labor organizations, institutions of higher education, or other interested parties." Therefore, a teacher or administrator from another school in the district who is a member of any of the groups identified above can serve as an "other person" on any school council. **In filling these positions, it is important to maintain a balance in representation between educator and lay members of the council in order to adhere to the "parity" standard referred to in the law.**

4. May an individual who is both a parent and a teacher at the school serve on the council?

If a parent of a child attending the school also serves as a teacher at that school, that person may serve only as a teacher member of the council. An individual who is supervised and evaluated by the principal may not be elected as a parent member of a council that is co-chaired by that same principal.

[At workshops] It would be nice if parents could meet separately sometimes. It's kind of intimidating to comment when you are surrounded by teachers and administrators.

*Holyoke School
Council Member,
1999 DOE workshop*

5. May substitute teachers serve on the council?

The law is silent on this issue. The language regarding membership categories uses three terms to refer to educators at the school: "teachers," "staff at the school," and "school-based professionals." Because substitutes have varying relationships with the school, such as occasional temporary, temporary full-time, and permanent full-time, the issue regarding substitutes revolves around the nature of the service. A full-time substitute teacher may be elected as a teacher member of the council. A parent of a student at the school who occasionally works as a substitute teacher at that school may be elected as a parent member of a council if the substitute service really is occasional (e.g., if the total number of days that the parent serves as a substitute at that particular school does not exceed 90 days). Because the most important judges of representation are those who are being represented, it makes sense to check with the other parents or teachers to determine if they are comfortable choosing a substitute teacher as one of their representatives.

6. May non-classroom based school professionals serve in the "teacher" membership category on the council?

Yes, if they are elected by the teachers at the school. Such professionals (e.g., guidance counselors, program coordinators) provide important services to students and bring another perspective to the council's discussions and planning process.

7. May other school staff serve on the council and, if so, in what membership category?

"Other school staff" includes custodians, lunchroom staff, and others who are not education professionals. Like non-classroom based education professionals, these people can provide an important perspective on the needs of the school and its students. Other school staff, who are not parents, teachers, or students at the school, may be appointed to serve as "other person" members. It is important; however, to maintain a balance so that the council's **"other person" membership category is not filled exclusively or even predominantly by school employees.**

8. May an individual serve as an "other person" on more than one school council?

Yes. Nothing in the legislative language prohibits this practice. Schools and school systems that exercise this option will want to consider the value-added benefit of having key community resource people serving on multiple councils and whether such persons' time and energy be stretched too thin. Service on multiple councils may make sense, however, in instances in which a business, human service agency, or higher education institution is part of a partnership consortium with several schools.

School council meetings are opportunities for reflection as well as council business. It is a time to explore the various roles educators, parents, and the community can play in supporting improvement goals.

*John Desses,
Educational
Specialist, MA
Department of
Education*

9. May school committee members serve on a council in the school district that is overseen by the school committee?

A school committee member who is a parent of a student attending a school may run and be elected to serve as a parent member of a council. **It is contrary to the spirit of the law, however, for a school committee member to be appointed to serve as an "other person" or public member of the council.** The intent is to widen the base of citizen involvement and support for the school. School committee members are already involved at the highest level of local school governance and are not encouraged to serve on school councils.

10. May school committee members serve in an *ex-officio* capacity on a school council?

Pursuant to the school council statute, G.L. c. 71, s.59C, there is only one *ex officio* member of a school council, the principal. The term *ex-officio* means "by virtue of the office". The principal is a school council member simply because s/he is the principal. No other offices or positions carry that designation for school councils.

11. May two parents or teachers share one slot on a council?

Yes, if the half-time members were elected by their peers and if they alternate attendance at meetings.

I have seen some heated debates at council meetings, but these disagreements often bring important points out in the open where they can be addressed.

*Marcella Russell,
Lynn Middle
School
Council Parent*

D. Running Meetings

1. What are the characteristics of effective council meetings?

While council meetings differ as much as the councils and the schools they represent, experience shows that the most effective councils do the following:

- ❖ Determine the dates and time of meetings at the beginning of each year to assure the attendance and participation of council members. *Some councils meet on a regular monthly schedule. Others hold regular meetings at the beginning of the school year and then convene on an "as-needed" basis to conserve time and energy and avoid meeting "for the sake of meeting."*
- ❖ Develop agendas that are focused and to the point. Distribute materials in advance of the meetings. *Concise agendas keep meetings focused and provide continuity from meeting to meeting. Members receive the agenda, minutes, and materials in advance to ensure that members are prepared and time is not spent reviewing materials.*
- ❖ Invite the public to attend meetings. Input is encouraged through a public comment period. *Posted council schedules and agendas can serve as invitations for other interested members of the school and community to provide input to the council.*
- ❖ Keep minutes. Post and distribute copies (e. g., at meetings, on school web-site). *This practice provides continuity from meeting to meeting and informs others about council activity. Note: this is also a requirement under the open meeting law*
- ❖ Conflict is viewed as a natural part of shared decision-making. Each member's views are respected even when opposing. *This attitude encourages an honest exchange of ideas and opinions. Note: Councils are encouraged to establish ground rules and a code of conduct for meetings.*
- ❖ Form subcommittees to address specific goals and/or tasks. *Subcommittee work is effective in preventing "burn-out" by allowing council members to focus on their areas of interest and expertise.*

When a council conducts a survey or when its members formally consult their constituents, these outreach efforts should result in feedback from the council on how this information was used. In the same spirit, school committees and other school officials who are the recipients of the council's recommendations should agree on a timeline and a format for a response.

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2. Must the principal provide a secretary to take minutes at school council meetings?

No. While minutes must be kept according to the open meeting law, this is clearly the principal's decision. Many principals ensure that minutes are kept by asking for a volunteer, or asking that all members share the responsibility by rotation.

3. Should councils make decisions by consensus or by majority rule?

Both methods are used by councils. Since a major product of the council is the school improvement plan, it makes sense to adopt such a plan through consensus even though it can be painstaking and time consuming. Some councils find it useful to adopt a dual-level of decision making. Consensus is recommended for major issues such as the development of the school plan, while a majority vote can be used on procedural questions and issues.

4. What is consensus decision-making?

Consensus decision-making is a way of working together that does not require unanimity of agreement. Members of a consensus decision making process may disagree with a final decision but agree to go along with it. **At the heart of the consensus process is the importance of each group member's viewpoint and the**

opportunity to express his/her views. Under a consensus process, it is perfectly acceptable for a member to say, "I disagree with this decision but I am willing to support it."

5. What are some basic rules that can facilitate shared decision-making?

The law contains language such as "assist" or "consult with" the principal. Clearly it envisions that councils will share in decisions that are the formal prerogative of principals, to whom the law has given increased responsibilities for the operational management of the school. Experience suggests that there are a few basic rules that can turn council meetings into a collaborative and positive experience:

- ❖ Explicitly state the issue that must be decided and why. Where does the problem originate? What values are at stake if the problem is not addressed?
- ❖ At the outset, communicate clearly who will make the final decision (e.g., council, principal, school committee) and identify any constraints that will affect the scope or content of the decision. The authority to decide and the ability to implement are two different matters. Accordingly, all of the constraints on schools such as budget, staffing, time, and regulations should be laid out on the table as the group begins its decision-making process.
- ❖ Keep in touch. Communicate formally with all of those involved in the decisions that are being made. If important information or decisions change, ensure that all council members and the larger school community are informed.

Although parents and teachers may not say things the same way, I find we often are saying the same thing. Parents get to the point, looking at student issues from a personal perspective, while ours is more global. Recently, we looked at the school mission, vision, and culture. The different perspectives were valuable. Our principal is open to listening to these perspectives and shares outcomes with the larger school community to secure further input and endorsement.

*Janice Sloan Riolo,
Teacher, Balch School,
Norwood*

6. Is the council's work stopped if under work-to-rule conditions the teachers on the council stop participating?

No. As long as access is guaranteed, an individual member's or a group's decision not to participate cannot stop the work of the whole council and thus deny other constituencies the opportunity to participate. Under the Open Meeting Law, a quorum for the council is a simple majority of current members, so meetings may be conducted in the absence of one constituency if enough other members attend.

It troubles me to hear some folks paint all administrators with a broad brush as obstacles to change and collaboration. Many of us value the help of our councils. ...We could use more training and better public relations on school councils.

*RD Brown, retired Principal,
Melrose*

Part Three: Roles and Responsibility

A. Oversight

1. Who is responsible for organizing a school council?

The law explicitly gives the school **principal responsibility for defining the composition and overseeing the formation of the council** consistent with a representative process approved by the superintendent and school committee.

As co-chair of the council, the principal is also **responsible for convening the first meeting** of the council no later than 40 days after the first day of school. At this meeting, the other co-chair is to be selected.

2. What form of technical assistance and preparation will benefit councils?

Ongoing training and technical assistance are key in maximizing school council effectiveness. Orientation sessions may be included in initial council meetings or the district might hold a system-wide orientation meeting for all council members. Council training should include:

- ❖ A written copy of meeting expectations, policies, and procedures, including district expectations
- ❖ An explanation of Massachusetts General Laws relevant to school councils
- ❖ An orientation/update on the district's goals, philosophy, and operations, including an overview of federal and state education laws and collective bargaining agreements
- ❖ A copy of the district's improvement plan outlining standards and policies that need to be reflected in the school's improvement plan
- ❖ School committee criteria/procedures for the review and approval of school improvement plans
- ❖ The district's budget making process and calendar
- ❖ Capacity building training on topics such as: decision-making, agenda setting, and conflict resolution

3. What authority do school committees have over school councils?

The law provides an explicit oversight role for school committees. The relationship between school committees and school councils has a strong potential for strengthening lay governance in public education. Regarding school councils, school committees have the responsibility to:

- ❖ Set district-wide performance standards and educational policies for school improvement
- ❖ Review and approve school improvement plans for each school in the district
- ❖ In consultation with the superintendent of schools, approve a representative process for the election of parent and teacher members of the council
- ❖ Determine whether school councils in the district shall have additional authority in the area of educational policy, beyond the functions mandated by G.L. c.71, s, 59C.

In order for councils to be effective, principals need to: (1) ensure that council members are trained on rules governing councils; (2) convey information to councils in an accurate and timely manner; and (3) interpret assessment results as part of improvement planning.

*George Luongo
North Reading
High School
Council*

4. Are school committees required to provide a written set of expectations for school councils?

While it is not a requirement, written expectations would help to clarify the roles and processes of site based management. School committees need to work with the superintendent and council members to develop local guidelines that achieve the law’s intent. Of course, such guidelines cannot impede councils' obligation to fulfill their mandated functions. School committees are encouraged to develop local guidelines that:

- ❖ Define the process for development and approval of school improvement plans
- ❖ Set goals for diverse representation on the council
- ❖ Outline any additional authority in the area of educational policy
- ❖ Reflect school committees' experience in participatory and inclusive decision-making

5. What role does the superintendent play with respect to school councils?

The superintendent works with the school committee to review and approve the representative process for forming school councils. As chief executive for the school district, the superintendent also works with principals and the school committee to align the district improvement plan and school improvement plans.

A district improvement plan is not a fixed document reflecting the ideas of its administrators alone but a working document developed by a planning committee with representation from all the stakeholders: school administration, staff, parents, and community.

*John Desses,
Education Specialist,
MA Department of Education*

6. Is it appropriate for the district to shape a school’s improvement plan?

Yes, by means of the district improvement plan. Consistency between the district improvement plan and the school improvement plans is critical. The district improvement plan is the umbrella that provides the vision, mission, and goals for the district. Like a school improvement plan, the district’s plan is an accountability tool, a strategic plan that addresses student achievement through data analysis and goal setting. It is reasonable for district administration to ask principals to develop school improvement plans closely aligned with the district’s plan, based on a school’s needs assessment and analysis of school data.

7. What is the school committee’s responsibility for ensuring alignment of school and district plans?

School committees are instrumental in the development of the district improvement plan. It is their responsibility to “establish educational goals and policies for the schools in the district consistent with the requirements of law and statewide goals and standards established by the Board of Education.” [G.L. Chapter 71, Section 37] School committees have a critical role to play in certifying development of the district improvement plan and providing resources and support to school councils to ensure both alignment and distinctiveness in each school’s plan.

I just finished a year on the the Mendon-Upton Middle High School Council. I was a community member as my children have both graduated. I was feeling out of touch with the workings of my own community and decided to join the group. I really enjoyed the whole experience because the council had a wide range of members from various perspectives and age ranges.[...] Council members were valued. I appreciated that all views and ideas were considered and several were incorporated in many areas.

*Mary Jo Jones,
Director of Pupil Personnel in Hopedale*

8. May the school committee adopt local conflict of interest provisions that are more stringent than those contained in state law?

Yes. The conflict of interest law, G.L.c. 268A, specifically provides that municipal agencies are not precluded "from establishing and enforcing additional standards of conduct." Therefore, a school committee may adopt additional standards of conduct. However, such standards must be reasonable and consistent with the purpose and intent of the Education Reform Act.

B. Developing Sound School Improvement Plans (SIP's)

1. What is a “sound” school improvement plan?

Under the School and District Accountability System, evaluators will be asked to determine if a school has a “sound” plan for improvement. A sound plan would be one that is strategically aligned with the district improvement plan and addresses:

- ❖ student achievement in setting priorities and objectives
- ❖ the use of data in needs analysis, goal setting, and evaluation of outcomes
- ❖ the SIP elements outlined in the G.L. c. 71, s. 59C, paragraph 5.
- ❖ goals and standards, including the student performance standards, adopted by the Board
- ❖ clear priorities, objectives, and strategies
- ❖ evaluative features such as outcomes, timelines, oversight, and resources
- ❖ goals that will lend themselves to implementing school programs and shaping educators’ individual professional development plans

I am encouraged to see educators and councils looking at data in planning for improvement, but we should not ignore valuable data because it's not easily quantifiable. We need to count what counts, not just what's easily countable.

*Debra Brady,
Assistant Superintendent,
Auburn Public Schools*

2. What is the process that leads to the development of a quality school improvement plan?

While the process of improvement planning will vary among councils, minimally, it would involve: (1) broad participation; (2) careful data analysis and hypothesis; and clarity of purpose. In their representative roles, council members are encouraged to gather input and feedback from the larger school community for consideration and analysis in planning. Finally, a sound plan would also reflect the buy-in of staff and the school community at large.

3. Must a school improvement plan address each element outlined in G.L. c. 71, s. 59C, each year?

A sound school improvement plan is not determined by the number of goals and activities but by clear links to student achievement and thoughtful needs analysis in goal setting. It would be unrealistic to expect a school to focus its efforts on each of the elements in the law each year, particularly if the district's priorities dictate otherwise, but a plan's narrative could reference components that were addressed in previous years or that will be in future plans.

4. Must the school improvement plan be aligned with other school and district plans?

Yes. Schools, teachers, and districts are required to align their plans strategically as a means of coordinating planning for improvement and ultimately increased student achievement. For example, the school council statute says that the school improvement plan shall be consistent with the educational policies of the district as well as with state goals and standards. The Regulations on Recertification require each educator to have a professional development plan that is aligned with the school and district improvement plan. When all of these plans are goals are well conceived and in harmony with each other, the school community as a whole can be more effective in improving student achievement.

5. May a school improvement plan be a multi-year rather than an annual plan?

While there is nothing to prevent a school from writing a multi-year master plan in addition to its annual SIP, the law is clear: “Each school improvement plan shall be submitted to the school committee for review and approval every year.” While it is important to map out long-term goals and plans, the principal and school council need to review and update the school improvement plan each year, to keep it current, strengthen it where needed, and meet the requirements of the law.

6. When should the annual school improvement plans be submitted, and to whom?

The principal and the school council shall submit the school improvement plan to the school committee for review and approval every year. The school committee should set a schedule for submission and review of the improvement plans, and should communicate the schedule to all principals and school councils. Typically, the school committee will ask school councils to submit their improvement plans early enough in the spring so that the committee can consider the plans when it develops the school budget for the following year.

7. When must a school improvement plan be approved by the school committee?

Other than requiring that the plan be submitted annually to the school committee, the law is silent on this issue. Common sense would suggest that in order to meet the goals and implement the activities of an annual plan, it should be **ready for implementation as early in the school year as possible.**

8. May a school committee reject all or parts of a school improvement plan?

Yes. The **law gives school committees final authority to approve the individual school plans.** “ Each school improvement plan shall be submitted to the school committee for review and approval every year. If said school improvement plan is not reviewed by the school committee **within thirty days of said school committee receiving said school improvement plan,** the plan shall be deemed to have been approved.”

The process of **review can be an ongoing conversation between the school committee and the school councils** in its school district. Unapproved elements of the plan can be sent back to the schools for further development and can be resubmitted in a revised form. A clear and published set of school committee expectations regarding school improvement plans can reduce the possibility of disapproved plans.

9. What happens if there is no regularly scheduled school committee meeting within 30 days of the submission of a school improvement plan?

If a school committee fails to take action within 30 calendar days, the plan is automatically approved. In order to avoid having to approve an unreviewed plan or schedule a special meeting, school committees should specify in advance the date on which plans must be submitted.

10. Does the superintendent have to approve the school improvement plan?

The law is silent on the superintendent’s role with regard to school improvement plans. The superintendent should be involved in reviewing school plans for alignment with district and professional development plans. A superintendent may request a copy of the school improvement plan before it is brought before the school committee. In addition, the school committee may ask the superintendent to review the district’s school improvement plans on its behalf.

11. Does the Department of Education review school improvement plans?

In 1999, the Board of Education established the Massachusetts School and District Accountability System focused on student results expressed as both performance and improvement. The Accountability System will track the progress of every school in every district in improving the performance of its students towards State standards. As part of a district or school evaluation, the Department may request a copy of the school improvement plan in order to evaluate how a school is planning for such improvement.

12. Is there anyone else who reviews a school improvement plan?

The school improvement plan is a public record. School staff and parents should review their school’s improvement plan each year. The Recertification Regulations **require that every educator align his/her professional development plan with his/her school’s improvement plan.**

Under the Education Reform Law, “Principals shall be the educational administrators and managers of their schools and shall supervise the operation and management of their school and school property subject to the supervision and direction of the superintendent.” School councils have a very important role to play in assisting the principal in this new and difficult role. Councils must also understand that their improvement plans must be consistent with the mission, goals, policies, and budget of the district determined by the school committee and superintendent.

*William Densmore,
Founding Director,
Mass Business
Alliance for Education*

C. Implementation and Evaluation

1. What is the council's role in implementing the school improvement plan?

In developing a sound school improvement plan the council should identify individuals responsible for seeing that programs and activities are implemented. The council should also see that a timeline has been established and resources identified for each goal in the plan. At a pre-determined time in the school year, the council should meet to evaluate and document the school's success in carrying out its annual plan.

2. What are the benefits of a school council coordinating with other groups or committees within the school and district?

When groups within a school or a district collaborate it is more likely that goals will be achieved. Such coordination helps to ensure that various groups do not exist in isolation, duplicate efforts, or develop conflicting programs. There are several ways to coordinate school council efforts with existing structures and the larger school community:

- ❖ Establish communication among school councils through district-wide meetings and council liaisons
- ❖ Open up the dialogue by inviting leadership teams and committees in the school and/or district to attend meetings and/or speak on relevant agenda items
- ❖ Promote and support the representative nature of council membership
- ❖ Organize the school council as a subcommittee of a larger umbrella group
- ❖ Discuss how groups within the school and/or district might interact with one another

3. How might a council evaluate its effectiveness?

This is a critical aspect of effective site based management and one that councils are encouraged to address. There are numerous benchmarks for success, among them:

- ❖ **The use of data:** Did the council use local/state data to assess progress on an annual basis?
- ❖ **Collaboration:** Did all council members contribute to the development and review of the school improvement plan before it was sent to the school committee?
- ❖ **Participation:** Did the council involve the larger community in its work? Were other members of the school community asked to make presentations or meet with the council? Was the school improvement plan shared with the larger school community? Were council agendas and minutes distributed to other school organizations/committees?
- ❖ **Representation:** Is the council reasonably representative of the geographic, socio-economic, and ethnic make-up of the school community?
- ❖ **Resource enhancement:** Did the council involve its representative members to establish links with groups that could contribute to the goals in the school improvement plan? (e.g., skills, in-kind contributions of time, knowledge, and material resources)
- ❖ **Internal functioning:** Did the council reach closure on important issues?

A school council offers a unique opportunity for family members and the community to come together in support of quality education. By its legal definition, it binds all parties to commit to identifying both needs and pathways to improvement.

*Kathleen Callahan,
Community Liaison,
Taunton Public Schools*

The philosophy behind school councils is sound; it's the implementation that's often faulty. We assume that we innately know how to plan and execute school improvement goals and we get frustrated when we come up short. Good implementation depends on structures and people. I understand why principals, school boards, and superintendents are suspicious. Shared decision making is not easy! But, before we throw up our hands and say, "This doesn't work," we need to learn how to make it work. Training is critical.

*Marilyn Fratturelli,
Assistant Superintendent,
Leominster Public Schools*

Did council meetings have good attendance?

D. Finance

1. Where can a school secure funds for training and support of its school council?

Language in the state budget has annually required that each district spend a certain amount (\$125 per pupil in FY00 and FY01) out of general fund sources (which does not include grants) for professional development. Training for school council members would be an allowable expenditure for this purpose. In addition, as outlined in Chapter 71, S. 38Q of Massachusetts General Laws, a school's professional development plan "shall also include training for members of school councils":

Every school district in the commonwealth shall adopt and implement a professional development plan for all principals, teachers and other professional staff employed by the district [...] **within the confines of the foundation budget.** Said plan shall include training in the teaching of new curriculum frameworks and other skills required for the effective implementation of this act, including participatory decision making, and parent and community involvement. Said plan shall also include training for members of school councils, pursuant to section fifty-nine C.

Effective and continuous school improvement planning, implementation, and evaluation are essential for the improvement of our schools.

*Bobbie
D'Alessandro,
Superintendent,
Cambridge*

2. May a council solicit or accept funds from the school's PTO or PTA to support programs and activities in the school improvement plan?

Yes. Such funds would be viewed and treated the same as any other donations the school may receive. Of course, solicitation and acceptance of these funds would be done at the discretion of the school principal and would require his/her approval.



NOTES

Appendix A:

Other Massachusetts Statutes Related to School Councils

NOTES

Appendix A: Other Massachusetts Statutes Related to School Councils

(* Note: Throughout the statutes cited, bold print has been added for increased focus.)

Chapter 71: Section 38Q. Professional development plans; statewide assistance plan.

Section 38Q. Every school district in the commonwealth shall adopt and implement a professional development plan for all principals, teachers, other professional staff, paraprofessionals and teacher assistants employed by the district, to include the professional support teams established pursuant to section thirty-eight G, and annually shall update such plans and set forth a budget for professional development within the confines of the foundation budget. Said plan shall include training in the teaching of new curriculum frameworks and other skills required for the effective implementation of this act, including participatory decision making, and parent and community involvement. The plan shall also include training in: (1) analyzing and accommodating diverse learning styles of all students in order to achieve an objective of inclusion in the regular classroom of students with diverse learning styles; and (2) methods of collaboration among teachers, paraprofessionals and teacher assistants to accommodate such styles. The plan may also include training in the provision of pre-referral services within regular education. Said plan shall include training in the teaching of new curriculum frameworks and other skills required for the effective implementation of this act, including participatory decision making, and parent and community involvement. **Said plan shall also include training for members of school councils, pursuant to section fifty-nine C.** Said plan may include teacher training which addresses the effects of gender bias in the classroom.

Councils need training. We need to know we are not working in a vacuum. For example, our council is trying to address poor parent involvement because we think it affects [school] climate and achievement. We'd like to learn how other schools address this problem.

Danvers School Council Member, 1999 DOE School Council Training, evaluation comment

71:38Q1/2. Curriculum accommodation plan.

Section 38Q1/2. A school district shall adopt and implement a curriculum accommodation plan to assist principals in ensuring that all efforts have been made to meet students' needs in regular education. The plan shall be designed to assist the regular classroom teacher in analyzing and accommodating diverse learning styles of all children in the regular classroom and in providing appropriate services and support within the regular education program including, but not limited to, direct and systematic instruction in reading and provision of services to address the needs of children whose behavior may interfere with learning, or who do not qualify for special education services under chapter 71B. The curriculum accommodation plan shall include provisions encouraging teacher mentoring and collaboration and parental involvement.

Chapter 71: Section 37H. Policies relative to conduct of teachers or students; student handbooks.

Section 37H. The superintendent of every school district shall publish the district's policies pertaining to the conduct of teachers and students. Said policies shall prohibit the use of any tobacco products within the school buildings, the school facilities or on the school grounds or on school buses by any individual, including school personnel. Copies of these policies shall be provided to any person upon request and without cost by the principal of every school within the district.

Each school district's policies pertaining to the conduct of students shall include the following: disciplinary proceedings, including procedures assuring due process; standards and procedures for suspension and expulsion of students; procedures pertaining to discipline of students with special needs; standards and procedures to assure school building security and safety of students and school personnel; and the disciplinary measures to be taken in cases involving the possession or use of illegal substances or weapons, the use of force, vandalism, or violation of other student's civil rights. Codes of discipline, as well as procedures used to develop such codes shall be filed with the department of education for informational purposes only.

In each school building containing the grades nine to twelve, inclusive, the principal, in consultation with the school council, shall prepare and distribute to each student a student handbook setting forth the rules pertaining to the conduct of students. The school council shall review the student handbook each spring to consider changes in disciplinary policy to take effect in September of the following school year, but may consider policy changes at any time. The annual review shall cover all areas of student conduct, including but not limited to those outlined in this section.

In Amesbury, our handbook is created by students and teachers. It is imperative to have student input in a handbook that is created for them. The students at Amesbury High have made small and large changes in their handbook, from changing the wording of a sentence to the entire dress-code in order to satisfy teachers as well as students.

*Erik Trofatter, Student
Amesbury High School,
Class of 2000*

Notwithstanding any general or special law to the contrary, all student handbooks shall contain the following provisions:

(a) Any student who is found on school premises or at school-sponsored or school-related events, including athletic games, in possession of a dangerous weapon, including, but not limited to, a gun or a knife; or a controlled substance as defined in chapter ninety-four C, including, but not limited to, marijuana, cocaine, and heroin, may be subject to expulsion from the school or school district by the principal.

(b) Any student who assaults a principal, assistant principal, teacher, teacher's aide or other educational staff on school premises or at school-sponsored or school-related events, including athletic games, may be subject to expulsion from the school or school district by the principal.

(c) Any student who is charged with a violation of either paragraph (a) or (b) shall be notified in writing of an opportunity for a hearing; provided, however, that the student may have representation, along with the opportunity to present evidence and witnesses at said hearing before the principal.

After said hearing, a principal may, in his discretion, decide to suspend rather than expel a student who has been determined by the principal to have violated either paragraph (a) or (b).

(d) Any student who has been expelled from a school district pursuant to these provisions shall have the right to appeal to the superintendent. The expelled student shall have ten days from the date of the expulsion in which to notify the superintendent of his appeal. The student has the right to counsel at a hearing before the superintendent. The subject matter of the appeal shall not be limited solely to a factual determination of whether the student has violated any provisions of this section.

Students grow from the experience and responsibility of school council membership[...] They are a valuable resource for schools in decision-making and planning for the achievement of all students.

*Rachelle M. Engler,
Director,
Office of Student Leadership
MA Department of
Education*

(e) When a student is expelled under the provisions of this section, no school or school district within the commonwealth shall be required to admit such student or to provide educational services to said student. If said student does apply for admission to another school or school district, the superintendent of the school district to which the application is made may request and shall receive from the superintendent of the school expelling said student a written statement of the reasons for said expulsion.

I have had the pleasure of working with Boston school principals who were good about listening to parents. They went beyond the open meeting law encouraging all parents to attend council meetings and address the council.

*Glenola Mitchell, Community Development Specialist,
MA Department of Education*

Chapter 39: Section 23B. Open meetings of governmental bodies.

Section 23B. All meetings of a governmental body shall be open to the public and any person shall be permitted to attend any meeting except as otherwise provided by this section.

No quorum of a governmental body shall meet in private for the purpose of deciding on or deliberating toward a decision on any matter except as provided by this section.

No executive session shall be held until the governmental body has first convened in an open session for which notice has been given, a majority of the members have voted to go into executive session and the vote of each member is recorded on a roll call vote and entered into the minutes, the presiding officer has cited the purpose for an executive session, and the presiding officer has stated before the executive session if the governmental body will reconvene after the executive session.

Nothing except the limitation contained in this section shall be construed to prevent the governmental body from holding an executive session after an open meeting has been convened and a recorded vote has been taken to hold an executive session. Executive sessions may be held only for the following purposes:

(1) To discuss the reputation, character, physical condition or mental health rather than the professional competence of an individual, provided that the individual involved in such executive session has been notified in writing by the governmental body, at least forty-eight hours prior to the proposed executive session. Notification may be waived upon agreement of the parties. A governmental body shall hold an open meeting if the individual involved requests that the meeting be open. If an executive session is held, such individual shall have the following rights:

- (a) to be present at such executive session during discussions or considerations which involve that individual.
- (b) to have counsel or a representative of his own choosing present and attending for the purpose of advising said individual and not for the purpose of active participation in said executive session.
- (c) to speak in his own behalf.

(2) To consider the discipline or dismissal of, or to hear complaints or charges brought against, a public officer, employee, staff member, or individual, provided that the individual involved in such executive session pursuant to this clause has been notified in writing by the governmental body at least forty-eight hours prior to the proposed executive session. Notification may be waived upon agreement of the parties. A governmental body shall hold an open meeting if the individual involved requests that the meeting be open. If an executive session is held, such individual shall have the following rights:

- (a) to be present at such executive session during discussions or considerations which involve that individual.
- (b) to have counsel or a representative of his own choosing present and attending for the purpose of advising said individual and not for the purpose of active participation.
- (c) to speak in his own behalf.

(3) To discuss strategy with respect to collective bargaining or litigation if an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the bargaining or litigating position of the governmental body, to conduct strategy sessions in preparation for negotiations with nonunion personnel, to conduct collective bargaining sessions or contract negotiations with nonunion personnel.

(4) To discuss the deployment of security personnel or devices.

(5) To investigate charges of criminal misconduct or to discuss the filing of criminal complaints.

When parents and the community are made aware of and have say in the policies of their school, they are likely to support and assist in carrying out those policies.

*Canton School
Council Member
(1999 DOE
workshop)
evaluation
comment)*

(6) To consider the purchase, exchange, lease or value of real property, if such discussions may have a detrimental effect on the negotiating position of the governmental body and a person, firm or corporation.

(7) To comply with the provisions of any general or special law or federal grant-in-aid requirements.

(8) To consider and interview applicants for employment by a preliminary screening committee or a subcommittee appointed by a governmental body if an open meeting will have a detrimental effect in obtaining qualified applicants; provided, however, that this clause shall not apply to any meeting, including meetings of a preliminary screening committee or a subcommittee appointed by a governmental body, to consider and interview applicants who have passed a prior preliminary screening.

(9) To meet or confer with a mediator, as defined in section twenty-three C of chapter two hundred and thirty-three, with respect to any litigation or decision on any public business within its jurisdiction involving another party, group or body, provided that: (a) any decision to participate in mediation shall be made in open meeting session and the parties, issues involved and purpose of the mediation shall be disclosed; and (b) no action shall be taken by any governmental body with respect to those issues which are the subject of the mediation without deliberation and approval for such action at an open meeting after such notice as may be required in this section.

This section shall not apply to any chance meeting, or a social meeting at which matters relating to official business are discussed so long as no final agreement is reached. No chance meeting or social meeting shall be used in circumvention of the spirit or requirements of this section to discuss or act upon a matter over which the governmental body has supervision, control, jurisdiction or advisory power.

Except in an emergency, a notice of every meeting of any governmental body shall be filed with the clerk of the city or town in which the body acts, and the notice or a copy thereof shall, at least forty-eight hours, including Saturdays but not Sundays and legal holidays, prior to such meeting, be publicly posted in the office of such clerk or on the principal official bulletin board of such city or town. The secretary of a regional school district committee shall be considered to be its clerk and he shall file the notice of meetings of the committee with the clerk of each city or town within such district and each such clerk shall post the notice in his office or on the principal official bulletin board of the city or town and such secretary shall post such notice in his office or on the principal official bulletin board of the district. If the meeting shall be of a regional or district governmental body, the officer calling the meeting shall file the notice thereof with the clerk of each city and town within such region or district, and each such clerk shall post the notice in his office or on the principal official bulletin board of the city or town. The notice shall be printed in easily readable type and shall contain the date, time and place of such meeting. Such filing and posting shall be the responsibility of the officer calling such meeting.

A governmental body shall maintain accurate records of its meetings, setting forth the date, time, place, members present or absent and action taken at each meeting, including executive sessions. The records of each meeting shall become a public record and be available to the public; provided, however, that the records of any executive session may remain secret as long as publication may defeat the lawful purposes of the executive session, but no longer. All votes taken in executive sessions shall be recorded roll call votes and shall become a part of the record of said executive sessions. No votes taken in open session shall be by secret ballot.

A meeting of a governmental body may be recorded by any person in attendance by means of a tape recorder or any other means of sonic reproduction or by means of videotape equipment fixed in one or more designated locations determined by the governmental body except when a meeting is held in executive session; provided, that in such recording there is no active interference with the conduct of the meeting.

Upon qualification for office following an appointment or election to a governmental body, as defined in this section, the member shall be furnished by the city or town clerk with a copy of this section. Each such member shall sign a written acknowledgement that he has been provided with such a copy.

The district attorney of the county in which the violation occurred shall enforce the provisions of this section.

Upon proof of failure by any governmental body or by any member or officer thereof to carry out any of the provisions for public notice or meetings, for holding open meetings, or for maintaining public records thereof, any justice of the supreme judicial court or the superior court sitting within and for the county in which such governmental body acts shall issue an appropriate order requiring such governmental body or member or officer thereof to carry out such provisions at future meetings. Such order may be sought by complaint of three or more registered voters, by the attorney general, or by the district attorney of the county in which the city or town is located. The order of notice on the complaint shall be returnable no later than ten days after the filing thereof and the complaint shall be heard and determined on the return day or on such day thereafter as the court shall fix, having regard to the speediest possible determination of the cause consistent with the rights of the parties; provided, however, that orders with respect to any of the matters referred to in this section may be issued at any time on or after the filing of the complaint without notice when such order is necessary to fulfill the purposes of this section. In the hearing of such complaints the burden shall be on the respondent to show by a preponderance of the evidence that the section complained of in such complaint was in accordance with and authorized by section eleven A½ of chapter thirty A, by section nine G of chapter thirty-four or by this section. All processes may be issued from the clerk's office in the county in which the action is brought and, except as aforesaid, shall be returnable as the court orders.

Such order may invalidate any action taken at any meeting at which any provision of this section has been violated, provided that such complaint is filed within twenty-one days of the date when such action is made public.

Any such order may also, when appropriate, require the records of any such meeting to be made public, unless it shall have been determined by such justice that the maintenance of secrecy with respect to such records is authorized. The remedy created hereby is not exclusive, but shall be in addition to every other available remedy. Such order may also include reinstatement without loss of compensation, seniority, tenure or other benefits for any employee discharged at a meeting or hearing held in violation of the provisions of this section.

Such order may also include a civil fine against the governmental body in an amount no greater than one thousand dollars for each meeting held in violation of this section.

The rights of an individual set forth in this section relative to his appearance before a meeting in an executive or open session, are in addition to the rights that an individual may have from any other source, including, but not limited to, rights under any laws or collective bargaining agreements, and the exercise or non-exercise of the individual rights under this section shall not be construed as a waiver of any rights of the individual.

In my children's school, the council works in collaboration with the PTA to keep parents and the community informed. Together, they created a bulletin board outside the school so parents could know what was happening in the school. School council minutes and meeting dates were among the postings. In addition, the council and PTA crafted home newsletters and web-site updates to keep us all informed.

*Joel Nitzberg, Parent Involvement Project Director,
MA Department of Education*

Appendix B:

Glossary

NOTES

Glossary

at-large: a term used to describe an elected official not representing a specific region/area but the area as a whole.

bargaining unit: a group of workers organized to negotiate collectively with the employer on wages, hours, and working conditions.

by-law: a rule adopted by an organization (e.g., school council) for managing its internal affairs.

collaboration: the act of working together towards a common goal or set of goals.

collective bargaining: negotiation between the representatives of organized workers and their employer to determine wages, hours, and working conditions.

consensus: a view or decision reached by a group as a whole or by majority will.

constituent: a person who authorizes another to act in his or her behalf.

Education Reform Act: the 1993 Massachusetts law that establishes public school reform through statewide educational standards and accountability, equitable funding, and innovations such as school councils.

ex-officio: by virtue of office or position.

majority rule: a policy by which decisions binding on a group are made by more than half the votes.

needs assessment: an analysis or evaluation of the needs of students and staff.

open meeting law: the Massachusetts law that requires governmental bodies to conduct their deliberations and decisions-making in public, except in specific limited circumstances.

parity: equality in status and/or number.

professional development: the organized and planned development of a staff member's skills and abilities.

PTA (Parent Teacher Association): an established voluntary child advocacy organization that operates at the local, state, and national level.

PTO (Parent Teacher Organization): a school based voluntary group of parents and teachers formed to promote mutual understanding and increase the effectiveness of the educational program.

quorum: the minimum number of officers and members of a committee or an organization who must be present for valid transaction of business.

School and District Accountability System: a method of tracking the progress of every school and every district in improving the performance of its students in relation to state standards.

school governance: management of the decisions concerning one or more schools.

school improvement plan: a written plan to address needs, advance goals, and improve the performance of students in a school. G.L. c. 71, s.59C lists the elements of a school improvement plan.

statute: a law enacted by a legislative body.

work-to-rule: type of job action in which employees in a bargaining unit do not accept any duties or responsibilities outside of their contractual work schedule.

NOTES

Appendix C:

Sample School Improvement Plans

www.doe.mass.edu/schcouncil/pubs/sip.ppt

A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

This is an excerpt from an actual

Massachusetts school improvement plan.

VISION STATEMENT

All graduates of _____ Public Schools will possess a positive self-image, the ability to think creatively and critically, the desire to learn continually and the skills to become contributing member of their community.

Our students will experience learning that will be purposeful, relevant, timeless, life-long and transferable. There will be high standards, a challenging curriculum, high stakes assessment, access to technology and a commitment to the community.

Our staff will adhere to high standards and expectations and continuous improvement. This will be supported through a strong professional development program and effective supervision and evaluation. Decisions will be based on knowledge of national standards, current research and alignment with a curriculum that matches high stakes state assessment. Parents, community members and business will be engaged in a partnership, which will increase involvement and accountability. We will build positive relationships with the community to broaden the understanding of the educational process, to develop community resources, to enhance learning and to increase student achievement.

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Public Schools is to provide a challenging, comprehensive education in a safe environment where all students are respected as individuals.

BELIEFS

We believe:

- School, home and community partnerships are vital for continuous learning and growth.
- Decisions should be made in the best interest of students.
- Every student is important and deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.
- All students can be successful learners in an appropriate setting that meets their learning style
- Learning is ongoing and life-long.
- Individual creativity is fostered by providing students access to athletics, arts and music.

STUDENT GOALS

GOALS IDENTIFIED IN 1999

Annual:

- ? Demonstrate the ability to meet or exceed state and district academic expectation.
- ? Develop a respectful attitude towards herself/himself and others.
- ? Participate in a wide range of enrichment activation activities to develop his/her sense of community.

Short Term (1-3 Tears):

- ? Each School Council will study the feasibility of developing a plan to involve the students, parents and staff in drafting an individual student educational plan, which will reflect year-to-year academic, social, emotional growth and goals and objectives for each continuing academic year.
- ? The student will have access to learning options or instructional approaches that relate school learning to practical applications in life and the workplace.

Long Term (3-5 Years):

- ? The student will meet or exceed State performance standards designed to prepare him/her for post-secondary work or further study.
- ? The student shall master the basic reading skills at a level commensurate with his/her ability by the end of grade three.

STUDENT GOALS EVALUATION

Annual:

- ? State and district assessment results will be analyzed annually.
- ? A. comparison of yearly discipline reports and types of infractions will indicate a change in the behavior of students towards others and themselves.
- ? Results of participation in the conflict resolution and peer mediation programs will provide evidence through yearly discipline reports.
- ? Collection of data through student surveys will be used to measure the effectiveness of the conflict resolution programs.
- ? Summary reports of number and type of school-provided enrichment programs co-curricular, athletic, and community service-based enrichment activities, including numbers of participants, will be used to track numbers of students involved.
- ? A study will be conducted by individual School Councils to evaluate and review individual student's school improvement plans.
- ? There will be an annual review of curriculum, program of studies, and specific professional development activities with reinforcement of improvement goals through supervision and evaluation.

TEACHER GOALS

GOALS IDENTIFIED IN 1999

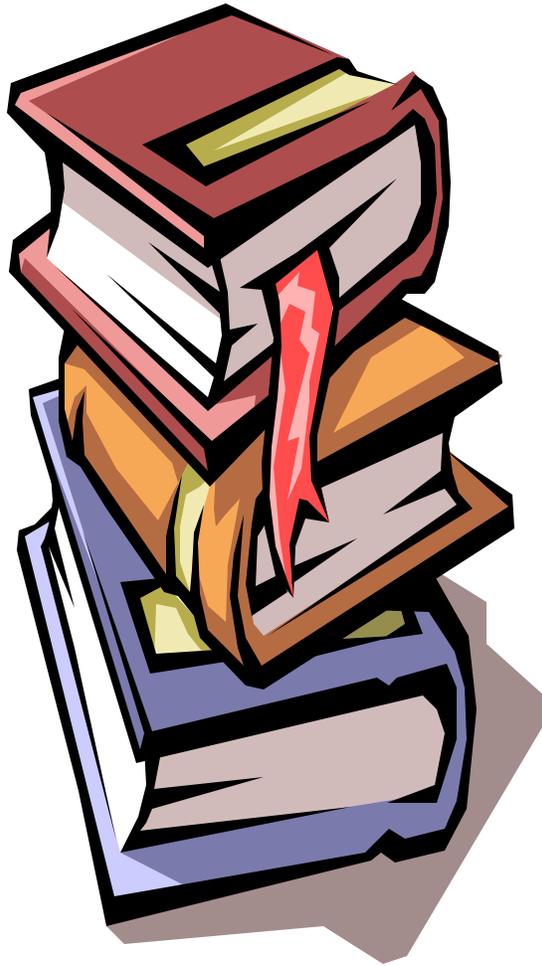
Annual:

- ? Develop and implement themes of respect and responsibility among staff, parents, students and community.
- ? Promote initiatives that strengthen and support a positive school culture.

SCHOOLS OF EXCELLENCE

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN HANDBOOK

1999-2001



This is an excerpt from an actual

Massachusetts school improvement plan.

SAMPLE: OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIC PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENT

Improvement Area 2:

Mathematics – Secondary Goal

Objective 2.1
mathematics

Increase students’ skill at reading and writing in

Objective 2.2

Increase the proportion of students in Grade 4 scoring at Proficient and Advanced levels on the MCAS from 10% in 1998 to 30% in 2000. Increase the proportion of students in grade 8 scoring at Proficient and Advanced levels from 60% in 1998 to 80% in 2000.

Objective 2.3

Increase the proportion of students in Grade 8 passing the Algebra Exam from 75% in 1998 to 85% in 2001

Evaluation Measure:

MCAS scores, Algebra Exam scores

Professional Development:

Specific training in strategies for getting information from print, or “reading to learn”, additional training in TERC

curriculum implementation

Special Programs:

Girls After School Math Mini Course, *Developing Mathematical Ideas*, Algebra Project, Math Night

Improvement Strategies/Activities	Person(s) Responsible for Implementation	Resources	Funding	Time Line	Evaluation Measure	Status
1. Identify the students Failing and Needing Improvement on MCAS, failing Algebra Exam, develop strategies to improve their performance.	Administrators, Teachers, Support Staff	MCAS, Algebra Exam Results, after school	G/F	Annually	MCAS, Algebra <u><i>Exam scores</i></u>	
2. Teach and model effective strategies for reading comprehension and writing to explain or persuade	Administrators, Teachers, Support Staff	Research-based Strategies, texts,	G/F/T	Ongoing	Administrator evaluation	
3. Increase teacher instructional effectiveness with TERC curriculum K-5, CMP curriculum 6-8	Administrators, Teachers, Math Department	Math department workshops, staff Developer, additional TERC training, EDC	G/F	Ongoing	Administrator Evaluation, test scores	

OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGIC PLAN FOR IMPROVEMENT

Improvement Area
 Objective
 Evaluation Measure:
 Professional Development:
 Special Programs:

Improvement Strategies/Initiatives/Activities	Person(s) Responsible for Implementation	Resources	Funding	Time Line	Evaluation Measure	Status

Appendix D:

School Performance Rating Process Overview

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/ata/srp/>

Appendix E:

Evaluating School Performance/ Guiding Questions for Review Panelists

http://www.doe.mass.edu/ata/eval01/pan_rev1.html

Appendix F:

The Massachusetts Parent Involvement Guide

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/schcouncil/pubs/2000/pandc.pdf>

