

**Springfield Public Schools
Dropout Prevention
Program Assessment & Review (PAR)**

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Program Assessment & Review Team

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NATIONAL
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About the Authors

The Urban Initiative at UMass Dartmouth: The Urban Initiative’s mission encompasses a fusion of research, project development and implementation, technical assistance, and policy analysis that supports the work of municipalities, state and local agencies, private and non-profit entities, and other organizations. Specifically, the Urban Initiative seeks to accomplish these goals by engaging our elected leaders, issuing research reports, hosting events and conferences, offering technical assistance and training to policy leaders, encouraging civic participation, and linking the University’s resources to the region and beyond.

Recognizing higher education’s further potential to pursue and promote constructive statewide growth, the University’s Chancellor, Dr. Jean F. MacCormack, commissioned the establishment of the Urban Initiative in November 2007, specifically to act on behalf of the many older urban communities throughout the Commonwealth that continue to struggle with the transition from manufacturing to a knowledge-based economy. Since then, the urban revitalization movement throughout the state has garnered significant momentum and has earned the Urban Initiative a prominent role in its progression.

In 2009, the Urban Initiative became the first satellite of the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University. This partnership has helped it become one of the region's most sought-after entities for support, research, and evaluation in the fields of education and dropout prevention.

Learn more at <http://www.umassd.edu/urbaninitiative/>.

The National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University: The mission of the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) is to increase high school graduation rates through research and evidenced-based solutions. Since 1986, the NDPC has worked to improve opportunities for all young people to fully develop the academic, social, work, and healthy life skills needed to graduate from high school and lead productive lives. Specifically, it serves as a clearinghouse on issues related to dropout prevention and to offer strategies designed to increase the graduation rate in America’s schools. In addition, the NDPC conducts a variety of third party evaluations and Program Assessment and Reviews (PAR). These efforts reflect the NDPC’s commitment to meeting the needs of youth in at-risk situations by shaping school environments that ensure all youth receive the quality education to which they are entitled.

The NDPC has one satellite center in partnership with the Urban Initiative at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. The NDPC is also affiliated with the National Dropout Prevention Network (NDPN), a national membership organization of teachers, counselors, school administrators, state departments of education staff, and business and community leaders who are concerned with education issues. By promoting awareness of successful programs and policies related to dropout prevention, the work of the Network and its members continues to have an impact on education from the local to the national level.

To learn more, visit <http://www.dropoutprevention.org>.

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Introduction

When Massachusetts released data on high school graduation and dropout rates in February 2011, the state had reason to celebrate: the statewide four-year graduation rate for 2010 had risen to an all-time high of 82.1 percent, while the dropout rate fell to 2.9 percent, its lowest point in a decade. Yet this trend did not extend to the City of Springfield: the four-year graduation rate continued to decline in 2010, with just 53 percent of students graduating in four years (from 54.5 percent in 2009), while the annual dropout rate grew from 9.6 percent to 10.5 percent. Results were even more troubling at three high schools in particular—High School of Commerce, High School of Science and Technology (Sci-Tech), and the Springfield Academy for Excellence (SAFE)—where four-year graduation rates are below 40 percent and annual dropout rates exceed 15 percent.

While the Springfield Public School District has continued to combat the persistent dropout problem with a number of initiatives and interventions, this continued decline—and growing gap between Springfield and communities across Massachusetts—was evidence to the district leadership that current dropout prevention policies and practices were not achieving their intended outcomes. Thus in March 2011, the Urban Initiative at UMass Dartmouth was contracted by the Springfield Public Schools (SPS) to conduct an independent review of dropout prevention efforts and programs at the city's high schools.

District leaders articulated two overarching goals of this assessment: first, to determine whether policies and programs related to dropout prevention are being implemented with fidelity and producing intended outcomes; and second, to identify service gaps and needs at individual high schools that could be addressed by integrating best practices in dropout prevention. In order to achieve these goals in a short amount of time, the Urban Initiative partnered with its affiliate, the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) at Clemson University. The two institutions have recently worked together to conduct similar assessments in two other urban school districts in Massachusetts (Chelsea in 2009 and Fall River in 2010) and were thus uniquely qualified to serve as the independent review team for Springfield.

In order to ensure the comprehensiveness of this report, the review team sought to integrate qualitative and quantitative data whenever possible. Moreover, qualitative input was solicited from not just district leaders, but from every category of school-based stakeholders. The review process thus included a series of site visits at each of the four comprehensive high schools in Springfield as well as at four alternative high schools that serve students in the district. Site visits included meetings with school administrators, focus groups with teachers, students, counselors, and support staff, and classroom observations. Site visits were supplemented by meetings with district-level administrators, examinations of policies and reports related to dropout prevention programs and practices, and analyses of program-specific data related to student outcomes.

While every effort was made to ensure that the results of this report are valid and comprehensive, it must be emphasized that the limited duration of this study narrows the scope of these findings and prevents the Urban Initiative and the National Dropout Prevention Center from offering an in-depth, longitudinal perspective on Springfield's dropout problem and prevention efforts. However, these findings can and should be used to establish internal evaluation practices that will enable SPS to more effectively monitor and assess the impact of dropout prevention programs and policies into the future.

Context

It is impossible to address a community’s dropout problem without acknowledging the setting in which these challenges are unfolding. The elements affecting student performance and the decision to drop out extend beyond the school environment to include a range of community-based factors. A significant and growing body of research validates the impact of these community influences on dropout and graduation rates. Moreover, these influences were cited time and again as factors impacting Springfield’s dropout rate by students, teachers, counselors, and administrators.

A. Internal context

With an enrollment exceeding 25,000 students in the 2010-11 school year, SPS is the second largest public school district in Massachusetts. Four comprehensive high schools, one alternative school (a collection of sites known as the Springfield Academy for Excellence, or SAFE), and one Expeditionary Learning School (The Springfield Renaissance School, with grades 6-12) serve nearly 7,000 students in grades 9-12. Springfield's student population is much different than that of Massachusetts as a whole, with higher proportions of students classified as low-income, minority, and special education (see **Figures 1 & 2**). While these demographic characteristics are not particularly effective in predicting dropout, they are nevertheless correlated with higher dropout rates.¹

Figure 1. Selected populations, 2010-11.²

	% of District	% of State
First Language not English	24.4	16.4
Limited English Proficient	14.1	7.2
Low-income	84.2	34.2
Special Education	22.8	17.0
Free Lunch	78.7	29.1
Reduced Lunch	5.5	5.1

Figure 2. Enrollment by race/ethnicity, 2010-11.³

Race	% of District	% of State
African American	21.4	8.2
Asian	2.2	5.5
Hispanic	58.3	15.4
Native American	0.1	0.2
White	14.2	68.0
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.0	0.1
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	3.7	2.4

Springfield has long struggled with the issues of not only high school dropout, but also with factors that are research-based predictive indicators of dropout risk, including low attendance rates, high retention rates, and high numbers of student suspensions.⁴ These challenges have persisted in Springfield for at least the better part of the past decade (see **Figures 3-5**).

Figure 3. Springfield vs. MA: Attendance, 2003-2010¹

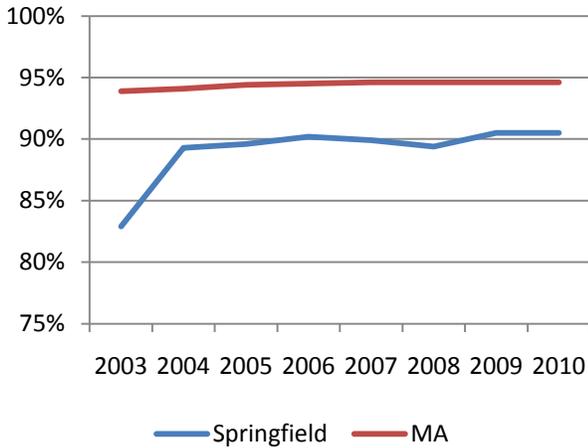


Figure 4. Springfield vs. MA: Retention rates, 2003-2010¹

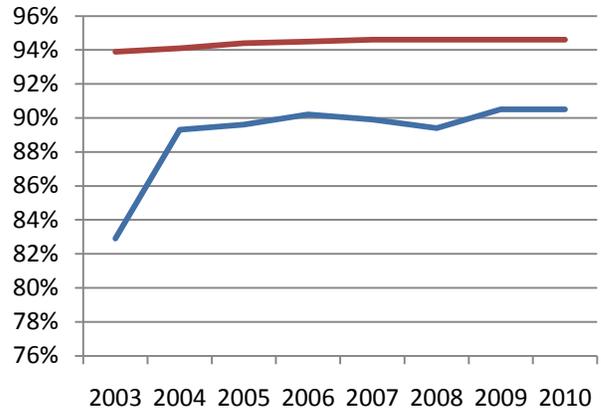
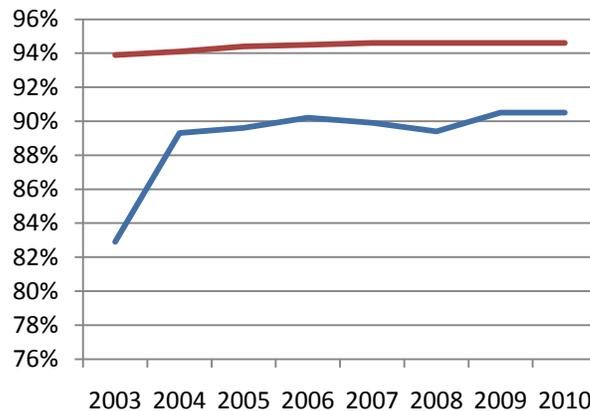


Figure 5. Springfield vs. MA: Out-of-school suspension rates, 2003-2010¹



Like other urban districts throughout the country, Springfield has a highly mobile student population. During the 2010 school year, 23.2 percent of students either entered or left school, likely causing significant disruption to the academic performance of those students. One third of students who dropped out of SPS during the 2008-09 school year had changed schools in the past, demonstrating that a high level of mobility can be used as an indicator of dropout risk in Springfield.⁵

Research has also correlated higher dropout rates with students who have limited English proficiency. The proportion of SPS students who fit this category (14.1 percent) is nearly twice that of Massachusetts (7.1 percent), making English Language Learner (ELL) education a critical element of the district's dropout prevention efforts. ELL status is used by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) as a dropout early warning indicator to help teachers and schools identify those students with the greatest need for intervention. In Springfield, the graduation rate for ELLs is among the lowest for all student subgroups, with just 39.2 percent completing high school in four years. Mobility for this group far exceeds the rate of the district population, with a churn rate of 31.4 percent for ELLs.⁶ Recognizing that these students face significant challenges and need higher levels of academic support in order to achieve at greater rates, SPS commissioned a study on the status of English Language Learners in 2010 and is now building a more rigorous, comprehensive program based on the recommendations of that report.

B. Community Context

Teachers, administrators, and students alike cited community-based barriers to academic achievement that stem from low socioeconomic status and risk factors particularly prevalent in cities like Springfield. Similar to its fellow Gateway Cities across Massachusetts, Springfield faces above-average rates of unemployment, low household incomes, low levels of educational attainment, and a large population of recent immigrants whose linguistic and cultural barriers are manifest in the ELL population of the school district.

The unemployment rate in Springfield—12.9 percent in March 2011—continues to exceed the state average of 8.2 percent for the same month, and reached a 13-month high of 14.4 percent in January 2011. Unsurprisingly, over one-fourth (27.4 percent) of city residents live below the poverty level, and the median household income is just \$34,113 (compared to a median of \$64,496 in Massachusetts).⁷ Poverty is particularly acute for children, with 41 percent of residents under 18 living below the poverty level.

Educational attainment has a major influence on household income and unemployment. While Massachusetts as a whole is characterized by high levels of education, Springfield lags: 24.5 percent of city residents failed to earn a high school diploma (compared to just 11.6 percent statewide), while just 17.1 percent have earned at least a Bachelor's degree (versus 37.8 percent in MA). Consequently, SPS students have few role models in their communities who can promote and reflect the benefits of graduating from both high school and college.

Nearly ten percent of Springfield's population was born outside the United States, and the preponderance (46.1 percent) hail from Latin America. While Spanish is the most common non-English language spoken by Springfield residents, other prevalent languages include Vietnamese, Somali, and Russian.⁸ Among Springfield residents ages five and older, 14.1 percent speak English less than very well. Based on longitudinal data related to this variable, it is likely that Springfield's popularity as a home for non-English speaking immigrants will continue.

In addition to socioeconomic and demographic factors, Springfield's youth face obstacles to academic success in the form of gangs, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy. Both national and local street gangs are present in the city, and the District Attorney's office estimates that at least 1,000 individuals have gang affiliations in Springfield.⁹ According to results of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (available on the SPS website only for 2000-2006), the number of high school students involved in a gang has increased from 8 percent in 2000 to 15 percent in 2006.¹⁰

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey results also validate claims by students and faculty that substance abuse is a major problem among Springfield youth. Survey results suggest that close to 30 percent of high school students have had one drink of alcohol on at least ten separate occasions, while roughly one-fourth of respondents reported using marijuana on at least ten separate days. Some of these activities reportedly took place on school grounds.

Longitudinal Youth Risk Behavior Survey data also suggests that over half of all high school students have had sexual intercourse. Consequently, Springfield was ranked sixth in Massachusetts based on its birth rate of 61.4 births per 1,000 women ages 15-19.¹¹ While this rate far exceeds the statewide rate, it represents a marked reduction in teen pregnancy over previous years during which the teen birth rate exceeded 80 per 1,000. Accordingly, this data suggests that while teen pregnancy is and will continue to be an obstacle to academic success for many of Springfield's young women, the trend is moving in a positive direction.

Nevertheless, the prevailing research in dropout risk indicators asserts that the factors most predictive of a student's likelihood of dropping out manifest themselves within the schools. The many school-based challenges so prevalent in Springfield are indeed obstacles, but they are not insurmountable: evidence-based best practices have proven effective at combating dropout risk in school districts not unlike Springfield. The evaluation team thus set out to assess individual high schools' dropout prevention policies and practices in order to determine areas in which best practices can be implemented to target Springfield's growing dropout rate.

Research Methods and Limitations

In order to provide Springfield Public Schools with a comprehensive analysis of both existing dropout prevention programs and opportunities to implement evidence-based interventions, the Urban Initiative and NDPC followed the National Dropout Prevention Center's Program Assessment and Review protocols. This model involves seven phases: 1) preparation; 2) data review and analysis; 3) school site visits; 4) review and analysis of school visit data; 5) report and discussion (contained herein); 6) action planning; and 7) implementing an action plan. This report is thus intended to be used by SPS to begin planning around strategies to be used for dropout prevention in the upcoming school year and beyond.

The evaluation and interview protocols used to guide this process are based primarily upon two important research documents:

- *Helping Students Graduate: a Strategic Approach to Dropout Prevention* (Smink & Schargel, 2004). This book defines fifteen research-based strategies advocated by the National Dropout Prevention Center that have shown to have a positive long-term impact on dropout prevention in both urban and rural areas across the nation.
- *Practice Guide for Dropout Prevention* (The Institute of Education Sciences, 2008). This guide provides useful recommendations to state and local school leaders and policymakers for planning and implementing interventions in schools to increase high school graduation rates.

Site visits were preceded by two meetings with a team of district administrators¹² convened to establish common goals, familiarize stakeholders with the evaluation process, and discuss logistics for site visits and data gathering. The visits then took place during the weeks of March 28 and April 4. Each school was visited for two days¹³, and visits included two meetings with principals/administrators (one at the start of the visit and one at the end), two focus groups with teachers, two focus groups with students, one focus group with guidance counselors, one focus group with support staff, and at least two periods of classroom observation.

In order to answer questions about specific dropout prevention programs that were not answered through the site visits, the evaluation team followed up with additional site visits and interviews with program managers and participants when possible. Interviewees included the two counselors who have "graduation coaching" roles at Sci-Tech and Commerce; online credit recovery site directors and participants at Putnam, Sci-Tech, Commerce, and Central; ELL Director Delia Bello-Davila; Mary Ellen Baron, who oversees afterschool, night school, and summer school programs; Mary Anne Morris, who oversees the district's attendance and truancy initiative; Paul Foster, regarding the use of and access to student data; and Yolanda Johnson, regarding guidance counseling and online credit recovery.

Because a great deal of the data gathered for this assessment was qualitative in nature, a significant effort was made to affirm the validity of these results. As much as possible, quantitative data was collected from school officials and individuals overseeing specific programs and initiatives. When quantitative data was not available to support qualitative findings, the Urban Initiative and the NDPC ensured that information presented was corroborated by at least three separate sources. Additionally, a draft of this report was presented to Springfield district leaders before final publication to allow for the correction of any errors or the further validation of results as necessary.

It is particularly important to note that this report is not based on longitudinal observations or analyses. Instead, the information presented reflects a snapshot of district and school policies and practices. Another limitation is that, because of the short timeframe given for data collection, the evaluation team was unable to broaden the scope of its efforts to include the perspectives of parents and community stakeholders. Finally, the factors influencing a student's decision to drop out of school are not strictly products of the high school environment. Instead, dropout risk factors can be identified as early as elementary school. In order to truly address the roots of dropout and ensure that interventions can be provided early and effectively, policies and practices at the elementary and middle school levels must also be examined.

Evaluation of district- and school-based approaches to dropout prevention

A. District leadership and governance

Superintendent Dr. Alan Ingram has made a concerted effort to aggressively address the performance of the SPS in the areas of student achievement, operational efficiency, and community engagement. As a result, over the past year there have been significant changes in structures, processes, and routines, as well as key changes in senior leadership within the school district. As such, there is significant awareness and attention to the problem of dropout prevention and the need for interventions at every administrative level within the school district. However, below the district level, the awareness seems to be stymied by an increasing frustration and a lack of understanding about what can be done to address the issue in a more systemic way. To address the problem, the SPS developed seven “strategic priorities” to help ensure system-wide accountability:

- High Academic Achievement for 21st Century Success
- Safe Learning and Working Environment
- Highly Qualified Staff
- Effective Parent and Community Partnerships
- Appropriate use of Resources and Equitable Funding
- Accountable Leadership
- Effective Communications

The evaluation team sought to discover pertinent outcomes related to the strategic priorities as a means of providing insight pertaining to the current effectiveness of these areas of identified need. The following is a summary of findings pertaining to the seven strategic priorities:

1. High Academic Achievement for 21st Century Success

Available quantitative data indicates no measureable change in average student achievement over the past three years in academic proficiency overall (among students in grades 3-10 in ELA math, and science/technology). Even as the State of Massachusetts raised the bar for MCAS proficiency requirements, there has been no corresponding rise in academic achievement across the district for most students. However, the district has made significant gains in SAT and PSAT participation, Advanced Placement qualifying scores, and Advanced Placement exams taken.¹⁴

Considering that high academic achievement is highly correlated with effective teaching practices, the NDPC evaluation team spent considerable time in classrooms at all of the high schools observing the teaching and learning process. Additionally, the evaluation team met with teacher focus groups at all of the high schools to seek their perspective on the high dropout rate and low achievement levels evident in SPS. Some of the major findings are as follows:

- High school teachers report that students arrive from middle school with serious shortfalls in math and reading skills.
- Beyond a one-day orientation, no comprehensive program addresses the transition from middle school to high school. When interviewees and focus groups were asked about transition programs, they continually cited the existence of BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life), despite its role as an academic support program that addresses the needs of academically at-risk students in this cohort.
- Course failure rates are particularly high.
- Academic interventions (including READ 180, MCAS Prep, summer school, and night school) are having a limited impact on students who need them most. Because programs like READ 180 are research-driven, implementation issues may be responsible for limited success.
- Students find their teachers to be insufficiently engaging.
- Through interviews and focus groups, it seemed to be the consensus of the educational community that SPS is setting high academic expectations implying that all students are being prepared for college.
- The “Open Response” writing initiative was found to be fraught with inconsistency of implementation and misunderstanding pertaining to its intended use. It appeared to be an exercise that teachers performed as mandated, but with little enthusiasm. The grading and feedback to students was inconsistent and appeared in most cases to be of little value in improving student’s capacity for writing with understanding. Teachers interviewed indicated that there was a requirement to submit outcome data to the district office (which is not indeed the case), and they expressed frustration at not receiving any feedback regarding these submissions.
- There is a major problem throughout the district pertaining to the effective implementation of the Student Success Plan (SSP) intervention, which is designed to very specifically address the needs of the most challenged students. As designed, the SSP should be created for high-risk students as early as elementary or middle school. It should thus follow these students to high school, allowing teachers to have a sense of past challenges and interventions that will inform future efforts. There was no evidence found within the system to suggest that the SSP intervention is being implemented as expected. Most teachers have never seen an SSP and at one school no interviewees or focus group participants even knew what an SSP was. Guidance counselors indicated that the burden has been placed on them to maintain and update the SSP files. Yet in most cases, the SSPs are not available electronically and the updating and maintenance of the SSPs is a laborious and time-consuming process that yields no positive outcome. A review of the SSP form by the evaluation team found that the kinds of information required to be entered was essentially academic in nature and was of little value to a teacher or counselor as a working document to help intervene on a one-to-one basis. The implementation of the SSP intervention needs a more in-depth review.

2. Safe Learning and Working Environment

- Students and staff generally feel safe within school. Accounts suggest that the uniform policy plays an important role in promoting safety by suppressing the influence of gangs. However, there is a great deal of inconsistency in enforcement of the uniform policy as well as enforcement of the policy prohibiting the use of cell phones and other electronic devices.
- Discipline is not being enforced consistently within or across the high schools.

3. Highly Qualified Staff

- According to the 2010 NCLB District Report Card, 92.2 percent of all teachers in the Springfield School District are “Highly Qualified” in the core subjects. The average for the high schools was 87.75 percent
- Students generally reported that there was too much reliance on worksheets and handouts in the classrooms and not enough direct/engaging teaching taking-place. When asked specifically about the quality of their teachers, there was consensus among student focus groups at all of the schools that fewer than half of teachers were “good teachers”. “Good” was defined as teaching with enthusiasm, employing active engagement, making the curriculum relevant, exhibiting care and concern for all students, consistency in discipline matters, and fair/equitable grading policies. Interestingly, the NDPC evaluation team, as a whole, did not find reliance on worksheets to be a major issue. As might be expected in any school, some teachers did seem to rely on a great deal of worksheets and handouts, but the majority of classrooms visited, found teachers attempting to engage students in a meaningful way with sound pedagogical strategies and practices. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of teachers the evaluation team talked with, interviewed, and observed expressed and demonstrated care and concern for their students. They expressed a willingness to come in early or stay late after school to help students who seek extra support.

4. Effective Parent and Community Partnerships

- The evaluation team discovered a great deal of a "blame the parents" attitude among school faculty and staff.
- Students consistently replied that home/school communications were minimal and most always were driven by, and centered on, a discipline issue.
- Anecdotal evidence from students and some staff members suggests that there is a great deal of mistrust between school staff and parents.
- All of the schools reported that it was very difficult to get parent engagement and support even though they had tried a myriad of tactics.
- The Springfield Parent Academy is likely to play a positive role in fostering parent and community engagement, but it is too early to understand the impact of this effort on student performance.

- It did not appear that schools have a well defined, holistic approach to developing and fostering community partnerships. Instead, that work appears to be done by dedicated individuals working within their own networks or with the district's volunteers to bring opportunities to students. Most administrators feel that there are many more areas of concern that requires their attention and focus.

5. Appropriate use of Resources and Equitable Funding

It was beyond the scope of this evaluation to do an in-depth analysis of resources and equity within the district. However, when asked specifically about equity in funding and resources for the schools, the district response was that all schools were funded according to an equitable formula based on Title I guidelines and mandates. Subsequently, there is no consideration given to a vertical equity construct ("the unequal treatment of unequals") for funding and distribution of resources. This has resulted in some very obvious inequities among the schools visited during the study. Sci-Tech and Commerce appeared to be lacking most obviously in terms of physical plants, comparing unfavorably in terms of cleanliness, accessibility, security, and overall appearance. Perhaps the most grievous of inequities for students is the fact that only Central High has their own athletic fields. The other high schools must bus their students to Central High to share practice facilities and/or play their home games there. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence from multiple sources indicates that there is significant inequity pertaining to the quality of teachers among the high schools. Again, this is an area that is beyond the scope of this evaluation to accurately determine, but it is a concern that was expressed multiple times by multiple individuals and groups.

6. Accountable Leadership

This is an area that was not examined specifically, but the evaluation team noted a wide variation in the strength and professional capacity of the administrators in the schools visited.

7. Effective Communications

- Only after several discussions with district administrators was the evaluation team able to fully comprehend the process by which students are allocated to high schools. Yet while the evaluation team emerged with a clear understanding of how balloting works, discussions with teachers, staff, and students at all schools reflect a sense that students are assigned to high schools unequally and unfairly, with higher achieving students filling Central and Putnam. Many are using this perception as a reason for the comparatively poor performance of Sci-Tech and Commerce, and this shared notion negatively influences school culture and expectations. Therefore, much like it communicated the balloting process clearly and

effectively to the evaluation team, the district must proactively communicate this more clearly and transparency to the broader community to dispel widespread claims of bias.

- School staff members are not universally aware of the dropout problem and the role they play in addressing it.
- There are many gaps in the way that student data is being collected, shared, and used to impact outcomes.
- Some school administrators suggested they would like more on-site visits and personal support from Dr. Ingram and the district's highest ranking staff that included more than just a walk-through of the building, or eating lunch and departing.

B. Springfield High School of Science & Technology (Sci-Tech)

Overview

The Springfield High School of Science and Technology (Sci-Tech) is home to grades 9–12. Enrollment for the 2010-2011 school year is approximately 1,200 students. This makes Sci-Tech the third largest high school in Springfield, behind Springfield Central High School and the High School of Commerce. It is located directly next to Springfield's Roger L. Putnam Vocational-Technical High School and the two schools share school buses.

The high school building was purchased from MassMutual in the 1990s in response to the rapid growth of the school district that necessitated a fourth high school. The design of the building still reflects its roots as an office building with the inside classrooms lacking windows. The high school opened in September 1996 and was billed as the top high school in Springfield. Designed to have a significant focus on science and technology, an entire hall was dedicated to science labs and computer labs.

Over the past decade, this school has seen a series of principals come and go. The current principal of Sci-Tech is Ira Brown, who has been with the school since late 2007. As part of the state-mandated reconstruction of the Springfield Public Schools in the mid-00s, Principal Brown spearheaded the transformation of the school into a National Academy Foundation (NAF)-supported school focusing on the STEM areas, with all students required to join one of four Academies.

Beginning in 2008, with the class of 2012, Sci-Tech adapted the STEM 21 learning criteria. (Upperclassmen who were attending the school before the start of the program are offered the STEM courses but not required to take them.) This shift separated the school into four "houses:"

- Biomedical, Biotechnology & Forensic
- Engineering
- Finance
- Information Technology, Film & Media

Findings

A. Strengths

- The dropout prevention adjustment counselor was cited as being particularly effective.
- Last year there was a 25 percent out-of-school suspension rate. This year, the rate was cut to 10 percent.
- A homework help-line has been initiated.

- Teachers are taking ownership of collaborative efforts to address problems and working with individual students.
- It is the only school visited that seemed to have an understanding of the role of the SSPs as an effective intervention strategy. Although the rate of completion was only 57.4 percent, the school is aggressively seeking to complete them for every student. The problem of SSP incompleteness is repeatedly said to be at the middle school level.
- The school has developed a mentoring program in partnership with Mass Mutual.

B. Challenges

- The school culture is not conducive to a safe, inviting, and effective learning environment. Disrespect toward school administrators and staff was widespread.
- During the evaluation team's observations, it appeared the policies regarding uniforms and the prohibition of electronic devices were going unenforced. Many students were wearing clothing of a wide variety of colors, hooded sweatshirts, sagging pants, jackets, and untucked shirts. In addition, many students were observed using cell phones and portable listening devices both in the hallways and in the classroom.
- The leadership capacity within the administrative team is questionable.
- Transition from middle to high school is a recurring theme throughout the district. Communication between the middle and high schools needs to improve.
- The BELL Program was cited by teachers as being ineffective for addressing the academic and transitional needs of its participants.
- The counseling function is perceived to be a weak link in the school operational plan, particularly for struggling students. Counselors spend little time with individual students and are perceived to have strayed from a social-emotional model of counseling. Responses from support staff focus groups indicated that they feel they do more psycho-social interventions than other staff members at the school.
- Data management and data-driven decision-making is not prevalent at the administrative or classroom level.
- There is significant inconsistency regarding rule enforcement.
- There appeared to be a great deal of teacher and staff apathy and a lack of genuine care for students and their needs. Low expectations were prevalent. Few teachers were observed complying with the administrative request to be present in the hallways during class changes.
- The academic program is not effective. The administration quoted that last year, 60 percent of students were repeating one or more courses due to failure (either as a result of poor performance or absenteeism).
- The DEWS data system is not being implemented with fidelity.
- The "graduation coach" at the school is not a member of the dropout prevention team at the school or at the district level.
- The dropout prevention strategy is not perceived to be comprehensive or holistic in nature.

- There is little staff buy-in for a comprehensive counseling framework to be established.
- Poor attendance characterizes MCAS tutoring, Saturday school, and online credit recovery.
- The issue of teacher quality and effectiveness was a repeated concern. The 90 minute periods were observed to not be used effectively.
- Counselors said that there is a problem getting students into an alternative school setting (there is no defined process and it takes too long).
- There appears to be no timely intervention for 9th grade students who fail the first marking period and/or semester.
- Parent communications are problematic. Students said only contact with home is for discipline matters.
- There appeared to be a great deal of worksheet assignments for students that was not very challenging.
- Students expressed that drugs and gang-related activities were cited as consistent problems at the school.
- Several students participating in focus groups suggested that discipline policies and consequences were not fair and equitable and there was a great deal of inconsistency at both the teacher and administrative levels.
- The faculty indicated that student attendance is a tremendous problem. Many students were observed roaming the hallways during class periods.
- Counselors reported that the school serves approximately 48 homeless students and it is an increasing problem.
- A high rate of teacher turnover is a concern of both teachers and administrators who participated in interviews or focus groups.
- Teachers in focus groups voiced that they were disappointed in the quality and utility of professional development.

C. High School of Commerce

Overview

The High School of Commerce is a magnet school that features an International Baccalaureate program. The school has a rich tradition that dates more than 100 years. The school serves grades 9-12, with a 2010-2011 enrollment of 1,380 students. Commerce is classified as a Level 4 school that indicates it is among the lowest-performing and least improving 2 percent of schools based on quantitative indicators, regardless of NCLB accountability status.

The school has a number of challenges, not the least of which is the age and condition of the school building. Though there have been some recent remodeling and additions to the school plant, the main building does not provide for a particularly attractive and appealing learning environment. For example, hallway lighting is dim, some areas of the school appear rundown, trash is prevalent in hallways, and students appeared to be constantly milling around when they should have been in class. Another challenge is the shifting demographics of the school. For example, while fewer than half (47.7 percent) of all students were classified as low-income in 2001-2002, 80.9 percent fall into that category just nine years later. That same year, just 5 percent were limited English proficient, but that figure is now at 20.5 percent. Of course, these same trends are not specific to Commerce alone, and the school's demographics now resemble those of the district. A further challenge that directly impacts students is the fact that the school does not have any athletic facilities on-site. Students must travel across the city to Central High to practice and play their home games.

The principal, Mr. Paul Nycz, has served at the school for one year. He is assisted by four assistant principals, approximately 118 teachers, and various support staff to include guidance counselors and their support staff, and a dropout prevention coach.

Findings

A. Strengths

- The after-school credit recovery site coordinator is very concerned about the number of 12th graders who have accrued significant numbers of absences such that they are negatively impact their possibility of graduating. He has personally taken it upon himself, along with a staff support person, to send out letters to parents, make phone calls and home visits to try and get students to come back to school. An assembly for seniors is planned to provide information about “buying back” the excessive absences.
- A new program entitled U-AIM will be implemented during the next school year that is a mentoring program affiliated with the Big Y and the YMCA. The program includes a component to track and reward for good grades as well as an opportunity to be hired at

Big Y. The program is already in place at Sci-Tech High School and a staff member from Sci-Tech will be splitting time between the two schools.

- The school has a collaborative agreement with the UMass Dunbar Architectural Center to work with students after school.
- The Junior Achievement organization provides job shadowing for students. Ninth graders are the primary target.
- The school culture is actually a weakness of the school, but a strength within that weakness is the effort being put into changing the school culture by the school staff. A grant for a PBIS model has been secured and is planned for implementation in the 9th graded during the 2011-2012 school year. Other initiatives include a spirit week before the MCAS testing, a pep rally, dance, and rewards for “doing the right thing”.
- A health clinic is offered in the afternoon at the school so that therapy can be provided on-site.
- Teachers report many personalized efforts to address the needs of struggling students. These efforts include meeting with students after school and supporting them as needed with extra help, extra work, alternative assessment practices, etc. The evaluation team observed several teachers working individually with students, and for those teachers involved in the teacher focus groups, perceived an overwhelming desire on the part of teachers to go the “extra mile” for their students. It was particularly interesting that many students cited one teacher in particular who personalized her classroom in ways that were obviously designed to learn how each student liked to learn. She was also described as knowledgeable, competent, caring, yet maintained a high degree of rigor that was respected by all.
- The International Baccalaureate program appears to be a strong component of the school’s mission and goals. Real-world connections are built into the curriculum. Several students reported that in spite of the negative school culture found at Commerce, they are happy they chose to attend the school due to the strength of the IB program.
- The New England Farm Workers Council has implemented a program at Commerce for low-income, out-of-school youth from 16 – 21 years of age. The program is designed to serve as a year-round program that assists youth who have dropped out of school to get back into school, enter an alternative program, or go into a GED preparation program. Some of the programs and services offered include: basic math and literacy, computer literacy, GED preparation job search/readiness, life skills/literacy, counseling, transportation. No data were available to discover the program’s effectiveness but it was mentioned by counselors as providing another good option for students who have previously dropped out.
- Teacher attendance averages between 92 - 95 percent.
- The Phoebe’s Messengers program has received significant recognition as an effective intervention that is helping to address bullying at the school.

B. Challenges

- The negative school culture is the greatest challenge facing Commerce High. It was obvious to the evaluation team as they first entered the school grounds. Students and teachers alike reported that it was a chaotic and non-healthy learning environment. One of the major factors impacting the school culture was inconsistency in the enforcement of rules, particularly the uniform policy and the tardy to class policy. Teachers reported, and the evaluation team observed, a great deal of student disrespect toward adults in the school. Teachers feel disenfranchised and not empowered to be proactive in and out of the classroom. Administrators or teachers were typically not observed to be present in the halls during class changes. Those teachers that were present and attempted to encourage students to move directly toward their next class were often rebuffed and/or ignored. The tardy bell seemed to be the accepted signal for students to begin moving toward class. Students and teachers alike feel that the school is little more than a “dumping ground” for new students into the district and students who are deemed to struggle academically and/or behaviorally. There is a pervasive belief among staff and students that the “lottery” system designed to provide choice of school within the district is not equitable and is deliberately being manipulated to negatively impact the school.
- In general, low expectations abound on the part of school staff regarding students at Commerce High.
- Student transition from middle to high school was reported repeatedly to be a major issue of concern.
- The BELL program was described as not being effective in design or practice, and focus group participants were not aware that data related to BELL participants has been collected and analyzed to determine the longer term impacts of this program on a number of variables.
- The Student Success Plan initiative is not being implemented as designed.
- Student mobility is a major concern.
- Attendance in the credit recovery day and night programs is problematic.
- Students who come late to school and to class are a continual problem. Data indicated that approximately 1/3 of the students are tardy to school each day.
- The Green Light program for repeating 9th graders was reported to be not very effective. Some suggested that teachers were part of the problem but no specifics were provided to the evaluation team as verification.
- It was reported that IEPs for special needs students were not provided to the school staff until after the first marking period. Likewise, the DEWS data were not provided until March.
- Professional development was reported by one focus group of teachers as being very good and not very useful by another focus group. Those suggesting that the PD was not very good said that the PD was mainly driven by recertification requirements and new initiatives

from the district office. All teachers indicated they had little or no input into the PD offerings each year.

- As noted in other areas of this report as a district-wide concern, parent/school communications and relationships are problematic at Commerce.
- Inequity in resources was evident at the school, particularly in the area of extra-curricular activities and athletic facilities. A more in-depth review would likely uncover many other disparities.
- The Slash/S program for low performing students was said to have no resources and no specific direction or guidance for teachers.
- Data-driven decision-making is not particularly understood or practiced at the school.
- The research-based “service-learning” strategy is not well understood and subsequently not practiced at the school.

D. Roger L. Putnam Vocational-Technical High School

Overview

Putnam Vocational Technical High School serves grades 9-12, with an enrollment of 1,632 students. The school provides academic and vocational instruction in the following vocational shops: Auto Mechanics, Automotive Body, Sheet Metal, Carpentry, Cosmetology, Culinary, Hospitality/Tourism, HVAC, and Horticulture. Ninth grade students are placed in an exploratory program, where they have the opportunity to experience many shops in a rotating schedule. At the end of the exploratory cycle, students are expected to select a shop in which they will further their vocational education. A combination of technical hands-on work coupled with a more academic theory 'related' portion assists the students in their learning. As juniors and seniors, students have the opportunity to apply for co-operative education programs and internships, where students are essentially employees of the business and are able to earn money and academic credit while being exposed to the real-world demands of their vocation.

Although it has shown small improvements over the years, the school is currently designated as a Level 3 school by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. In 2010, no demographic achieved the goals set Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for English Language Arts, as measured by attendance, standardized test scores, and other factors. In mathematics, only white students made (AYP) (except "Meets or exceeds state requirements"), with all other demographics (save African American) posting a loss of progress. From 2003 onward, the years 2004 and 2008 were the most recent years in which the school met AYP.

Putnam operates on swing-week schedule. Each week is designated as either 'A' week or 'B' week. During an 'A' week, approximately half of the student body are in their vocational shop for the entirety of the school day, while the other half attend mostly academic classes, or 'related' classes, in which students learn the theory regarding their shop in a classroom setting. The next week, the students switch to a 'B' week schedule, where the classes taken (academic or vocational) are switched.

Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical High School offers a wide variety of sports for its students. Among their most successful and renowned teams are the Putnam football team, which won several Super Bowls throughout the years. Putnam also offers baseball, softball, wrestling, swimming, and many other sports.

In addition to athletics, Putnam boasts a moderate number of extracurricular activities which extend the learning process beyond the typical school day. Most notable are the United States Air Force JROTC, winning several unit inspections and competitions each year as well as Cadet of the Year Medals. Putnam also has an active SkillsUSA chapter, advancing several students to the state finals in 2011 and eventually winning six gold medals. Finally, the Putnam Debate team, the first

vocational member of the National Catholic Forensic League, is also of note, sending one student to last year's National tournament in Omaha, NE.

Roger L. Putnam Vocational Technical High School's old building, currently located at 1300 State St, is slated for demolition and is in the process of being replaced with a newer, state-of-the-art building to be completed in the fall of 2012. The building was originally budgeted at \$125 million but was revised to \$114.3 million dollars later in construction. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts is reimbursing the city for 90 percent of the project's cost. The building will be designed to be reminiscent of a shopping mall, with many vocational areas maintaining a storefront where their wares may be bought and sold. Vocational technology will also be updated across the board for all shops.

Findings

A. Strengths

- The principal is aggressively working to change the culture of the school to reflect a more positive learning environment.
- There is a great deal of staff awareness regarding the dropout issue at Putnam resulting in many initiatives being put in place to address dropout and low academic achievement. Some of the major initiatives include: an attempt by teachers to have significant one-on-one interaction with students; credit recovery, night school program; summer school; Saturday school for attendance recovery; English Language Learners (ELL) programming; an MCAS “boot camp” for struggling students; a mentor program sponsored by Mass Mutual; a GEAR-UP program; ROTC; many extra-curricular activities.
- Teachers stay after school at least once a week to help struggling students.
- Students reported that the school was basically a safe environment. Bullying and harassment were described as not being a problem. There are significant gang issues in the community but they do not cause problems at the school.
- Teachers reported that they have close connections with deans and administrators.
- Many teachers have charts in the hall showing individual student achievements and accomplishments.
- Interviews and observations showed many teachers really care for their students and attempt to build one-on-one relationships.
- Accountability in all areas has been a focus of the administrative staff.
- The principal is attempting to change the matrix of the system toward being a vocational high school that works because he feels the way business has previously been done at the school is far from being a true and effective model.
- Students overwhelmingly reported that discipline policies and practices were fair at the school.

B. Challenges

- The support staff, as a whole, feel like they are an integral part of the school but they do not feel they are given a voice for strategic planning or feel empowered to impact the policies and practices.
- The school culture is described by administrators, teachers, and students as being problematic. Even though the administrative staff is working aggressively to address the issue, it has been a difficult task. There has been push-back from teachers and students regarding new policies and practices.
- The administrative staff declared that there is a big disconnect between the teacher's contract and the teaching of children. A great deal of instructional time was reported to be lost each day and teacher attendance was reported to be a problem.
- As noted in the strengths section, there are a lot of initiatives in place at the school but there is not a systematic process for determining program effectiveness. Very little quantitative or qualitative data are being gathered and analyzed. The principal feels there is a need to streamline many of the initiatives.
- Parent/school communications and engagement was reported to be a problem from administrators, teachers, and students. Several students suggested that it seems school staff members have a negative attitude when their parents call or come to the school.
- The guidance counseling services were reported by students to be not very effective. Several students reported that they did not even know who their counselor was. Others reported that counselors only meet with students who request an appointment.
- Counselors reported that they have not had time to look at the DEWS for incoming 9th grade high-risk students. It appeared that nothing was being done with the DEWS data disk to impact those students most at-risk of school failure and dropout.
- A specific need was cited for Special Education materials, technology, and certified staff members. The evaluation team did not have the capacity to determine the validity of this finding.
- The teachers did not feel that data-driven decision making was being practiced. They continually alluded to "the disk" provided by the district, but teachers indicated that they were not given access to disk- or web-based student data.
- Teachers perceive they are limited by the pacing guides and standards-based teaching from making learning more real-world oriented.
- None of the teachers interviewed knew what an SSP was. They reported that they had never seen one. The counselors said that the SSPs are on-site for some students but they are not entered into the school data base and furthermore they did not have access to electronic records. They insist that work is being done on the SSPs by hand, but it is not documented.

- Teen pregnancy is a problem within the school district and at Putnam, according to counselors, administrators, and support staff. Approximately 10 percent of female students are known to get pregnant each year.
- The research-based “service-learning” strategy is not well understood and subsequently not practiced at the school.

E. Springfield Central High School

Overview

Springfield Central High School has an enrollment of approximately 2,000 students in grades 9-12. The school has a long history of rigor, academic excellence, and athletic achievement and is known as the *Home of Scholars and Champions*. Expectations are high for students at Central as noted in the school's Mission Statement:

“The mission of Springfield Central High School is to provide a rigorous academic program for college-bound students that encourages and supports students to communicate effectively, analyze problems, express their creativity, utilize technology, act responsibly and compassionately, and accept fully the duties of citizenship. Every Central High School student will graduate, having met the standards for each course, and be prepared for a two-year or four-year college without the need for remediation.”

Along with high academic expectations, civic and social expectations are stressed as well. Students are expected to comport themselves with pride and dignity in accordance with school rules and take responsibility for their actions. Responsible citizenship is stressed along with the concepts of good health.

Student demographics somewhat reflect the entire Springfield Public Schools' demographics. The percentage of students whose first language is not English is 20.7 percent, with an additional limited English proficient population of 7.7 percent. Just over two-thirds of students come from low income homes. The Special Education population is 20.7 percent. Enrollment by race shows that 27.1 percent of students are African American, 4.2 percent are Asian, 42.5 percent are Hispanic, and 21.8 percent are White. Student and teacher attendance rates are 88.7 percent and 95 percent respectively. The graduation rate is approximately 80 percent, which is the highest of all SPS high schools. MCAS test results indicate that 63 percent of students are At/Above Proficient in reading/ELA, 47 percent in math, and 41 percent in science and technology.

The academic curriculum consists of the typical core subject areas such as English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, PE, etc. but also a robust Fine Arts program, Departments of Technology and Computers, World Languages, and Aerospace Science (AFJROTC). The AFJROTC has been recognized nationally as one of the top programs in the nation.

A school uniform policy is rigorously enforced. The class schedule is a seven-period/seven-day rotating schedule, with classes lasting approximately 55 minutes. The school is led by Mr. Thad Tokarz who has been at the school for two years. He is supported by seasoned corps of five assistant principals and approximately 200 teachers and support staff.

Findings

A. Strengths

- The school culture is remarkable in comparison to the other high schools in the district. The building is clean, safe, inviting. A positive, proactive philosophy of student capacity is present at all levels. It is evident that school staff and students are proud to be associated with the school. High expectations are prevalent for students and staff. While there was an unwritten dress code for staff, it was observed that almost all teachers dressed professionally and wore a tie to school every day.
- The central framework for student success at Central is to somehow connect students to the building, thereby creating an environment that is conducive to inspiring students to attend school. Much of this is achieved by providing a wide variety of extra-curricular activities for students.
- A major strength of the school is the leadership of the principal and administrative staff whose goal is to be recognized as one of the top 100 schools in the nation.
- The SEBS program for special needs students was overwhelmingly touted by all school staff as a very effective program. However there was no quantifiable data to support effectiveness. The program serves 31 students and is designed to help students get organized and adjust to their environment.
- The GEAR-UP program was universally described as a key component to school success for struggling students. There are 285 students in the program and each year 5 – 10 students are targeted for dropout prevention interventions. No targeted students have dropped out this school year. The most interventions are one-on-one and focus on relationship building.
- School policies and rules are enforced fairly and consistently by administrators and staff. At the beginning and ending of school, during lunch, and periods between classes, the principal and other administrative staff patrol the hallways and bathrooms to proactively address uniform violations, ensure students are moving toward their next class, but perhaps most importantly, working to develop relationships with students. It was evident that the administrative staff knew students personally and called them by name.
- Considerable effort is made to ensure that every student who attends Central High gets the help they need to pass the MCAS tests.
- The school had a 100 percent attendance rate for the 2010-2011 MCAS tests.
- The school recognizes that parent/school communications and parent engagement are problematic and have taken several steps to address the problem. Professional development was provided to teachers on parent/home contact and 17 teachers are waiting on training to make home visits. Efforts have been made to make the PTO feel more engaged to help with school/home communications and parental engagement strategies.
- The school is now a magnet school for advanced studies in the sciences and arts. Professional development for all English, Math, and Science teachers will be provided prior

to the 2011-2012 school year to help students make the transition toward upper-level courses. At present, approximately 30 percent of students are taking upper-level courses.

- Students were in general agreement that if a student needs individual attention there is always someone to assist them or talk with them at the school. They agreed that teachers know them and treat them as individuals. Teachers were described as working hard to keep students in more advanced classes and do not allow them to go to an easier class simply because the work load was heavier or the program of studies was more rigorous.
- The students suggested that several initiatives in place to support student transition were very effective. They named the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program to match 9th grade students with upper classmen, the freshman orientation during the summer, and lots of peer mentoring.
- The school recognizes the challenges of the ELL population and has taken positive measures to expand opportunities for ELL students to take AP courses. A magnet grant has been secured to provide programs that address the isolation of the ELL students and to identify those student who can benefit from advance courses and to develop ways to make it happen. Furthermore, the ELL program staff is very proactive in addressing the needs of their students. The staff meets once a day to discuss issues and interventions, and one person is tasked with calling parents when students are absent or problems arise. The staff reports that each of the families of all 170 students served in the program have been contacted at least once during the school year.

B. Challenges

- A major challenge is overcoming the perception that Central recruits the best and the brightest students and athletes from within the district. There is a clear need for more openness in the “lottery” process for student selection to the school and perhaps a more proactive public relations campaign within the community to address the issue in a straight forward manner.
- There are multiple sources of data that suggest the guidance function at Central is a weak link in the plan to address the needs of students, particularly those most at-risk of school failure and dropping out. Many students interviewed felt like guidance counselors believed their only role is to help students with college and careers but they were even “lax” on that.
- There is little familiarity with the SSP intervention on the part of teachers.
- As with other schools in the district, the “open response” intervention suffers from lack of understanding and fidelity of implementation issues.
- There is a wide perception that the court system has no teeth pertaining to truancy cases but there was no data presented to support the claim.
- The research-based “service-learning” strategy is not well understood and subsequently not practiced at the school.

- There is a need for more understanding and use of data-driven decision-making at the classroom level.
- School staff and faculty were unaware of any data management or analysis system in place to determine if the BELL program is effective. Some staff suggested that the program relies too much on staff members who are not connected with the school.
- There is a need to provide a greater understanding of the multitude of interventions taking place at the school for struggling students, how the programs connect with one another and/or overlap. Likewise, there is a need for a more robust data system to determine program effectiveness.

F. SAFE Schools

1. SAFE High School

Overview

The mission of SAFE High School is to ensure that every student has a safe, nurturing learning environment in which to achieve academic proficiency as measured by local and state assessments. We will work effortlessly with students to reinforce those traits which lead students to a positive, productive, and healthy transition from school life to adulthood.

The academic focus of SAFE High is content literacy. It is a small school composed of 100 students who have not succeeded in the larger high schools. Students are supported both academically and behaviorally by linking them with an adjustment counselor upon entrance to help monitor their academic and behavioral success. A point system is used for students to monitor their own progress and provide incentives to students who are doing the right thing.

All students are assessed for reading and math upon entry and placed in appropriate classes based on their needs. Additional supports are offered for ELA using the Read 180 program and the ALEKS program for math. Credit recovery is offered to students who are behind in credits and students take their foreign language requirement on-line using Rosetta Stone. Students completing the alternative high school requirements and passing MCAS receive a diploma from Springfield Academy for Excellence.

Some students are able to transition back to the regular high school. In those cases, students are placed on contracts where academics, attendance and discipline are monitored for a period of time with regular check-ins on student progress. Each year the school successfully transitions several students to Sci-Tech, Putnam, Commerce and Central High Schools. Some of the SAFE students also transition to our Early College High School at Holyoke Community College, the Gateway program, and Westover Job Corps.

The school's goal is to provide a safe, smaller environment for students to learn. School staff believes that all students can learn with the appropriate supports and graduate to continue with their post secondary careers.

Findings

A. Strengths

- A major strength of the school is the quality of the school leadership, teachers and support staff. They are highly competent, committed, and caring.

- The student and staff regimen is highly regulated by necessity and is adhered to in a consistent manner.
- The school culture can easily be characterized as being very warm, inviting, and caring.
- Data showed that the program is having a positive impact on approximately 85% of the students every year. Positive impact is defined as increased attendance, improved behavior, and academic progress.
- A pilot program is being implemented at Springfield College for career exploration.
- Students overwhelmingly reported that the strength of the school was a smaller learning environment, more help from teachers when they are struggling to include after-school support, significant emotional supports are in place, and teachers and staff treat students with dignity and respect. Staff members meet individual student needs by listening and making students feel like they matter.
- Expectations are high for student behavior and academic progress.
- Relationship development is a key component of the program.
- Families are more involved with the school than at the traditional high schools.
- According to administrators and staff who participated in interviews and focus groups, student suspension is not considered as an option to address negative behaviors.
- Counselors are running various parent support groups during the school year.
- According to administrators, the capacity to carefully select staff members is a key success factor.

B. Challenges

- The facility is inadequate to adequately serve the needs of students. One major issue for students is the fact they have to go through a factory to get to their cafeteria. The classrooms are small and cramped, technology is limited, there is no space for physical education, and limited space for group activities.
- Bus/van access is a concern.
- Service-learning is not well understood or practiced, despite research and evidence that shows it to be an effective tool for engaging high-risk students.
- In addition to the model provided by the MCAS-based tool provided by the state, the development of a customized value-added Student Growth Model should be considered to measure student success.
- There is a need to be able to select their own professional development activities that better accommodate the needs of their students.
- A vocational component is needed.
- A school psychologist is needed on site.

2. Early College High School

Overview

Early College High School gives students in grades 11-12 an opportunity to complete their high school requirements while attending courses at Holyoke Community College. The school is led by Dr. Alex Gillat, the SAFE Executive Officer, an assistant principal, guidance counselor, secretary, and a science, math, English, and history teacher.

Findings

A. Strengths

- The school is located in a very positive learning environment at Holyoke Community College. A positive relationship exists between the Early College program and HCC and the Early College has complete access to the HCC facilities.
- The Assistant Principal, Mr. Dwight Hall has almost three decades of experience working in alternative education settings. He is very data oriented and was observed to be using data in a very positive way to help drive the decision-making process and to chart student progress.
- The school has a positive record of student success and achievement.
- High expectations are expected for all students.
- Many support systems are in place for struggling students.
- The program fills a much-needed gap in services for the Springfield Public Schools.

B. Challenges

- Distance from the Springfield attendance areas is problematic in terms of transportation issues.
- The school has no official bus or van to transport students.
- The small staff limits the curriculum to basic core subjects.
- There is a need for the school administration to have more autonomy to select highly effective teachers and remove those who are ineffective.
- Immature behavior by students is sometimes problematic when they engage and mingle with HCC students.

3. Springfield Academy High School

Overview

Springfield Academy High School is alternative high school that was established to meet the needs of special education students who also have acute social-emotional needs that cannot be sufficiently addressed in a traditional school environment. The school provides high-need students with a small learning environment in which students can meet their academic requirements while receiving support from guidance and adjustment counselors.

Findings

- Students report transferring to this school as a turning point in their lives; while many were on a path to dropping out (and for some, even to jail), students expressed the role this school has played in putting them on track to graduate
- The small learning environment plays a significant role in student success. Teachers, counselors, and administrators all demonstrated an in-depth knowledge of the needs and circumstances surrounding every student. In turn, the students feel cared for and accountable.
- One issue expressed is that there is little understanding of the role and impact of this school on addressing students' needs and getting them back on track.
- Resources are another challenge; one result is the school psychologist can only spend limited time at this site.
- Non-academic offerings are sorely needed to address the needs of students (many of whom are not necessarily academically inclined). Students are seemingly desperate for relevant programming that equips them with career skills. It was expressed that there should be more efforts to allow these students to participate in vocational programming at Putnam to help fulfill this need.

G. The Springfield Renaissance School

Overview

Scheduling constraints kept the Renaissance visit to just one day of classroom observations and interviews. Nevertheless, it was apparent that this school's success is attributable to not just charismatic leadership and unique programming; it is also a result of high expectations, universal adherence to school policies, and a positive school culture. These are elements, along with the concept of advisory groups (or "crews"), that do not require pilot school status to incorporate and can thus be replicated at schools across the district. Indeed, the evaluation team strongly recommends spreading awareness of Renaissance's model throughout the district to demonstrate how changes in practices and expectations can have a positive impact on students who are representative of the district's aggregate population.

Findings

- Teachers, counselors, and students alike asserted that the primary reason for Renaissance's high graduation rate is because the small size of the school allows for the building of close relationships.
- Renaissance has a policy of "sweating the small stuff," meaning that school policies are universally and strictly enforced. This reinforces a culture of high expectations that prevails school-wide.
- Expectations are not only high; they are also clear. "Habits of Work" are posted in each classroom, and these are used to help students concretely understand the factors shaping their academic performance.
- The expectation that students will attend college is established in the 6th grade, which is early enough to make this goal seem attainable regardless of a student's academic history.
- Advisories ("crews") build relationships among small groups of students and with a teacher or staff member who can advocate for student needs and inform academic or social problems that may be going on.
- It was expressed that the school district needs a better procedure for schools to follow when students return to school after a long absence (or participation in a program like SSARC).
- Pregnancy is an issue for many students, though the problem is not as prevalent as it is at other district schools. There was once an on-site daycare that no longer exists.

Evaluation of targeted dropout prevention initiatives

A. Credit recovery programs

Program Theory. Academic course failure is highly predictive of a student's decision to drop out, not only because this is a signal of disengagement, but also because it increases the difficulty of obtaining enough credits for graduating on time. A logical and evidence-based response is to establish programs in which students can complete required courses either during the course of the school day or in after school, nighttime, weekend, or summer programs. When effective, credit recovery programs can not only put students on track to graduate; they can also contribute to improved attendance and scores on standardized tests.¹⁵

To achieve optimum results, the National High School Center makes a number of recommendations for high school credit recovery programs aimed at dropout prevention.¹⁶ First, faculty and staff managing these programs should receive sufficient professional development, and teachers should be certified in the subject areas in which students are making up credit. Second, there should be clear eligibility criteria that targets students at risk for dropping out, and these students should be referred to credit recovery programs by a team of school leaders, teachers, and counselors. Parents should also be involved in this process. Another important element is the use of data, which should be collected and reviewed to help school and district leaders determine the effectiveness of the program and make decisions about how to restructure it as necessary.

Activities & Implementation. Springfield employs four types of credit recovery programs for high school students across the district: night school, online credit recovery, Saturday school, and summer school.

Night school. In Springfield, night school is a credit recovery option available to students in grades 11 and 12 who need to retake failed courses in order to earn credit toward graduation. Students attend night school for three hours on one night per week at the Springfield Renaissance School; the duration of each course is 14 weeks for students seeking full credit and 7 weeks for those earning 1/2 credit. The attendance policy is particularly stringent: students earn no credit if they miss more than one class (no absences are allowed for 1/2 credit courses), and two tardies count for one absence.

In order to participate in night school, students must submit a registration form that is signed by a guidance counselor or school principal. The cost to attend is \$125, or \$70 for a 1/2 credit course. Waivers are no longer issued, but accounts from administrators and students alike suggest that cost is not a barrier to participation for Springfield's students.

Springfield's night school program has undergone a number of changes during the past year as a result of a change in leadership (the program is now managed by Mary Ellen Baron,

Senior Administrator for Extended Instructional Time). The changes include involving the district's academic administrators in the process of hiring teachers and reviewing course syllabi and the curriculum to ensure alignment with that of the district. The night school curriculum has also been standardized: whereas previous night school teachers were responsible for developing their own, they now implement that which has been developed under the guidance of administrators. A third change has been the incorporation of professional development, which had not been done in the past. While anecdotal reports suggest that the quality of both teaching and course content was lacking in the past, the recent changes to Springfield's night school program indicate that the standards have become more rigorous

Online credit recovery. The newest addition to Springfield's credit recovery programming is technology-based, allowing students to make up failed courses by taking classes entirely online. While this program serves the same function as night school, the online option requires more frequent attendance, emphasizes self-directed learning, and is free of charge to all participants. Begun in March 2010, SPS is now in its third phase of employing the program at its high schools. At each site, participants spend three afternoons per week (7.5 hours per week, for a total of approximately 42 hours per session) in computer labs, working independently to earn credits for a variety of courses. Students can also access online coursework offsite if internet access is available, but they are only able to access quizzes and tests while at school. Each site is staffed by teachers (certified in core content areas) who are on hand to provide students with academic support and to monitor progress (easily tracked in real time through the program's online platform). For at least one site (Sci-Tech), at least one of these teachers is certified in special education and can thus address the needs of students with IEPs (however, it was also noted that faculty staffing online credit recovery are not informed by school administrators as to which students have IEPs).

Like night school, a similarly stringent attendance policy is in place, with students earning no credit after three absences. However, the enforcement of this policy varies by site, with several faculty involved noting that if not for relaxed enforcement, very few students would actually earn credit and the program would be far less successful.

The first phase of online credit recovery took place during the end of the 2010 school year and was aimed at helping seniors earn sufficient credits to graduate on time; 204 students participated. The second phase took place during the summer and served 206 participants, and the third phase includes three sessions during the 2010-11 school year. The first session took place between September 13-October 28 (84 participants), the second between October 25-January 20 (46 participants), and the third between January 24-May 19 (in progress). Like the first phase, the third session of the current school year is directed at seniors seeking to graduate on time.

At Commerce, online credit recovery is also available during the school day for students who are significantly behind in terms of the number of credits earned (reportedly, most have fewer than five), are considerably over-age (students are 18-22 years old) and thus have a particular acute risk for dropping out. These students spend the preponderance of the school day in the computer lab, earning credits for multiple failed courses under the supervision of a certified teacher. While it is intended that certified teachers rotate into the classroom to provide content area support during their free periods, anecdotal evidence suggests that students are not receiving sufficient academic support, particularly in math.

Saturday school. Each comprehensive high school implements Saturday school at their respective campuses. By all accounts, Saturday school does not allow students to recover credits; instead, it allows students to "buy back" attendance and avoid losing credit due to excess absences. The intention is that students will attend Saturday school to catch up on schoolwork, which could present an opportunity to bolster academic performance. Guidance counselors at all high schools appear to take on the role of referring students to Saturday school based on flagging attendance.

Summer school. SPS offers a traditional credit recovery option during the summer, structured similarly to night school and intended to allow students to retake failed courses and earn credit toward graduation. All four comprehensive high schools serve as sites for summer school to accommodate upwards of 1,000 participants (997 students were enrolled in 2010). Classes take place during two hours each weekday morning for five weeks (for a total of 50 hours, minus holidays). Like night school, Springfield students pay \$125 to participate, and the attendance policy allows for no more than three absences in order to receive full credit.

A new summertime credit recovery option exists for students with limited English proficiency. It is projected to enroll 35 students from July 1-August 5 of 2011 and is part of a district-wide effort to more comprehensively address the needs of English language learners in Springfield, a group which has a particularly high dropout rate and faces significant challenges in earning credits toward graduating.

Findings. In order to assess the impact of Springfield's credit recovery programs, the evaluation team relied upon reporting materials provided by district administrators that included information on students' academic performance and attendance, along with qualitative feedback provided by parents, teachers, and students through surveys. Qualitative information was also obtained through site visits and interviews with key stakeholders. Because the district's information management system is unable to identify students participating in these programs, it was largely impossible to obtain student-level data and determine program impacts at the individual level within the time

constraints of this effort. The Urban Initiative and the NDPC provide recommendations for collecting and analyzing data related to credit recovery programs in the following section.

Night school. Based on data provided by SPS, the night school program is serving approximately 300 students per year by providing options to recover courses in seventeen subject areas. Out of a sample of 109 students who participated in a recent session of night school, eight failed to receive credit due to excess absences, while three did not receive credit due to unpaid bills. The remaining 98 students received grades of D- or higher (a 90 percent success rate).

Based on the combination of qualitative and quantitative data that was provided, SPS night school is effectively helping students get back on track by earning credits toward graduation. Nevertheless, judging by participant numbers alone, it appears there is room for expansion of this initiative to meet the needs of many more students who are falling behind due to course failure. Moreover, in order to intervene with at-risk students as early as possible, SPS should consider making night school courses available to all students regardless of grade level, particularly in core subjects like math and ELA. This suggestion is supported by the recent study on Springfield dropouts conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins, which determined that over two-thirds of students who dropped out during the 2008-09 school year were already so far behind in terms of credits that they would have been unlikely to succeed in a traditional school environment.¹⁷ Indeed, students who are at a high risk for dropping out due to course failure have a particularly difficult time even *reaching* grades 11 and 12, because their course failure is likely to lead to continued retention. By reducing this barrier to participation, SPS can ensure that *all* at-risk students can access this pathway as soon as they need it, and not only when the prospect of graduation is already within reach.

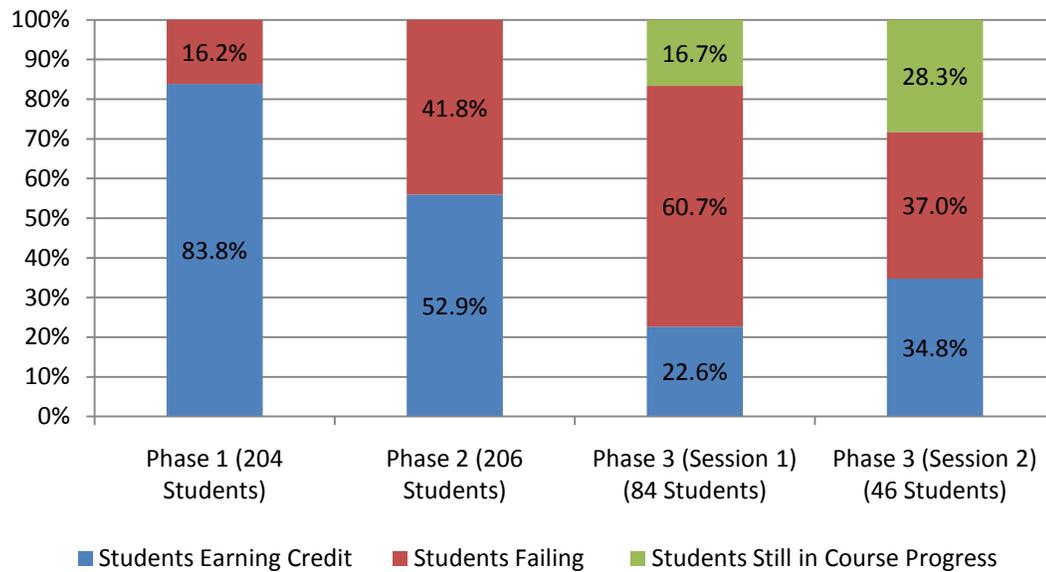
Online credit recovery. The success of this program has been markedly different across the three phases of implementation. Comparatively, the first phase was particularly successful: of 204 students who participated, 171 (83.8 percent) earned credit, while 33 (16.2 percent) did not. Data was not available to help determine the number of students who were dropped due to excessive absences.

Based on the data available for the second phase (July-August 2010), 52.9 percent of the 206 participants successfully earned a total of 202 credits. Meanwhile, 86 students (41.8 percent) failed to earn credit during this phase.¹⁸ Again, data was unavailable on the number of students who were dropped due to attendance issues.

The first session of the 2010-11 school year included 84 participants: 22.6 percent successfully completed coursework, while 16.7 percent were still working to earn credits as of January 2011. Meanwhile, 51 students failed the online course, accounting for over 60 percent of program participants for the first session. The second session of the current

school year had fewer participants (46) but enjoyed a higher success rate. Sixteen (34.8 percent) earned credit, 13 were still working at the time this data was issued, and 17 (37 percent) failed. Because the third session is ongoing, no data is currently available to demonstrate its impact on student success. A summary of results is exhibited in **Figure 6**.

Figure 6. Online credit recovery outcomes



Online credit recovery is working—for some students. Out of a total of 540 students who have participated in between March 2010 and January 2011, just 314 (58.3 percent) have earned credit. Participation has dropped sharply since the introduction of this program, and the attendance policy was cited by many as a major hindrance to keeping students successfully engaged.

A number of other factors were cited as obstacles to the success of this program. One major hurdle has been garnering support for this initiative from teachers and guidance counselors, many of whom underestimate the value and rigor of the program and do not fully comprehend the logistics. This prevents many students from being referred to online credit recovery despite the potential benefits. There is considerable evidence that instances of student failure result from this high level of academic rigor, which suggests that more academic support is needed (particularly for special education students, according to multiple site coordinators). Another issue cited is that the program is not being implemented strategically, resulting in the fact that many seniors are only now participating in online coursework in an attempt to graduate on time. In order to be truly successful in helping students graduate on time, according to several site coordinators and staff, the program should have been more aggressive in attracting seniors at the beginning, not end, of the school year.

Finally, there is the matter of this program's strict attendance policy. While there was no data to quantify exactly how many students have been dropped from online credit recovery upon exceeding three absences, reports suggest that the policy prevents many students from earning credit, particularly at certain sites. This may be a reflection of expectations: is the way students are introduced to the program and its requirements different at each school? Because site visits were conducted while programs were underway, it was difficult to determine how the attendance policy and overall expectations are communicated. What was clear was that site coordinators at Putnam and Central supported and adhered to the strict attendance policy. Central's site coordinator feels that this attendance requirement supports overall student attendance, encouraging participants to come to school so that they can stay after for this program. Putnam's site coordinator cited examples of calling students and meeting with parents to ensure that students were not dropped due to poor attendance. Yet at Commerce and Sci-Tech, the attendance policy was considered to be too rigid for many students who could benefit from credit recovery. Enforcement is summarily much more lenient at these schools as a means of keeping students who demonstrate progress and are on track to earn credit enrolled in the program to allow for positive outcomes.

Despite these obstacles, online credit recovery is indeed having a positive impact on helping a majority of participants get back on track to graduating. Students are largely satisfied with this option: some cited this program as the factor that will help them graduate with their classmates this spring, and others noted the benefits of learning independently and via computer. This initiative does have tremendous potential to help more students, but SPS must first establish buy-in among *all* school personnel, bolster participation, and ensure that students continue to have sufficient academic support to help them succeed in earning credits.

Saturday school. The evaluation team was unable to obtain quantitative data on Saturday school attendance from individual schools, but feedback on the impact and utility of Saturday school as a means of dropout prevention was garnered from counselors, teachers, and administrators at each site. Each high school implements Saturday school at their discretion; consequently, the impact and perceived value of this offering vary widely. For example, it was reported that Saturday school at Putnam is well attended, and the program extends beyond simple attendance buyback to include a physical education component to help students earn credit and meet that graduation requirement. Central teachers and administrators also attested to the utility of this offering and indicated a positive level of faculty buy-in.

On the other hand, accounts suggest that Saturday school at Sci-Tech is not working, primarily because of poor attendance. This is suggested to result from several factors, including a lack of accountability for students, limited support among parents, and the fact

that students are given little incentive to participate. Some focus was turned to this challenge earlier in the school year when counselors were instructed to review student attendance and encourage those with excessive absences to sign on to attend Saturday school, but there is no indication that this effort was effective.

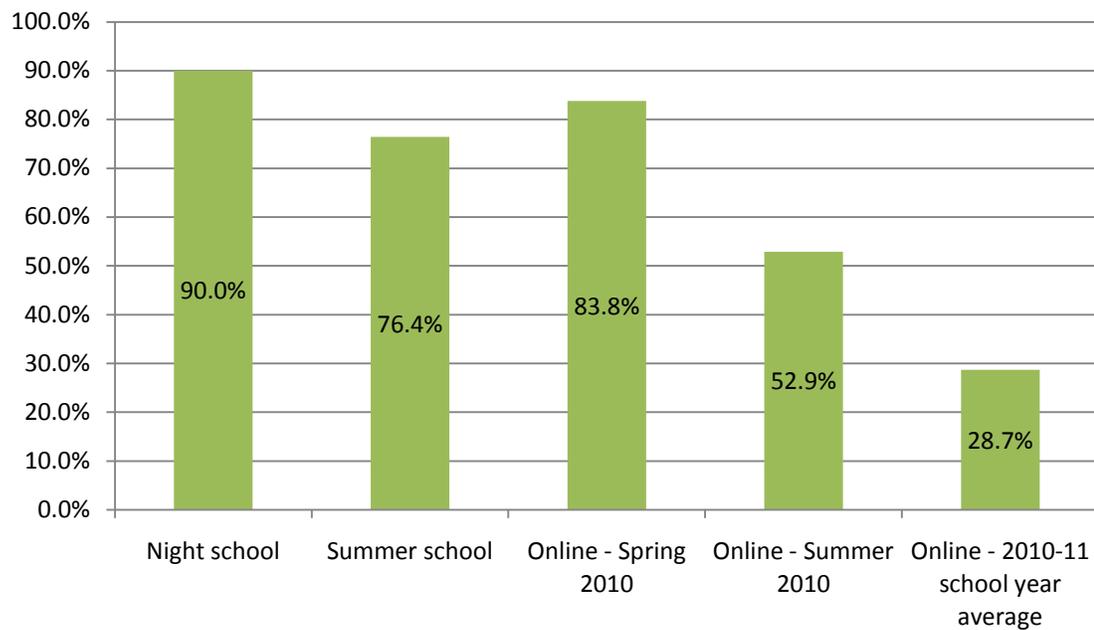
It should be noted that Saturday school, while presented as a credit recovery option aimed at dropout prevention, is not offering students the option to recover credit and catch up academically (except in the case of Putnam's P.E. class, for example). Nevertheless, such an offering does help students avoid losing credits as a result of excessive absences, and can thus be effective in helping students avoid the need to participate in credit recovery programs in the future. Furthermore, the tutoring component that several schools reported including can support students' academic

Summer school. The proportion of students who earned passing grades was 78 percent in 2010; just sixteen students (1.6 percent of participants) passed their coursework but failed to earn credit due to excessive absences. Therefore, the program produced intended outcomes for 76.4 percent of all participants. Attendance rates hovered between 92-97 percent, depending on the site in question, and it was reported that site facilitators proactively reached out to students and parents to address absences.

For this program, a significant amount of qualitative data was collected from site facilitators, instructors, and participants. This data demonstrates that the program is strong overall, but particular challenges are keeping summer school from having an even broader impact on students' credit acquisition. Again, attendance was the biggest barrier to student success, and part of this problem is reportedly a result of transportation challenges and a lack of student/parent buy-in. It also appears that stakeholders feel the program is not being effectively publicized, so it is not reaching all members of the target audience. Finally, reports suggest that the application and registration process could be improved upon to make the program more accessible.

Nevertheless, students and parents alike expressed great satisfaction with the program, and would recommend it to other students in need of making up failed coursework. It therefore appears that this program is headed in the right direction and should be expanded to meet the credit recovery needs of a broader population of high school students in the district.

The following figure compares success rates (defined as the percentage of students earning credit after participating in each program) across three credit recovery programs: night school, summer school, and online credit recovery.

Figure 7: Credit recovery success rates.

Recommendations.

For all credit recovery programs, consistent, long-term data collection and analysis is critical to Springfield's ability to evaluate program impact. Benchmarks should be established to measure program outcomes against and determine whether changes are needed to bolster effectiveness. For example, students' participation in these programs should be tracked in PowerSchool. This will help determine whether credit recovery has a long-term impact on students' ability to get back on track and graduate on time (particularly among those who take advantage of the opportunity to recover credits before senior year).

Online credit recovery: This program is successful by all accounts, and should continue to be offered to SPS students as an alternate means of credit recovery. Yet its continuation must be strategic and consistent across sites. Suggestions include:

1. Present program details/impact to teachers, administrators, and counselors at all high schools to encourage district-wide support and understanding (currently lacking).
2. Engage teachers in dialogue about ways to bolster the success rate among participants.

3. Ensure that each site continues to provide participants with the same level of sufficient academic support; this should include certified teachers in core content areas and teachers certified in special education.
4. Online credit recovery is generally touted for its flexibility, yet the attendance requirements and short sessions (just 7-8 weeks) mean that it is not sufficiently flexible for students with commitments after school. Unlike night school, which is once a week for a longer duration, online credit recovery requires students to participate thrice weekly during a shorter span of time. And while the policy is based on that of summer school, this is not necessarily appropriate: while students attend summer school for just three hours per day, students in online credit recovery have already spent a full day in school before spending the afternoon in a computer lab.

Many students are dropped—or would be dropped if not for the flexibility of their site coordinators. Consider modifying the attendance structure at even just one site, reducing the number of weekly in-class hours and elongating the duration of the session overall. This will allow the district to determine if such changes would indeed produce meaningful gains in the number of students staying enrolled and earning credit. Also consider the option of crediting students for "attendance" when they log in remotely and participate in coursework outside the in-school lab.

5. Consider adding opportunities for students to participate in online credit recovery during the daytime. While the model at Commerce is likely of a higher intensity than many students need, adding an opportunity to get seat time during the school day could reduce the number of students who exceed the absence limit.
6. Establish benchmarks for determining if this program is successful overall and whether it should be continued in its current form. Benchmarks should be based on attendance and the proportion of participants successfully earning credits.

Night school

1. Open program to all high school students, regardless of grade level.
2. Survey students and parents to determine whether cost and transportation are obstacles to participation.

Saturday school

1. Establish a uniform Saturday school policy and implementation plan to ensure that all schools are maximizing the utility of this program.
2. Bolster level of support for this program among school administrators and guidance counselors to encourage higher attendance.
3. Expand opportunities for students to use Saturday school as a means of catching up academically (through tutoring, for example).
4. Because Saturday school attendees are at a high risk for dropping out (due to excessive absences), consider having guidance counselors on site to support students' efforts at getting on track to graduate.
5. Consider incentivizing student participation using strategies similar to those used by the MCAS Prep program to encourage attendance.
6. Work with parents and community partners to determine strategies for encouraging parental buy-in for not just Saturday school, but attendance recovery as a whole.

Summer school

1. Publicize the program more effectively to encourage broader participation.
2. Consider options for reducing the transportation barrier.
3. Improve the application and registration process.

B. Attendance/truancy initiative

Program Theory. The theory behind Springfield's current attendance policy (approved in June 2009) is clearly articulated within the document itself: "Regular school attendance is linked to higher graduation rates and lower dropout rates." The truancy initiative is one way of targeting those students with attendance issues and thus a higher propensity to drop out.

Activities and Implementation.

Attendance. In order to address the relationship between poor attendance and a student's likelihood of dropping out, SPS revised its attendance policy in June 2009. Because unexcused absences are a major problem for SPS, a truancy initiative was created in September 2009 to target those students with particularly high rates of unexcused absenteeism.

Attendance Specialists have been assigned to each high school to support the efforts of administrators, faculty and staff in upholding this policy. Specialists are tasked with tracking attendance data, making phone calls to students' parents/guardians, sending home letters of warning, holding phone conferences with parents, and conducting home visits when necessary. Based on findings from site visits to individual schools, teachers and guidance counselors are also reaching out to parents and guardians to address attendance issues through phone calls and letters home.

The policy also includes a directive for schools to create incentive programs to allow students to buy back absences. The term "incentive" is misleading, as these programs simply include "Saturday school, after school opportunities, and summer school." To clarify, the policy does not direct schools to offer incentives that encourage students to attend school; instead, it allows students an option to remedy attendance problems that have already occurred. Nevertheless, such programs are being implemented at each of the comprehensive high schools. All are conducting Saturday school (see above section on credit recovery for analysis), and students were observed recovering attendance after school at Commerce.

Truancy. According to data provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Springfield's truancy rate in 2010 was an astounding 25.3 percent, which was the third highest among Massachusetts public school districts (the state average was just 2.2 percent). In order to combat the prevalence of unexcused absences, particularly at the secondary level, a truancy intervention plan was established in September 2009. Along with articulating the process by which schools and administrators implement efforts to improve attendance (as outlined in Addendum A of the attendance policy), SPS created the Springfield Student Attendance Resource Center (SSARC). SSARC is located at the same site as SAFE High School and operates in partnership with the Hampden County Sheriff's Department to identify (and track down) truant students and target those with exceptional credit recovery needs to help them get back on track in an alternative environment. Students can also arrive at SSARC through referrals from their high schools if all options for truancy intervention have been exhausted (as outlined in the district's Cumulative Unexcused Absence Procedure). And roughly ten percent of students refer themselves: having heard about the impact of SSARC on their peers, these students have identified this alternative as an option that can help them get back on track with both attendance and academics.

After the comprehensive screening process conducted upon arrival—which can involve mental health evaluations, interviews with students and their families, interviews with school staff and service providers, and reviews of academic history—students are assigned to interventions based on their academic and social-emotional needs. Interventions include enrollment in SSARC's credit recovery program, placement in one of Springfield's alternative schools, enrollment in a GED program, or referral to Job Corps. Unless the student is participating in online credit recovery, the typical stay at SSARC is approximately two weeks.

SSARC is not just for students with attendance issues: it also serves as the assessment center (AC) for Springfield's Middle and High School Suspension Program. Students who receive out-of-school suspensions for serious violations to the district's code of conduct are referred to SSARC for a period of 5-10 days. After students are screened and assessed, they participate in an educational program that addresses their transgression (for example, violence prevention) and work with educational support staff to complete academic work from their referring school.

Findings.

Attendance. In general, Springfield's attendance policy is being implemented with fidelity. Buy-in is not an issue: faculty and staff across the high schools all feel that the policy is conceptually sound and sufficiently comprehensive. Teachers are familiar with the attendance log, and many cited making phone calls home (in addition to those made by attendance specialists). Yet while the phone calls are being made, their impact was cited as being limited by the fact that parents are particularly difficult to reach—even if the phone number is correct, which often is not the case. According to students, the automated phone calls are even less effective at notifying parents of attendance issues. These calls make sense conceptually; after all, many teachers expressed the fact that they regularly have significant numbers of parents/guardians who need phone calls. However, students felt that these automated calls were so impersonal that parents and guardians ignored or discounted them.

One directive of the attendance policy is that "Attendance shall be taken daily in every class of each school..."¹⁹ While this policy has been in place for two school years, the evaluation team learned that teachers have until very recently lacked the capacity to take attendance at the beginning of each period. Teachers are now able to do this through PowerSchool, which was made accessible as recently as this semester (Spring 2011) for many. At Sci-Tech, teachers noted that they had only been taking class attendance since early March. Because this critical element of the district's attendance policy is just being implemented, it was impossible to determine the impact of this shift on overall student attendance.

In addition to facilitating the process of taking attendance throughout the school day, PowerSchool was cited as playing an important supportive role in teachers' efforts to target students who have a history of poor attendance and skipping class, particularly among entering freshmen. Teachers at Commerce felt that having access to this data has enabled them to identify and address the needs of individual students early on.

One challenge was cited by administrators, attendance officers, and counselors repeatedly as one that is insurmountable without a major campaign to influence policy at the state and even federal levels. Attendance and enrollment requirements for students involved in social service programs like the Department of Children and Families (DCF), Transitional Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) are not as stringent as Massachusetts' policies

(with which Springfield's is aligned), and oversight by these agencies is limited. For example, TANF has no attendance requirement for students ages 14-16, so the district has one less mechanism through which to encourage attendance among students in this age bracket. For federal programs like SSI, there is simply an enrollment requirement. District administrators and staff cited this as a reason for many students participating in school at a minimal level, skipping classes and accruing a high number of absences while remaining on the roll to continue receiving payments. This may also help to explain the fact that such a high proportion of Springfield's dropouts fail courses and fall increasingly behind for several years before making the decision to drop out. Certainly, this is not a factor that can be influenced by any efforts within SPS. Instead, this problem seems to necessitate closer analysis to establish a case for policy changes at higher levels of government.

Truancy. PowerSchool does not capture information as to which students were referred to SSARC during the school year, making it impossible to determine the longer-term impact that this intervention has on attendance, suspension rates, and even dropout rates. However, some data was provided from the site itself to help illuminate the scope and impact of this program. During the current school year, 38 students have arrived at SSARC strictly due to attendance issues. Of this group, 58 percent were male; 60 percent were Hispanic, 24 percent Black, and 16 percent White. Interestingly, these proportions correspond with the breakdown of Springfield dropouts as illustrated in the segmentation study of SPS dropouts.²⁰ Regarding the interventions assigned to these students, online credit recovery was the most popular, with 58 percent of students participating. Another 29 percent were at SSARC for just two weeks, while 13 percent remained at the site for 45 days. Credit recovery was reported to be a very successful program, enabling students to get back on track and bolstering their motivation for returning to a traditional school environment. Yet unlike the rest of the district participating in this program, SSARC is not using Education2020 to deliver the program. This is reportedly due to obstacles regarding internet access in the building, which is inconsistent and slow. Nevertheless, streamlining the delivery of online credit recovery may enable students to continue the program without interruption upon returning to their original high schools.

One aspect of SSARC that appears to be having a particularly positive impact is the component that pairs a county sheriff with an attendance officer to not just find truants throughout the city, but also to visit homes and work with community members to spread awareness about the prevalence and impact of truancy. The number of interactions conducted by these two teams is impressive: between September 2010 and March 2011, there have been a total of 302 home visits, 159 transports of truant students to their schools, 1,343 student contacts, 102 instances in which teams have escorted students into their schools and met with school personnel, and 1,666 community visits.

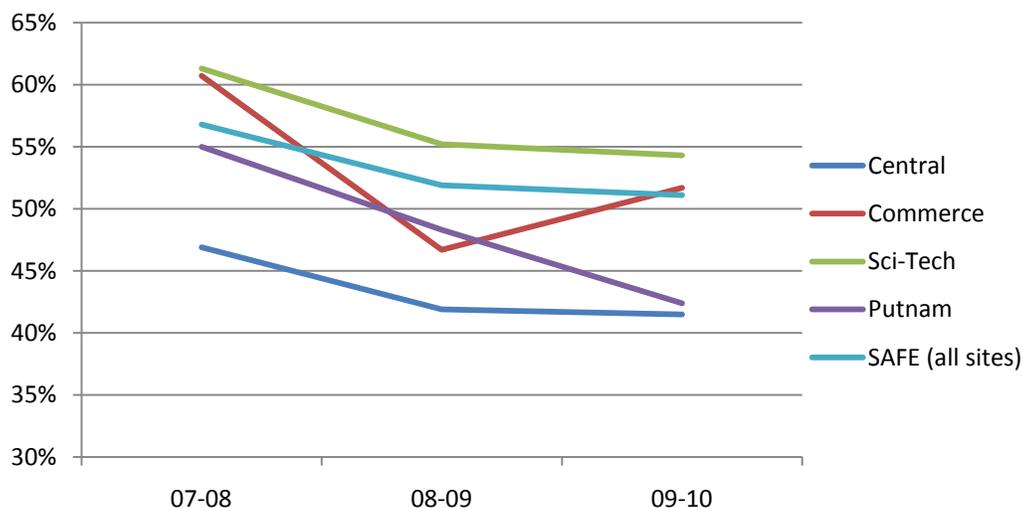
Among the 202 students referred to the assessment center (AC) at SSARC, 64 percent were Hispanic, 28 percent Black, and 8 percent White. The majority were male (nearly 75 percent) and receiving special education (55 percent). Students' offenses were varied; the most prevalent included battery of a staff member (24 percent), staff assault (23 percent), weapons (17 percent), and drugs

(16 percent). After receiving a 5-10 day intervention, over 90 percent of students returned to their original school, while 5 percent were enrolled in a SAFE school that could better address their needs.

While the overall program seems to be successful while students are onsite, one gap acknowledged by SSARC is that there is no means of following up with students once they return to their original schools or leave for an alternative program. While each student leaves the site with a plan for successfully moving forward, there is no mechanism for checking in with the student, school staff, and parents to determine whether the plan—and the student's time at SSARC—has been effective. The only way efficacy is currently measured is by calculating recidivism among students referred through suspensions. During the current school year, 202 students came to SSARC this way. Out of this group, just 19 were there for the second time, and only one was a third-time repeater. Yet unless it can be determined that all previous SSARC referrals are still enrolled in school, it is difficult to express with certainty that the limited number of returning students indicates that the assessment center has been successful in keeping students with behavioral issues in the classroom for the long-term.

Finally, it must be noted that the truancy rate for the entire district has continued to decline since reaching a five-year high of 37.8 percent during the 2007-08 school year. The rate for the previous 2009-10 school year, for which the most recent data is available, was 25.3 percent. And while the truancy rates at each of the four comprehensive high schools are still significantly higher than the rate district-wide, each school has also seen this figure decline since 2007-08 (see **Figure 8**). While these declines suggest that the district's truancy initiative has influenced improvement in this area, additional years of data will be required to determine the significance of this relationship.

Figure 8. Truancy rates, 2007-2010



Recommendations.

Attendance:

1. Ensure that all teachers begin the 2011-12 school year with the full capacity to track attendance for each class.
2. Reevaluate efforts to collect contact information for students' parents/guardians.
3. Attempt to quantify the impact of social service programs policies on attendance; work with other urban districts to address policy issues.
4. Ensure that all teachers have access to PowerSchool so that they may better track attendance and identify target students.
5. Foster parent support for promoting student attendance (both during traditional school day and at attendance recovery programs).

Truancy:

1. Track SSARC participation via PowerSchool to allow for determining the long-term impact of this intervention.
2. Use the same platform for online credit recovery at SSARC as the rest of the district to allow students to seamlessly continue the program upon return to original schools.
3. Create a system by which SSARC follows up with students after leaving, not only to determine the impact, but also to help ease the transition into students' original schools or new placements.

C. MCAS Prep (including Summer Intensive)

Program Theory. Because the emphasis of MCAS tutoring is on academic achievement, this type of programming has the potential to address the fact that poor academic performance is a risk factor for dropping out of high school. In addition, a growing body of research suggests that failure to pass high-stakes tests like the MCAS influences a student's decision to leave school. While there is also research to the contrary, it is nevertheless undeniable that after school and summer programs aimed at bolstering students skills in math and ELA can keep participants on track to graduate.

Activities and Implementation.

MCAS Prep. This state-funded program provides additional instruction in math, ELA, and biology for students who are at risk of failing or have already failed the MCAS (and are thus in danger of failing to earn a high school diploma). Instruction is offered both during the

school day and after school throughout the school year. Students participating in the program during the school day follow the PLATO curriculum and remain until competency has been established (or for the duration of a semester). Instructors use these students' prior MCAS results to individualize instruction and target the most severe needs. The after school program takes place at each high school on Mondays and Wednesdays from 2:30-4:30, with three sessions taking place during the course of the academic year. Students in 11th and 12th grade are the primary target audience, while underclassmen are eligible to attend if space permits.

Students are primarily referred to these programs by guidance counselors, and participation is incentivized with things like gift certificates and movie tickets. Parents are engaged through an open house at the start of the year. Meanwhile, program instructors receive professional development during the school year to maintain rigor and relevance.

During the 2009-10 school year, 819 students participated in the daytime program, and another 228 attended MCAS prep after school. Data on the in-school component was not available for 2010-11, but the after school program engaged 205 participants as of April 2011. In 2010, the average number of hours students attended the in-school program was 17.1, while the after school program attendees averaged 8.6 hours. In 2011, the average number of participation hours was just 6 across the three subject areas.

Summer Intensive. The summer program was targeted for students who had passed neither the 10th grade MCAS test nor the re-tests needed to complete the competency determination required for a high school diploma. This grant-funded program assigned students to classes based on their competency needs in ELA, math, and/or biology. Students took up to two classes a day and worked in small learning environments with teachers certified in core content areas as well as special education. During the summer of 2010, 347 applications were received. Of this group, 12 improved sufficiently before the program began and thus did not need to participate, 97 attended other summer programs, and 30 failed to meet attendance requirements. The data suggests that 208 students completed the program, though grading data is only provided for 182.

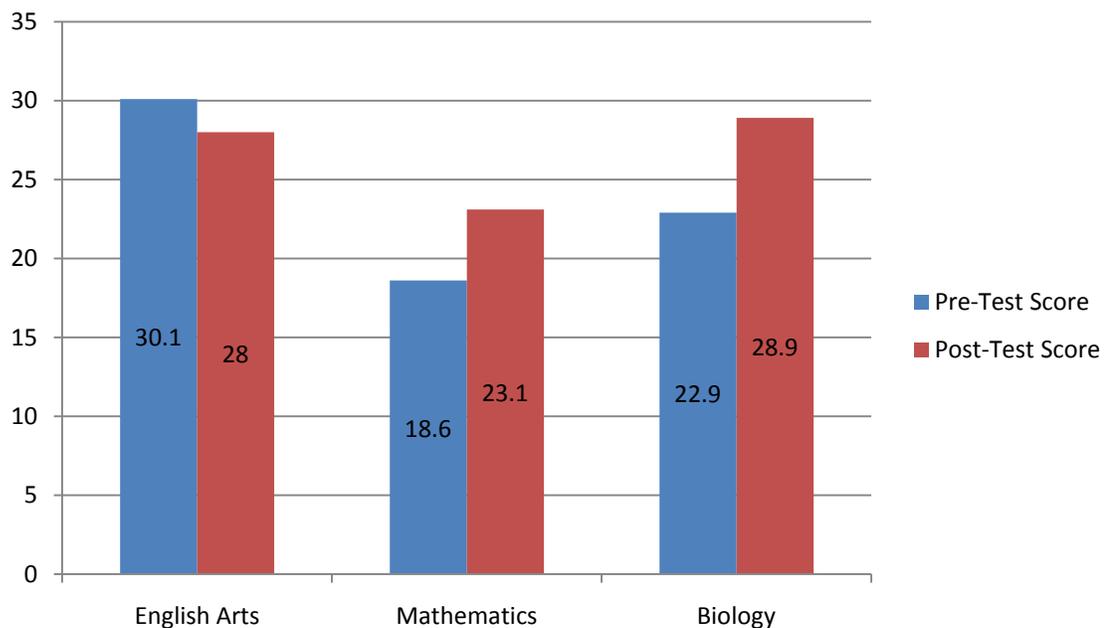
Findings.

MCAS Prep. Both qualitative and quantitative data indicate that the biggest failing of this program is the low level of participation—including poor attendance among those who did participate. While providing students with additional academic support can impact performance both in coursework and on the MCAS, the impact is negligible if so few students are receiving this intervention despite the high number of students who scored below 'Proficient' in 2010 (785 in ELA, 943 in math, and 1020 in science).

Participation in 2010 was particularly varied by school, suggesting that some schools may be using successful strategies that could be shared with other sites. For example, Putnam engaged over 600 students in MCAS prep during the school day; the second highest level of participation was at Commerce, with just over 100 students. (Data was not available for 2011.) Yet Putnam had the lowest levels of after school participation in both ELA and math during that same year. Sci-Tech was comparatively most successful in enrolling students in those subject areas. School-specific data on after school attendance was not available for 2011, though counselors at Putnam indicated that their enrollment in after school MCAS has grown as a result of adding an MCAS counselor to the staff.

The most meaningful way to assess the impact of this program on MCAS performance is to look at students' test scores for the current year, which were not available at the writing of this report. Nevertheless, some grading data was provided that helps illustrate the short-term impact of participation on student performance. **Figure 9** shows that in the after school component during the previous school year, students made gains in math and biology but actually demonstrated lower post-test scores in ELA.

Figure 9: MCAS Prep pre- and post-test scores



Summer Intensive. With the exception of student grades, the results provided for the MCAS Summer Intensive were qualitative only. Once again, updated scores for participants are not yet available. Instructor evaluations reflected positive attitudes toward the program and its efficacy, though there were some concerns expressed regarding low levels of enrollment and attendance. Students and parents provided similarly positive feedback, with

the majority of respondents in each category expressing that they would recommend the program. Nevertheless, the true impact of this program cannot be expressed without an analysis of MCAS passage rates for participants in both MCAS preparatory programs.

Recommendations.

1. Evaluate both programs by looking at the most recent MCAS scores for participants to determine if participation has improved success rates.
2. Underutilization of these programs is likely inhibiting efficacy and limiting the role of this program as a dropout prevention effort. Establish district-wide goals for participation and attendance and determine what incentives will be effective at encouraging student and parent buy-in.
3. Data provided to the evaluation team was incomplete, containing many gaps that precluded a more comprehensive analysis. Establish data collection protocols for this program that will allow the district to more effectively assess this program against benchmarks and determine how resources can be best used to address MCAS failure.

D. "Graduation Coaching"

Program Theory. The efficacy of using graduation coaches—counselors with a focus on supporting at-risk students in the effort to remain on track to graduate—is demonstrated by the impressive increase in Georgia's graduation rate (from 69.5 percent in 2006 to an all-time high of 80.8 percent in 2010) after the program was implemented statewide.²¹ Graduation coaches can play a key role in not only ensuring that students remain on track with credits and attendance, but also in providing at-risk students with a supportive adult relationship that is often lacking among dropouts. Typically, a graduation coach's tasks include identifying at-risk students, identifying and implementing interventions, creating individualized graduation plans, connecting students with resources both in and outside of school, and encouraging parent and community involvement.²²

Activities and Implementation. Two "graduation coaches"²³ currently serve students in two Springfield high schools: Commerce and Sci-Tech, which were identified as having the most severe dropout challenges and standing to benefit most from this strategy. At Sci-Tech, this individual is an adjustment counselor, while Commerce's designated "graduation coach" is a guidance counselor. The intention is for both counselors to address the needs of students with the most severe dropout risks.

This is happening in two very different ways at each of the sites: at Sci-Tech, the "graduation coach" performs case management for a group of thirty incoming freshmen identified as high risk through DEWS. The counselor meets regularly with these students, both individually and in a group.

Students are assigned to individual interventions as needed, and the group also engages in occasional group programming that is aimed at promoting academic success and positive behavior. The "graduation coach" is also available to support other counselors who have students with dropout risk factors, and he hosts sporadic meetings with the counseling staff to share dropout prevention strategies and educate colleagues about his role. In the past, this "graduation coach" has also engaged outside partners to support his work, including interns from local colleges and volunteers and mentors from the community (such as Big Y, MassMutual, Future Works, the Department of Health, and the YMCA).

The work of the "graduation coach" at Commerce is vastly different: this counselor works out of the school's attendance office in order to quickly identify those students with risk factors stemming from poor attendance and truancy issues. This allows her to interact with a vast number of students and identify risk factors and interventions as they arise. In addition to performing a triage role in dropout prevention, this counselor helped establish "Phoebe's Messengers," a student-led program that encourages a positive, caring school culture that aims to support the social and emotional needs of Commerce students. This program is seen to play an important role in dropout prevention by helping students establish positive relationships with members of the school community and addressing issues both within and outside of school that impact academic performance, attendance, and behavior (and thus increase dropout risk factors). One effort of this group that specifically targeted the relationship between attendance and graduation was a marketing campaign to distribute information on attendance recovery options. Other campaigns have promoted MCAS tutoring, access to psychological services, and opportunities for community service.

Like the "graduation coach" at Sci-Tech, this individual also works closely with a number of community partners to bring mentors and other volunteers to the school in order to not just increase the number of interventions available to students, but also to encourage school pride and a positive school culture (as evidenced by recent efforts to document Commerce's history). Commerce's "graduation coach" also participates in regular meetings held to address the status of every member of the senior class. These meetings, which engage academic and counseling staff, are used to ensure that seniors demonstrating risk factors can be addressed in a timely and effective manner.

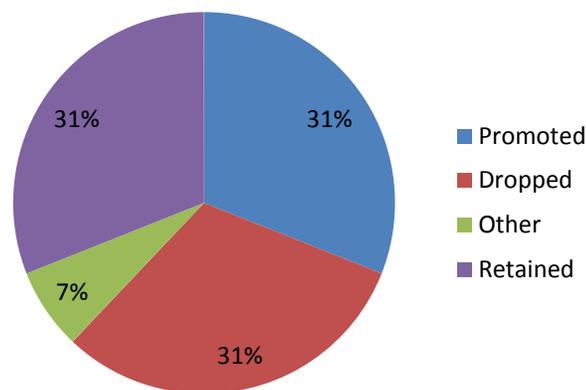
Findings. Because the implementation of the graduation coaching program is so vastly different at the two sites, it is difficult to use the same framework to evaluate them. It is particularly difficult to determine the effectiveness of graduation coaching at Commerce, because there is no specific cohort of students that receives these services. Moreover, graduation coaching only began in its current incarnation at the start of the 2010-11 school year, so there has not been much time for an impact to take shape. Similarly, Phoebe's Messengers is a group that is still in its infancy, so there is not yet evidence as to its role on dropout prevention. Qualitative reports suggest that both this group and the graduation coaching effort at Commerce are positively influencing school culture and helping foster relationships with and among at-risk students. It appears that members of the school

community are supportive and sufficiently informed about both initiatives, and the Phoebe's Messengers model is slated to be replicated at the middle school level next year. Because of these positive reports, the school and the district should work to identify ways to measure more concretely the impact of these initiatives on the students involved. Not only will such an evaluation validate the work being done, but if qualitative results match anecdotal evidence, this will support efforts to replicate what appear to be successful endeavors.

The Sci-Tech model of graduation coaching lends itself to quantitative analysis. However, PowerSchool does not readily identify students as being part of this school's graduation coaching program, and data has not yet been provided on academic and behavioral variables for participants that would allow researchers to independently determine the extent to which graduation coaching has reduced dropout risk factors. The only quantitative data available was an annual report provided by the district on outcomes for students participating in graduation coaching during the 2009-2010 school year.

While the report does provide information on outcomes for students in the "graduation coach's" cohort, the conclusions that can be drawn from this data are very limited because there is nothing against which to compare these students. According to the information provided, 29 students were assigned to graduation coaching for that school year. By the year's end, 11 had left school: 9 were dropped due to excessive absences, one left the district, and another was unable to track down. Out of the original group, just 9 were promoted to 10th grade, and another 9 were retained due to poor academic performance or a high number of absences (see **Figure 10**).

Figure 10: Outcomes for students participating in graduation coaching at Sci-Tech, 2009-10.



While the data suggests that graduation coaching only resulted in positive outcomes for one-third of participants, it is impossible to determine the true impact of this intervention with just one small sample of participants. After all, these students were targeted as having the highest dropout risk even before starting high school, and may have had similar—or worse—outcomes if not for graduation

coaching. In this case, a control group would be necessary to determine if the results of this intervention are any than would be expected for students exhibiting this level of risk.

Absent of truly useful quantitative data, there is anecdotal evidence that participation is having a positive impact on the students targeted by this intervention, and it was reported that the majority of the first cohort (freshmen in 2007) will be graduating this year. Despite the positive results this effort is reportedly achieving, there is limited understanding among the staff and faculty regarding the role of the graduation coach. The services of this individual are underutilized, despite the depth of knowledge this graduation coach possesses in the area of dropout prevention strategies.

Recommendations.

1. Formalize the name "graduation coach." This will help clarify the important role these individuals can play in addressing the dropout problem and will increase their legitimacy among faculty, staff, students, and parents alike.
2. Conduct an overview of the role of the "graduation coach" at participating high schools for teachers and staff. Use this as an opportunity to qualitatively evaluate current practices, establish a more defined strategy for each graduation coach, and promote broader understanding to encourage higher utilization of this resource.
3. Establish an evaluation plan and clear goals/benchmarks for graduation coaches to measure themselves against.
4. Create an evaluation plan for Phoebe's Messengers to facilitate the replication of this program at other sites in the district. And while this program is currently operated at no cost to the district, using an evaluation tool to demonstrate the program's impact could be useful in attracting private funding sources as needed in the future.

E. Guidance Counseling

Program Theory. In 2009, Springfield adopted a Comprehensive School Counseling Program that represented a paradigm shift in the way guidance counseling is done in Springfield. This program is research-based and incorporates many of the National Dropout Prevention Center's best practices to emphasize the role of guidance counselors in not just dropout prevention, but also in addressing academic, career, and social needs of students.

Activities and Implementation. All SPS counselors received professional development around the new program, and counselors and school administrators all have a toolkit (handbook) to serve as a resource for ways to successfully implement this new model. The toolkit includes recommendations

for the allocation of counselors' time across the tasks for which they are responsible. Reporting and evaluation guidelines are also contained within this document.

One role of guidance counselors is to maintain and update Student Success Plans, or SSPs. An SSP should be on file for every "at-risk" student, and it is used to document interventions aimed at reducing those risks. SSPs are state-mandated as a strategy for improving the mastery of skills needed for the MCAS. Dropout prevention efforts are also documented in SSPs to allow for everyone working with a particular student to understand what efforts are being done to address academic, behavior, and attendance issues. It is intended that an assistant principal at each high school oversees the maintenance and updating of SSPs—both in hard copy and on the intranet—by working in conjunction with the guidance office. Based on the district's DEWS output, 4,754 high school students are classified as "at risk," "high risk," or "very high risk." Yet just 56.5 percent of these students actually have an SSP on file.

Findings. Despite the fact that the Comprehensive School Counseling Program has been in place for two years (since April 2009), there appears to be limited understanding of what this new paradigm means among counselors and school administrators alike. During focus groups with both cohorts, few participants were able to articulate what this new platform looks like or why it exists. Many did reference the toolkit, but there was limited evidence that it was actually being used to support counselors and principals in implementing this program as intended. Reports suggest that the plan is not receiving the necessary support from principals to make it effective, and counselors are not held accountable for adhering to this plan themselves. Notably, some of the stressors expressed by guidance counselors—particularly those related to the demands on their time—could be remedied if counselors and principals consulted and followed the toolkit, which provides clear recommendations for appropriate division of counselors' time.

Among counselors who did demonstrate understanding of the plan, it was expressed that "turf issues" make it difficult for them to follow. Specifically, while the plan calls for counselors to have a role in the classroom, teachers are not universally supportive of facilitating that role and giving counselors access. Then again, when referencing both this challenge and obstacles to addressing things like course failure and student academic success, one counselor noted that perhaps they are waiting to be invited to the table, and instead should begin inviting themselves.

The evaluation team was aware of the implementation problem surrounding SSPs before site visits began and thus endeavored to explore the reasons that almost half of all students requiring SSPs do not have them. One of the most prevalent explanations for this gap again relates to the demands on counselors' time: many noted that SSPs have been maintained and updated for many more students than the numbers reflect, but there has not been sufficient time nor staffing to enter this information in the district's intranet. Interviewees at Sci-Tech and Commerce noted that despite having particularly proportions of high-risk students, each school has just one guidance clerk who can alleviate the administrative pressure on guidance counselors to allow them to better serve their

students. Another reason for the lack of SSP implementation given by counselors and school administrators was that SSPs are supposed to come from the middle school when at-risk students enter high school, but this is not happening for many students.

It also seems that SSPs are not being used beyond the guidance office to inform stakeholders about student risk levels and the interventions being employed to address particular challenges. Specifically, it was cited by teachers and counselors that teachers should be given easier access to SSPs through the intranet, because they are occasionally responsible for implementing and monitoring intervention programs. In fact, some teachers reported having never seen SSPs, and some had not even heard of them.

Recommendations.

1. Institute higher levels of accountability for following the Comprehensive Counseling Plan and updating SSPs.
2. Promote understanding of Comprehensive Counseling Plan among not just counselors, but teachers and other members of the school staff who are in a position to facilitate the plan's implementation.
3. Look to ways to further target the needs of *all* high school students through the Comprehensive Counseling Program. A useful model for Springfield is the *Connected Counseling* program employed in the public schools of St. Paul, MN. Begun in 2003, the initiative is focused on redesigning both the content and delivery of school counseling programs in seven comprehensive high schools. Funded by the Bush Foundation, the initiative is an effort aligned with the Foundation's goal of raising high school completion rates for all students. Like Springfield's plan, the Connected Counseling model shifts the focus of school counselors from concentrating exclusively on one-on-one support to individual students to creating school-wide comprehensive standards-based school counseling programs in order to reach all students. Connected Counseling stresses the leadership role that school counselors play in developing school-wide improvement strategies in alignment with the district's strategic goals. On paper, Springfield's counseling plan is quite similar. Yet because district-wide support for this paradigm has not yet taken hold, this model can provide a useful illustration of not only how this program works in practice, but also how it impacts student achievement.
4. Establish clear, attainable goals for improving the proportion of at-risk students with SSPs; employ incentives to encourage buy-in at the individual high schools.
5. Allow teachers to access SSPs through intranet.

6. Work with middle schools to ensure that all students leave 8th grade with an SSP updated on the intranet.

F. BELL Program

Program Theory. Employing academic programs to help students get on track as they progress from 8th grade to high school is an evidence-based best practice for dropout prevention. The impact of such programs is often so instrumental in addressing dropout risk factors because, for many schools, most dropouts choose to leave school during 9th grade. In Springfield, a full 47 percent of all students who dropped out during the 2008-09 school year left while at this grade level, making efforts to address the needs of high-risk students as they transition to high school particularly critical for SPS. Retention is another key predictor of dropout, and in 2009, 25 percent of Springfield's 9th graders were held back.²⁴ Therefore, a program that promotes academic achievement for high-risk rising freshmen can be an effective way to bolster graduation rates among students with lower academic achievement. While the evaluation team understands that BELL is an academic support program (and not a transition program, per se), this intervention can nevertheless play an important role in meeting the needs of students demonstrating a high risk for dropping out as they segue from middle to high school.

Activities and Implementation. During the summer of 2010, Springfield partnered with BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life) to address the needs of the district's lowest performing rising 9th graders. Three hundred 8th graders were identified as meeting participation criteria, which included failure of 7th grade ELA or Math MCAS and receiving a D or F as a final grade on their 8th grade report card. The district established a policy that these students would only be promoted to high school upon the successful completion of the BELL program that summer.

The program ran from June 28-August 6, 2010 (six weeks) for 6 ½ hours per day. Academic instruction was emphasized Monday through Thursday, while Fridays were designated for field trips, community service, and guest speakers. The program took place at each of the four comprehensive high schools, and students attended at the sites corresponding to their high school placements in order to give them an early introduction to their new environment. Some program staff members were drawn from these schools as another means of promoting familiarity and easing the transition (for instance, Sci-Tech's "graduation coach" administered his school's site). Students also participated in orientations to learn more about the facilities and resources at their new high schools, and guest speakers included school principals, teachers, and even representatives of the sports programs at Central and Commerce.

Findings. The results of program evaluations conducted and reported by BELL state that on average, Springfield students gained nine months of reading skills and five months of math skills. The report also indicates that students learned faster than their peers, and that BELL participation

positively influenced self esteem, attitudes toward school, willingness to work in groups, and the ability to express ideas. But there is a significant amount of variance across scores students at the four sites. For example, the average number of months gained in reading ability for students participating in BELL nationwide is 5.3. Springfield's average of 9.4 is particularly skewed by the immense gains made by students at Putnam (18.1 months). And in math, all schools but Sci-Tech actually experienced below-average gains.

So what is responsible for such variances? And because BELL's internal evaluation only covers the participation period, are the gains made in the summer sustained over the course of the school year? Most importantly, how does participation in BELL influence overall high school success? Because the school's data management system does not identify which students participated in BELL last summer, it is not possible to answer these questions.

It merits noting that in previous years, such information was tracked and analyzed to determine whether BELL participation had lasting effects on students. This analysis was conducted during 2008-09 and it compared indicators of 161 students who participated in BELL to those of 151 SPS students who did not enroll in any programs during the same summer (a control group). Results of this effort showed that 2 percent of BELL participants dropped out during the 2008-09 school year, while 11 percent of students in the control group left school during the year. Average daily attendance was better among BELL participants (85 percent, versus 77 percent). And BELL participants earned more high grades and fewer low grades than students in the control group. It is unclear how comparable the control group was to the intervention group, and it is also impossible to determine the statistical significance of the differences between these two groups. Nevertheless, this data suggests that BELL participation can impact student performance during the school year following the summer during which this intervention takes place. It also emphasizes the need for continued longitudinal evaluation over the long term.

One important element of the BELL program (and efforts surrounding it) is that students targeted for this intervention must either participate in BELL or repeat 8th grade. However, it was broadly reported that this ultimatum is largely without teeth. The decision of whether to promote a student rests with middle school principals, and there have been a number of instances in which a student neither enrolled in BELL nor repeated 8th grade, but was instead promoted to high school without participating in an intervention program. According to data provided by BELL, 300 students were identified, but only 268 actually enrolled. This suggests that 32 students fell into this category, making the transition to high school with neither additional support nor consequences for their course failure. Among teachers and counselors interviewed at the comprehensive high schools, the fact that students are being socially promoted without participating in BELL is a major problem.

This and other reasons support many interviewees' claims that BELL is not an effective intervention program overall. Buy-in was only evident at one school (Sci-Tech), and this appeared to be a result of the fact that this program was managed by one of the school's own counselors whose ability to

build relationships and connect participation to the 9th grade experience made a meaningful and noticeable difference. At other schools, one issue many take with BELL is that there is little integration of school staff and faculty. As a result, there is limited understanding related to how the program works, who is participating, and how it relates to their own efforts aimed at bolstering academic achievement and reducing the dropout risk.

Finally, many school-level staff and faculty perceive BELL to be primarily a transition program to help students adjust to the high school environment. This is not actually the case, as BELL is aimed at providing academic support for select, high-need students who require an intervention to get back on track academically. Some dissatisfaction with BELL, then, is that its purpose is misunderstood, and many evaluate it based on the notion that its purpose is to provide what is otherwise a missing transitional piece that is needed by so many more students than just those enrolled in BELL.

Recommendations.

1. Conduct internal evaluations to determine the impact of BELL on dropout risk factors (including course failure, attendance, behavior, and MCAS scores) over the course of the 9th grade school year and beyond. This analysis has not been done for students who participated in BELL during the summer of 2010.
2. Strengthen enforcement of the policy that requires targeted students to either participate in BELL or repeat 8th grade.
3. Present information on BELL to high school teachers, staff, and administrators to encourage broader understanding and buy-in. Many expressed doubt that BELL has had any impact on performance during the school year because they have not been provided with the data that suggests otherwise.
4. Establish benchmarks to determine what the results of the program should look like in order to continue it.
5. In the summer of 2010, BELL served 268 students. Yet at the end of that school year, Springfield had 1,712 8th graders enrolled. The district must identify a way to support the transition of the remaining 84 percent of students who received nothing more than an orientation to high school before making the critical transition to 9th grade. This may be achieved through transition plans that have been developed through the Workforce Development office of SPS, though details of these plans were not shared with the evaluation team.

G. ELL Programming

Program Theory. English language learners (ELLs) have a particularly acute risk for dropping out of school, so ELL-specific programming aimed at supporting the academic, social, and emotional needs of students in this subgroup can be particularly effective at raising graduation rates among this cohort. Springfield's ELL programming continues to undergo a major shift since the Center for Collaborative Education released its report and recommendations regarding the status of ELL students in September 2010.²⁵ The theoretical basis of the models being developed reflects a significant number of best practices in dropout prevention, including the use of small learning communities, the use of a youth development approach, incorporation of career skills and readiness, professional development for teachers related to the needs of ELL students, service learning, and the integration of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Based on the soundness of the program theory and evidence-based approaches being used, the Urban Initiative and NDPC are particularly encouraged by the direction ELL programming in Springfield is headed.

Activities and Implementation. Activities currently being implemented or planned that are aimed (directly or indirectly) at reducing the dropout rate among ELLs include: the establishment of small learning communities for ELLs within each high school, the creation of individual student progression plans outlining pathways to graduation, the addition of career readiness elective courses to encourage multiple intelligences and non-academic skills, the integration of a youth development approach to ELL education and dropout prevention, providing ELL-specific training to at least 75 percent of SPS teachers within the next three years, and the creation of a dashboard that gives teachers and administrators quick access to ELL student data that will help inform the decision to transition ELL students into the mainstream.

Findings. Because the changes being made to ELL programming are relatively new, it is impossible to determine the impact of these efforts at such an early point. Nevertheless, the evaluation team feels that, if implemented according to plan and supported by administrators and teachers district-wide, Springfield's ELL program is likely to have a positive impact on graduation rates in the next several years. This stance is based on the fact that the program plan incorporates a significant number of research-based best practices in dropout prevention that have proven successful in similar districts nationwide.

Recommendations. District and school administrators, along with teachers and counselors, should be educated about the role ELL programming can play in dropout prevention. This will help broaden the support for efforts both underway and in planning stages that have a high likelihood of success *if* a diverse array of stakeholders participates. The district should capitalize on the energy of ELL staff and the momentum gained by the Center for Collaborative Education report by providing both encouragement and resources. Moreover, the ELL director should be invited into discussions about dropout prevention and added to the district's Dropout Prevention Task Force.

H. Dropout Prevention Task Force

Program Theory. The theory behind the Dropout Prevention Task Force appears to be unclear to the members themselves. Nevertheless, the concept of assembling district-level administrators to regularly discuss efforts and issues related to dropout prevention is a logical element of a district-wide effort to target this problem.

Activities and Implementation. The major limitation of this Task Force is that the initiative is not being implemented in a way that allows for this group to be effective. Instead, a group exists only nominally, without clear goals, a long-term plan, or even regular meetings. Members²⁶ of the group indicated that this is simply an offshoot of a group convened approximately one year ago as part of Springfield's work with state education officials. Before this group was created, similar work was being done through Instructional Learning Teams. While the Dropout Prevention Task Force is not meeting or working as a formalized body (like the name suggests), smaller teams of these administrators are working together more regularly in issue-specific subgroups. For example, several administrators work with school leaders on Dropout Early Warning System (DEWS) data, reviewing course failure trends, creating intervention plans, and visiting the individual schools once per year. Another group convenes around credit recovery, including the online program as well as offerings in the summer and through night school.

Findings. In a meeting with the Dropout Task Force, it was articulated by many members that while this group lacked a formal structure or plan, all would be well-served by doing so. A meeting of just less than one hour provided sufficient evidence that this group could accomplish much if goals and expectations were clearly articulated. During this time, not only did Task Force members talk about the structure and function of this group, but they also shared valuable insights on policies and challenges related to Springfield's dropout problem.

Despite the fact that group members are already meeting to discuss many of these issues in smaller teams, there seemed to be collective agreement that a larger group setting would be more cohesive. It was also expressed that the group could be expanded to include a more diverse group of stakeholders, with suggestions including principals, representatives from community groups, members of the district's instructional team (indeed, the need for bolstering instructional quality and reducing course failure was cited time and again by Task Force members), and the district's ELL director. While the need to be more inclusive was universally acknowledged, Task Force members also articulated the importance of working internally to ensure that the Task Force has a clearly articulated plan before being opened up to a broader network of stakeholders.

Recommendations. The concept of having a Dropout Prevention Task Force is a sound one, but its efficacy to date is limited by the fact that this group lacks a formal charge to meet regularly and work toward accomplishing a clear set of objectives. It is thus recommended that this group—currently existing only nominally—becomes systematized as part of Springfield's dropout prevention

strategy. This process should begin with the creation of a strategic plan that establishes the group's composition, goals, and long-term outlook. Once the Dropout Prevention Task Force has been charged, it should then be reconvened to include not just district administrators, but also representatives from the high schools themselves who address the dropout challenge at the ground level.

It was noted that members of the current Task Force already work with principals and counselors at the school level and can therefore transmit the feedback of these stakeholders to the larger group. However, it is clear to not just members of the evaluation team, but also to district administrators that one of the major factors limiting the success of dropout prevention efforts is that programs and policies are not being implemented with fidelity. This suggests a communication breakdown that can be readily and effectively addressed by limiting the levels of communication and bringing critical stakeholders to the same table as decision- and policymakers. For example, Springfield's two "graduation coaches" have demonstrated high levels of expertise in the area of dropout prevention, and they work with the district's highest risk students on a daily basis. Instead of these critical staff members having third-party representation at the Dropout Prevention Task Force (via the Director of Student Support Services), they should be given a regular opportunity to share their expertise and day-to-day experiences with administrators who are further removed from the core subject in dropout prevention: the students.

This step would also allow administrators to monitor programs more regularly and effectively and would heighten the accountability of school-level implementers. The need for systemic internal evaluation of programs and policies is a key recommendation of this report, and by interacting regularly and directly with individuals responsible for carrying out efforts critical to dropout prevention, administrators can more readily assess the impact and efficacy of targeted initiatives and make necessary changes more quickly and comprehensively.

Recommendations

While the UI/NDPC evaluation team spent considerable time in each of the high schools, the data gathered and analyzed were used to understand the overall fidelity of implementation of the varying Springfield Public Schools' dropout prevention initiatives in the aggregate. Therefore, the recommendations to follow are not specific to any particular school, but should be broadly interpreted and applied as being district-wide. It should be noted that some of the dropout prevention initiatives being implemented in SPS have been discussed in detail in previous sections of this report and included recommendations specific to that particular initiative. Those recommendations will not be repeated in this section.

Middle School Academic Preparation

In order to address the resounding issue of middle school students not being prepared for high school academically, the evaluation team suggests the district should investigate what is being done at the middle school level to aggressively address students who are performing below grade level. A robust strategy should be developed to ensure they are prepared for the academic rigor of high school. This should be a discreet piece of the overall issue of transition from middle to high school.

Magnet School Design

Based on findings that revealed the magnet school design for the high schools is in name only, the programs should be strengthened at each school to truly reflect the intended magnet design.

School Culture and Climate

- Before any of the intended dropout prevention interventions will be successful, the school culture at Commerce, Sci-Tech, and Putnam high schools must be improved. The following areas should be addressed: 1) appearance and physical plant; 2) faculty relations/connections with students; 3) faculty effectiveness; 4) student interactions; 5) leadership capacity of principals and assistant principals; 6) student management and discipline policies/procedures; 7) learning environment to include academic rigor and connections to both post-secondary education and the world of work; 8) school-community relations; 9) affective environment that includes student connections with adults in the school and student/culture diversity.
- Consider implementing PBIS in all grade levels at Commerce High and not just the 9th grade.
- Also consider implementing the PBIS model at Putnam, Sci-Tech, and Central High Schools, as well as their feeder middle schools.

Equity Issues

- Each school should have adequate and comparable athletic facilities and programs.
- Each school should have an attractive and adequate physical plant.

- There should be equity in the quality and effectiveness of teachers throughout the high schools.

Dropout Early Warning System (DEWS)

- The current DEWS program that is driven by the distribution of a disk containing a list of struggling students should be scrapped and/or revised to include more robust data elements that are based on a predictive model and not a business intelligence model that is essentially after-the-fact and is of little value to administrators and teachers.
- The DEWS program should be web-based, accessible to teachers as well as administrators, user friendly, have the capacity to be updated frequently, the capacity to monitor the effectiveness of interventions as well as the relationship of existing programs, include non-school data as well as school data and the capacity to collect data from disparate sources.

Data Management/Data-Driven Decision-Making

- The process of gathering, analyzing, and distribution of data across the district should be examined for weaknesses, usefulness, and overlapping efforts.
- Provide staff development for all teachers on data literacy that helps teachers to understand that data means more than just test scores and that improving data literacy across a school can become an agent of deep, sustained change and educational improvement.

Balloting System for School Assignment

- Examine the balloting system for school assignment to ensure the process is working as intended, is equitable, and is transparent.
- Implement a public relations campaign to show that this system is working as intended, is equitable, and is transparent.

Open Response Writing Initiative

Ensure that all teachers fully understand the purpose, usefulness, and effective strategies for intervention of the Open Response initiative and more vigorously monitor for fidelity of implementation.

Student Success Plan (SSP) Implementation

The evaluation team recommends a thorough study and redesign of the SSP instrument and how it is being used/not used as a dropout prevention strategy. The instrument itself was found to be of little value even where it was attempted to be completed as designed. But most importantly, the whole SSP program is flawed with technological issues, misunderstanding, and in some cases purposefully ignored.

Professional Development

Except for some common issues such as the Open Response and SSP implementation, the professional development program, process, and activities should be assessed from the perspective of teachers. Some of the recurring issues that should be addressed are: how the staff development is selected, the level of administrator/teacher input into the selection of staff development, the effectiveness of a particular staff development activity/initiative, and how the staff development aligns with the district's strategic priorities.

Evidence-based recommendations

There are three additional program areas that the evaluation team identified as needing improvement or implementation. These are not large-scale recommendation areas as those noted above, but they have been shown through research to have a positive impact on dropout prevention.

Mentoring

A comprehensive, large-scale adult/student one-on-mentoring program should be employed at the secondary level. Right now, these programs are taking place on a smaller scale and only as a result of the efforts of select counselors. A broader effort could be achieved through a face-to-face or e-mentoring process and consideration should be given to not only relationship and psycho-social development, but to career mentoring as well.

Service-Learning

Create awareness about the impact of service-learning and effective implementation strategies. The National Dropout Prevention Center has a wealth of information and expertise in service-learning program implementation. Additionally, the *Kids Consortium Organization* is conducting a series of summer institutes for teachers on service-learning. More information can be found at the following website: http://www.kidsconsortium.org/institute_for_educators.php.

Value-Added Growth Model

The district should consider implementing a value-added student growth model in all the schools but particularly in the SAFE Schools where program impact should be measured in more than just the academic domain. A value-added growth model is an analytical approach to quantify the impact of teachers, programs, administrators, and other school structures and interventions on student achievement. By measuring the change in performance of individuals or groups of students in a given cohort, class or school, a growth model credits educational interventions, teachers and students for documented progress. Resources to consider for more information include: The Value-Added Research Center at the University of Wisconsin (<http://varc.wceruw.org>); The ECRA Group (http://www.ecragroup.com/growth_model.aspx); The Georgia Pioneer Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH) INSIGHT Growth Model (<http://www.pioneerresa.org>).

Conclusion

An analysis of dropout prevention programs in Springfield's high schools should be just the beginning of a large-scale effort at reevaluating programs, policies, and practices throughout the district. After all, the decision to drop out is rarely a product of the high school experience alone. Instead, risk factors begin to manifest themselves as early as the third grade.²⁷ So while the research team from the Urban Initiative and the National Dropout Prevention Center have made some recommendations specific to current conditions at the high school level, we must also recommend that Springfield's leadership look for opportunities to stem the dropout crisis as early as possible in its elementary and middle schools.

And while periodical independent evaluations play an important role in maintaining objectivity and legitimacy, internal formative evaluations are also essential to ensuring that resources are being used efficiently and effectively. Going forward, the district should establish evaluation plans for all existing and new programs that clearly define goals, benchmarks, and the way data will be collected and evaluated in order to determine the extent of the impact. This effort will allow the district to address its dropout challenge in a more data-driven and strategic way that will be far more sustainable than its current approach.

Endnotes

¹ Crowder, Kyle and Scott J. South. "Neighborhood distress and school dropout: the variable significant of community context." *Social Science Research*, 32:4 (2003): 659-698.

² Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) School District Profile. <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu>.

Note: Unless otherwise expressed, all school- and district-level data was obtained here.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Hammond, C., Linton, D., Smink, J., & Drew, S. (2007). *Dropout Risk Factors and Exemplary Programs*. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center, Communities in Schools, Inc.

⁵ Balfanz, Robert and Vaughan Byrnes. *Massachusetts Segmentation Study: Springfield School District*. The Johns Hopkins University, February 2011: 17.

⁶ The churn rate is expressed as the number of students transferring into or out of a district at any time during the school year divided by the district's total enrollment. Students are counted only once.

⁷ US Census Bureau. 2005-09 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates: Springfield, MA

⁸ Tung, Rosann. *Springfield Public Schools English Language Learner Status Report*. Center for Collaborative Education, September 2010.

⁹ Charles E. Shannon, Jr. Community Safety Initiative. *Schannon CSI Sites: Springfield*. Accessed at http://www.shannoncsi.neu.edu/community_partners/springfield/.

¹⁰ Springfield Public Schools. *Responses on the High School Level Youth at Risk Survey*. Accessed at http://www.sps.springfield.ma.us/webContent/SDFSC/YRBS-allyears_HS.pdf.

¹¹ Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy. *Teen Pregnancy and Birth Rates*. Accessed at <http://www.massteenpregnancy.org/research/teen-pregnancy-and-birth-rates>.

¹² Referred to as the "Local Action Team," this group included Assistant Superintendent Daniel Warwick, Chief Academic Officer Beth Schiavino-Narvaez, Chief Information Officer Paul Foster, Director of Student Support Services Yolanda Johnson, Chief of Pupil Services Mary Anne Morris, Chief Administrator for Extended Instructional Services Mary Ellen Baron, Chief of Federal Programs Denise Pagan-Vega, Zone 3 Chief Schools Officer Lydia Martinez, and Senior Administrator for Teaching, Learning, and Professional Development Judy Vazquez.

¹³ Visits to Renaissance and two of the SAFE schools--Early College High School and SAFE High School were condensed due to the smaller size of these schools coupled with scheduling restrictions.

¹⁴ Superintendent's Annual Report to School Committee, September 23rd, 2010.

¹⁵ Trautman, T., & J. Lawrence. *Credit recovery: A technology-based intervention for dropout prevention at Wichita Falls High School*. Oklahoma City: American Education Corporation, 2004.

¹⁶ National High School Center. *Credit Recovery Programs*. Accessed at http://www.centerii.org/handbook/Resources/4_C_h_Credit_recovery_programs_hs.pdf.

¹⁷ Balfanz & Byrnes.

¹⁸ Data is missing for eleven students because final reporting data from Renaissance was unavailable.

¹⁹ Springfield Public Schools. *District Attendance Policy*. June 2009. Accessed at <http://www.sps.springfield.ma.us/webContent/Attendance%20Policy.pdf>.

²⁰ Balfanz & Byrnes.

²¹ Georgia Department of Education. "State Graduation Rate Soars Above 80 Percent." October 26, 2010. Accessed at http://www.gadoe.org/pea_communications.aspx?ViewMode=1&obj=1984.

²² Georgia Department of Education. *What is a Graduation Coach?* Accessed at http://www.dropoutprevention.org/sites/default/files/GradCoachInitBrochure_20090908.pdf.

²³ The evaluation team was asked to refrain from using this phrase when referring to the individuals performing such services due to the fact that this designation is not used in teacher contracts. Because this phrase is important to ensure clarity and consistency, it is used in quotations.

²⁴ Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL). *BELL Summer in Springfield*. Provided by BELL staff.

²⁵ "Springfield Public Schools English Language Learner Recommended Actions and Implementation Plans" can be accessed at <http://www.sps.springfield.ma.us/webContent/SPS%20ELL%20Action%20Plan.pdf>.

²⁶ The Dropout Prevention Task Force includes Assistant Superintendent Daniel Warwick, Chief Academic Officer Beth Schiavino-Narvaez, Chief Information Officer Paul Foster, Director of Student Support Services Yolanda Johnson, Chief of Pupil Services Mary Anne Morris, Chief Administrator for Extended Instructional Services Mary Ellen Baron, Chief of Federal Programs Denise Pagan-Vega, Zone 3 Chief Schools Officer Lydia Martinez, and Senior Administrator for Teaching, Learning, Professional Development Judy Vazquez, and Pat Spradley, Office of Parent and Community Engagement.

²⁷ The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2010). *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*. At: http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Initiatives/KIDS%20COUNT/123/2010KCSpecReport/AEC_report_color_highres.pdf.