District Review Report

Palmer Public Schools

Targeted Review conducted February 25–27, 2020

Office of District Reviews and Monitoring

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

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**Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education**

75 Pleasant Street, Malden, MA 02148-4906

Phone 781-338-3000 TTY: N.E.T. Replay 800-439-2370

[www.doe.mass.edu](http://www.doe.mass.edu)



This document was prepared by the   
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Jeffrey C. Riley

Commissioner

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Executive Summary

Palmer Public Schools, a school districtin central Massachusetts, had consistent school and central office leadership over the five years before the onsite review in February 2020, except for the director of finance position, which had high turnover. The district’s two schools, Old Mill Pond Elementary School (Pre-K-5) and Palmer High School (6-12), both opened in 1991. In February 2017, the Palmer School Committee voted to close the Converse Middle School and transfer grades 6 and 7 from the middle school to Palmer High School because of health and safety concerns and the high costs of maintaining the middle-school facility, which opened in 1922.

The Town of Palmer meets its financial commitment to the district as demonstrated by continual increases in net school spending over the four years before the onsite review. Spending for education has increased on average by five percent each year. The facilities director is retiring in 2020, and the district and town are considering broadening the scope of the facilities director position by making the facilities director responsible for both municipal and school facilities. The district has developed capital and preventive maintenance plans.

Since assuming the role in 2016, the superintendent has addressed a number of urgent issues requiring immediate attention. Among the most serious of these issues was the district’s missed opportunity to develop a district improvement plan (DIP) in response to a finding in the report of an onsite review of the district conducted by DESE in 2013. The superintendent acted quickly to formulate a DIP, although this was accomplished without much input from key stakeholders.

When DESE notified the district that its Corrective Action Plan addressing the criteria rated *Partially Implemented* and *Not Implemented* in the Department’s 2015-2016 Coordinated Program Review report was overdue, the superintendent initiated major changes in the special education department, including hiring a new director of special education. The new director has made a number of improvements, including substantially reducing the number of out-of-district placements by creating comparable in-district programs.

These are positive steps, but major challenges remain, including reducing administrative turnover at Old Mill Pond Elementary School and continuing to improve the district’s relationship with the Palmer Teachers Association. Further, the district has not defined and assigned specific leadership responsibilities for major areas of work in the district. This hampers Palmer’s ability to address several challenges, including those related to curriculum development and revision, human resources, professional development, and the educator evaluation system, as described in this report. While it might not be possible to provide exclusively dedicated staff to each of these important functions, the district should review the roles of district administration to ensure that responsibilities vital to the effective operation of the district are explicitly assigned.

The district has not established the level of collaboration and reflection necessary to address the significant problems that it currently faces. For example, the high school experienced a substantial increase in out-of-school suspensions in 2019[[1]](#footnote-2) that district leaders attributed to an increase in transitional housing in Palmer; however, the team found little evidence that key stakeholders, including high-school leaders, had worked cooperatively or strategically to identify the root causes. Since the district has and will continue to serve increasingly diverse students, it will be important to analyze all forms of student data and placement to ensure equitable practice and to guard against implicit bias.

*Instruction*

The team observed 45 classes throughout the district: 14 in grades 6-8 and 14 in grades 9-12 at the high school and 17 at the elementary school. The team observed 20 ELA classes, 15 mathematics classes, and 10 classes in other subject areas. Among the classes observed were three co-taught classes. The observations were approximately 20 minutes in length. All review team members collected data using DESE’s Instructional Inventory, a tool for recording observed characteristics of standards-based teaching. This data is presented in Appendix C.

In observed lessons at both schools, classroom routines and positive supports were in place to ensure that students behaved appropriately, and classroom climate supported teaching and learning.

In observed elementary classes, the team found effective implementation of almost all characteristics of effective instruction in DESE’s Instructional Inventory. While the team found strong student engagement in nearly all elementary classes, opportunities for students to use higher-order thinking were limited. In most observed elementary classes students were engaged in higher-order thinking, such as analysis, synthesis, problem-solving ,and application of new knowledge (characteristic #6 of the Instructional Inventory, Appendix C), for only short periods of time. The team noted examples of elementary students using critical thinking skills in a sustained manner when they discerned the author’s point of view, analyzed text for evidence, and solved mathematical problems. However, the team noted that activities in centers often involved lower-level learning skills such as describing, listing, and giving examples, except when students worked directly with their teachers.

While many positive characteristics of teaching and learning were observed in classes at Old Mill Pond Elementary School, these characteristics were often missing in observed classes at Palmer High School, especially checking for understanding, adjusting instruction, and providing feedback, and ensuring that students engage in challenging tasks regardless of learning needs.

**Strengths**

* The district is developing practices, resources, and structures to strengthen teaching and learning at the elementary level through an evidence-based intervention program.
* At the elementary level, the district has introduced and is implementing an evidence- based phonics instructional model in collaboration with an external partner.
* In observed elementary classes, the team found effective implementation of almost all characteristics of effective instruction in the Instructional Inventory.
* The district manages its finances effectively, with clear procedures for the legal procurement of goods and services and for accurate payrolls, resulting in the effective use of town and grant funds. Reports are submitted regularly to administrators and the school committee to keep them advised of the current financial condition of the district.
* Town support for the district has brought its funding above the Net School Spending (NSS) requirement and made it possible to implement several capital improvement projects. Collaboration between district leaders and town officials contributes to effective budget development and financial management.

**Challenges and Areas for Growth**

* The district does not have a broadly inclusive improvement planning process that would result in district and school improvement plans with measurable goals that drive the district’s work and are systematically monitored.
* The current allocation of resources in the district challenges its capacity to meet the learning and social-emotional needs of a changing student population.

In observed classes at the high school, the team found inconsistent and limited implementation of effective instructional practices.

* The district’s educator evaluation system is missing key components and has not been fully implemented.
  + - The district’s educator evaluation system does not prioritize opportunities for educators to receive high-quality feedback[[2]](#footnote-3) that helps them improve their practice.
    - Professional development (PD) is not explicitly aligned with the priorities in district planning documents. The PD program is exclusively school based and is not coordinated and evaluated for effectiveness. Many teachers view the PD program as ineffective.
    - Budget documents do not clearly connect funding requests to district and school planning documents and student performance data. The district does not include historical spending data in the budget to indicate trends over time.

**Recommendations**

The district should establish a culture of accountability to support a systematic approach to improving student performance by developing clear improvement plans that are characterized by measurable benchmarks, clear timelines, and regular cycles of review and modification. These plans should be developed with input from all district stakeholders.

The district should critically review resource allocation in the district to identify opportunities to provide students with social-emotional support through traditional avenues such as guidance and pupil services.

* The district should ensure that all teachers provide effective instruction that challenges and supports all students. In particular, the district should ensure that teachers in grades 6-12 have access to high-quality, comprehensive, standards-based, and horizontally and vertically aligned curricular resources and the support they need to implement the curricula effectively.
* The district should fully implement all components of its educator evaluation system, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that all educators receive high-quality feedback.
  + - The district should develop a professional development program that is informed by data and includes well-defined, measurable goals that are aligned with district, school, and educator goals.
* The district should develop a budget document that is clear, complete, and explicitly aligned with district and school improvement plan goals.

Palmer Public Schools Targeted District Review Overview

Purpose

Conducted under Chapter 15, Section 55A of the Massachusetts General Laws, targeted district reviews support local school districts in establishing or strengthening a cycle of continuous improvement. Reviews consider carefully the effectiveness of systemwide functions, with reference to three district standards used by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Targeted reviews address one of the following sets of three standards: **Governance and Administrative Systems** (Leadership and Governance, Human Resources and Professional Development, and Financial and Asset Management standards) or **Student-Centered Systems** (Curriculum and Instruction, Assessment, and Student Support standards). All targeted reviews include finding(s) about instruction based on classroom observations. A targeted review identifies systems and practices that may be impeding improvement as well as those most likely to be contributing to positive results. In addition, the targeted district review is designed to promote district reflection on its own performance and potential next steps. In addition to providing information to each district reviewed, DESE uses review reports to identify resources and/or technical assistance to provide to the district.

This targeted review by the Office of District Reviews and Monitoring focused on the following standards: Leadership and Governance, Instruction, Human Resources and Professional Development, and Financial and Asset Management.

Methodology

Reviews collect evidence for each of the three district standards identified as the focus of the targeted review. Team members also observe classroom instructional practice. A district review team consisting of independent consultants with expertise in the district standards reviews documentation, data, and reports for two days before conducting a three-day district visit that includes visits to individual schools. The team conducts interviews and focus group sessions with such stakeholders as school committee members, teachers’ association representatives, administrators, teachers, students, and students’ families. Subsequent to the onsite review, the team meets for two days to develop findings and recommendations before submitting a draft report to DESE. DESE edits and fact-checks the draft report and sends it to the district for factual review before publishing it on the DESE website.

Site Visit

The site visit to the Palmer Public Schools was conducted from February 25–27, 2020. The site visit included approximately 30 hours of interviews and focus groups with approximately 80 stakeholders, including school committee members, town administrators and leaders, district administrators, school staff, students, students’ families, and teachers’ association representatives. The review team conducted 3 focus groups with 8 elementary-school teachers, 8 teachers in grades 6-8, and 8 teachers in grades 9-12.

A list of review team members, information about review activities, and the site visit schedule are in Appendix A, and Appendix B provides information about enrollment, attendance, and expenditures. The team observed classroom instruction in 45 classrooms in 2 schools. The team collected data using DESE’s Instructional Inventory, a tool for recording observed characteristics of standards-based teaching. This data is contained in Appendix C.

**District Profile**

Palmer has a town manager/town council form of government and the chair of the school committee is elected. The five members of the school committee meet monthly.

The superintendent has been in the position since January 2016. The district leadership team includes the superintendent, the director of student services, the director of finance, the elementary-school principal, and the high-school principal. Central office positions have been mostly stable over the past five years, except for the director of finance position which turned over three times in the two years before the onsite review. The district has two principals leading two schools. Other school administrators include two assistant principals at the Old Mill Pond Elementary School and two assistant principals at Palmer High School (one for grades 6-8 and one for grades 9-12). In 2018–2019, there were 114.7 teachers in the district.

In the 2018–2019 school year, 1,304 students were enrolled in the district’s schools:

**Table 1: Palmer Public Schools**

**Schools, Type, Grades Served, and Enrollment\*, 2018–2019**

| **School** | **Type** | **Grades Served** | **Enrollment** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Old Mill Pond Elementary | ES | Pre-K-5 | 642 |
| Palmer High School | HS | 6-12 | 662 |
| **Totals** | **2 schools** | **Pre-K-12** | **1,304** |
| \*As of October 1, 2018 | | | |

Total student enrollment decreased by 12.6 percent between 2014 and 2019. Enrollment figures by race/ethnicity and high needs populations (i.e., students with disabilities, economically disadvantaged students, English learners (ELs) and former ELs) as compared with the state are provided in Tables B1a and B1b in Appendix B.

The total in-district per-pupil expenditure was equivalent to the median in-district per-pupil expenditure for 43 K-12 districts of similar size (1,000-1,999 students) in fiscal year 2018: $14,582, compared with a median of $14,582 (see [District Analysis and Review Tool Detail: Staffing & Finance](https://eur02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.doe.mass.edu%2Fdart%2F&data=02%7C01%7Cjames.hearns%40classmeasures.com%7C0915e6756d184b29f81a08d7c5037902%7C78731c4015ca4cd7938f4960a2cb0713%7C0%7C0%7C637194491012162778&sdata=x38QOegnsP0LelHqEEihRwyWT8B2tV6Vge9ZksHl7VA%3D&reserved=0)). Actual net school spending has been above what is required by the Chapter 70 state education aid program, as shown in Table B3 in Appendix B.

Student Performance

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| **Table 2: Palmer Public Schools**  **Accountability Percentile, Criterion Reference Target (CRT) Percentage, Reason for Classification** | | | | |
| **School** | **Accountability Percentile** | **Cumulative CRT Percentage** | **Overall Classification** | **Reason for Classification** |
| Old Mill Pond | 16 | 28% | Not requiring assistance or intervention | Moderate progress toward targets |
| Palmer High | 28 | 45% | Not requiring assistance or intervention | Moderate progress toward targets |
| District | -- | 36% | Not requiring assistance or intervention | Moderate progress toward targets |

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| **Table 3: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS ELA Scaled Scores Grades 3­-8, 2017­-2019** | | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **Change** | **State (2019)** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | 19 | 493.0 | 491.9 | 485.4 | -7.6 | 491.2 | -5.8 |
| Asian | 15 | 491.2 | 502.7 | 497.0 | 5.8 | 512.8 | -15.8 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 74 | 492.5 | 490.8 | 489.1 | -3.4 | 490.6 | -1.5 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 41 | 497.1 | 497.3 | 490.3 | -6.8 | 503.6 | -13.3 |
| White | 499 | 497.2 | 499.2 | 495.6 | -1.6 | 504.9 | -9.3 |
| High needs | 364 | 490.4 | 490.1 | 486.7 | -3.7 | 490.7 | -4.0 |
| Economically disadvantaged. | 313 | 492.8 | 492.4 | 488.3 | -4.5 | 490.6 | -2.3 |
| EL and Former EL | 32 | 481.9 | 484.8 | 479.5 | -2.4 | 481.1 | -1.6 |
| Students with disabilities | 128 | 476.4 | 474.2 | 471.4 | -5.0 | 489.3 | -17.9 |
| All | 649 | 496.6 | 498.0 | 494.2 | -2.4 | 501.2 | -7.0 |
| Next Generation MCAS Achievement Levels: 440­-470 Not Meeting Expectations; 470­-500 Partially Meeting Expectations; 500-530 Meeting Expectations; 530­-560 Exceeding Expectations | | | | | | | |

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| **Table 4: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS Math Scaled Scores Grades 3­-8, 2017­-2019** | | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **Change** | **State (2019)** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | 19 | 483.7 | 482.9 | 477.6 | -6.1 | 487.8 | -10.2 |
| Asian | 15 | 492.7 | 498.1 | 500.2 | 7.5 | 516.4 | -16.2 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 75 | 488.2 | 481.7 | 482.2 | -6.0 | 488.2 | -6.0 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 41 | 493.0 | 488.8 | 483.5 | -9.5 | 500.8 | -17.3 |
| White | 501 | 494.2 | 492.3 | 489.3 | -4.9 | 502.7 | -13.4 |
| High needs | 366 | 486.9 | 484.0 | 481.7 | -5.2 | 488.8 | -7.1 |
| Economically disadvantaged | 314 | 488.9 | 485.6 | 482.5 | -6.4 | 488.1 | -5.6 |
| EL and Former EL | 32 | 479.4 | 480.2 | 476.4 | -3.0 | 479.5 | -3.1 |
| Students with disabilities | 130 | 473.5 | 469.5 | 469.5 | -4.0 | 489.3 | -19.8 |
| All | 652 | 493.4 | 490.7 | 488.1 | -5.3 | 499.2 | -11.1 |
| Next Generation MCAS Achievement Levels: 440­-470 Not Meeting Expectations; 470-­500 Partially Meeting Expectations; 500­-530 Meeting Expectations; 530­-560 Exceeding Expectations | | | | | | | |

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| **Table 5: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS ELA Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations Grades 3­-8, 2017-­2019** | | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **Change** | **State (2019)** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | 19 | 35% | 33% | 21% | -14% | 33% | -12% |
| Asian | 15 | 42% | 50% | 33% | -9% | 72% | -39% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 74 | 35% | 32% | 34% | -1% | 33% | 1% |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 41 | 46% | 47% | 27% | -19% | 56% | -29% |
| White | 499 | 42% | 49% | 41% | -1% | 59% | -18% |
| High needs | 364 | 31% | 32% | 25% | -6% | 32% | -7% |
| Economically disadvantaged. | 313 | 35% | 36% | 27% | -8% | 33% | -6% |
| El and Former EL | 32 | 16% | 17% | 9% | -7% | 16% | -7% |
| Students with disabilities | 128 | 6% | 8% | 5% | -1% | 32% | -27% |
| All | 649 | 41% | 47% | 38% | -3% | 52% | -14% |

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| **Table 6: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS Math Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations Grades 3­-8, 2017-­2019** | | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **Change** | **State (2019)** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | 19 | 6% | 13% | 5% | -1% | 28% | -23% |
| Asian | 15 | 33% | 50% | 47% | 14% | 76% | -29% |
| Hispanic or Latino | 75 | 27% | 24% | 25% | -2% | 29% | -4% |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 41 | 25% | 29% | 24% | -1% | 51% | -27% |
| White | 501 | 38% | 34% | 29% | -9% | 56% | -27% |
| High needs | 366 | 24% | 21% | 18% | -6% | 29% | -11% |
| Economically disadvantaged | 314 | 26% | 24% | 18% | -8% | 29% | -11% |
| EL and Former EL | 32 | 16% | 17% | 16% | 0% | 15% | 1% |
| Students with disabilities | 130 | 6% | 4% | 5% | -1% | 32% | -27% |
| All | 652 | 35% | 33% | 28% | -7% | 49% | -21% |

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| **Table 7: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next Generation MCAS ELA and Math Scaled Scores in Grade 10, 2019** | | | | | | | | |
|  | **ELA** | | | | **Math** | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2019** | **State** | **Above/Below** | **N (2019)** | **2019** | **State** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | 3 | -- | 493.8 | -- | 3 | -- | 492.3 | -- |
| Asian | 2 | -- | 516.8 | -- | 2 | -- | 522.5 | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 3 | -- | 492.0 | -- | 3 | -- | 491.0 | -- |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 5 | -- | 509.0 | -- | 5 | -- | 506.7 | -- |
| White | 66 | 504.6 | 510.7 | -6.1 | 66 | 504.5 | 509.0 | -4.5 |
| High needs | 31 | 492.0 | 492.6 | -0.6 | 31 | 491.7 | 491.6 | 0.1 |
| Economically disadvantaged | 25 | 493.6 | 493.4 | 0.2 | 25 | 493.8 | 492.1 | 1.7 |
| EL and Former EL | 2 | -- | 486.2 | -- | 2 | -- | 483.8 | -- |
| Students with disabilities | 11 | 475.0 | 480.6 | -5.6 | 11 | 473.9 | 485.4 | -11.5 |
| All | 79 | 502.2 | 506.2 | -4.0 | 79 | 502.5 | 505.1 | -2.6 |

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| **Table 8: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next Generation MCAS ELA and Math Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grade 10, 2019** | | | | | | | | |
|  | **ELA** | | | | **Math** | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2019** | **State** | **Above/Below** | **N (2019)** | **2019** | **State** | **Above/Below** |
| African American/Black | 3 | -- | 38% | -- | 3 | -- | 35% | -- |
| Asian | 2 | -- | 78% | -- | 2 | -- | 82% | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 3 | -- | 37% | -- | 3 | -- | 33% | -- |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 5 | -- | 65% | -- | 5 | -- | 60% | -- |
| White | 66 | 56% | 69% | -13% | 66 | 53% | 67% | -14% |
| High needs | 31 | 26% | 36% | -10% | 31 | 29% | 33% | -4% |
| Economically disadvantaged | 25 | 32% | 38% | -6% | 25 | 36% | 35% | 1% |
| EL and Former EL | 2 | -- | 18% | -- | 2 | -- | 24% | -- |
| Students with disabilities | 11 | 0% | 22% | -22% | 11 | 0% | 18% | -18% |
| All | 79 | 49% | 61% | -12% | 79 | 48% | 59% | -11% |

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| **Table 9: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next Generation MCAS Science Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grades 5 and 8,**  **and MCAS Science Proficient or Advanced in Grade 10, 2019** | | | | | | | | |
|  | **Next-Generation MCAS Grades 5 and 8** | | | | **MCAS Grade 10** | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2019** | **State** | **Above/ Below** | **N (2019)** | **2019** | **State** | **Above/ Below** |
| African American/Black | 7 | 0% | 24% | -24% | 3 | -- | 54% | -- |
| Asian | 2 | 0% | 67% | -67% | 2 | -- | 88% | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 26 | 23% | 26% | -3% | 3 | -- | 53% | -- |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 13 | 23% | 51% | -28% | 3 | -- | 76% | -- |
| White | 188 | 31% | 56% | -26% | 62 | 76% | 81% | -5% |
| High needs | 126 | 14% | 27% | -13% | 28 | 50% | 53% | -3% |
| Economically disadvantaged | 110 | 16% | 27% | -10% | 23 | 61% | 54% | 7% |
| EL and Former EL | 10 | 0% | 23% | -23% | 2 | -- | 39% | -- |
| Students with disabilities | 52 | 6% | 17% | -11% | 9 | -- | 38% | -- |
| All | 236 | 28% | 48% | -19% | 73 | 70% | 74% | -4% |

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| **Table 10: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS ELA Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations, 2017­-2019** | | | | | | | |
| **Grade** | **N (2019)** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **Change** | **State (2019)** | **Above/Below** |
| 3 | 90 | 37% | 47% | 40% | 3% | 56% | -16% |
| 4 | 90 | 51% | 49% | 40% | -11% | 52% | -12% |
| 5 | 113 | 43% | 64% | 36% | -7% | 52% | -16% |
| 6 | 123 | 49% | 44% | 41% | -8% | 53% | -12% |
| 7 | 111 | 45% | 38% | 46% | 1% | 48% | -2% |
| 8 | 122 | 24% | 40% | 28% | 4% | 52% | -24% |
| 3-­8 | 649 | 41% | 47% | 38% | -3% | 52% | -14% |
| 10 | 79 | -- | -- | 49% | -- | 61% | -12% |

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| **Table 11: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS Math Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grades 3-­8, 2017-­2019** | | | | | | | |
| **Grade** | **N (2019)** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **Change** | **State (2019)** | **Above/Below** |
| 3 | 90 | 43% | 43% | 26% | -17% | 49% | -23% |
| 4 | 91 | 44% | 19% | 29% | -15% | 50% | -21% |
| 5 | 113 | 20% | 28% | 10% | -10% | 48% | -38% |
| 6 | 124 | 36% | 44% | 46% | 10% | 52% | -6% |
| 7 | 111 | 41% | 30% | 34% | -7% | 48% | -14% |
| 8 | 123 | 28% | 34% | 21% | -7% | 46% | -25% |
| 3­-8 | 652 | 35% | 33% | 28% | -7% | 49% | -21% |
| 10 | 79 | -- | -- | 48% | -- | 59% | -11% |

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| **Table 12: Palmer Public Schools**  **MCAS Science Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced in Grades 5, 8, and 10, 2016­-2019** | | | | | | | |
| **Grade** | **N (2019)** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2019)** |
| 5 | -- | 53% | 41% | 40% | -- | -- | -- |
| 8 | -- | 22% | 25% | 32% | -- | -- | -- |
| 10 | 73 | 63% | 59% | 65% | 70% | 7% | 74% |

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| **Table 13: Palmer Public Schools**  **English Language Arts and Math Mean Student Growth Percentile, 2018­-2019** | | | | | | | | |
|  | **ELA** | | | | **Math** | | | |
| **Grade** | **N (2019)** | **2018** | **2019** | **State (2019)** | **N (2019)** | **2018** | **2019** | **State (2019)** |
| 3 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| 4 | 84 | 53.0 | 41.1 | 49.7 | 84 | 28.6 | 30.5 | 49.8 |
| 5 | 105 | 54.4 | 34.1 | 50.0 | 105 | 29.0 | 24.2 | 50.0 |
| 6 | 110 | 47.5 | 35.5 | 50.0 | 110 | 62.5 | 57.4 | 50.0 |
| 7 | 100 | 52.7 | 52.5 | 49.9 | 101 | 49.3 | 47.3 | 50.1 |
| 8 | 111 | 37.9 | 30.1 | 49.9 | 110 | 41.4 | 26.5 | 49.9 |
| 3­-8 | 510 | 49.1 | 38.3 | 49.9 | 510 | 42.0 | 37.5 | 49.9 |
| 10 | 68 | 47.1 | 51.8 | 49.4 | 67 | 52.5 | 57.7 | 49.7 |

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| **Table 14: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS ELA Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations by School and Grade, 2019** | | | | | | | | |
| **School** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **3­8** | **10** |
| Old Mill Pond | 41% | 42% | 38% | -- | -- | -- | 40% | -- |
| Palmer High | -- | -- | -- | 43% | 49% | 30% | 41% | 54% |
| District | 40% | 40% | 36% | 41% | 46% | 28% | 38% | 49% |
| State | 56% | 52% | 52% | 53% | 48% | 52% | 52% | 61% |

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| **Table 15: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS Math Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations by School and Grade, 2019** | | | | | | | | |  |
| **School** | **3** | **4** | **5** | **6** | **7** | **8** | **3-8** | **10** | |
| Old Mill Pond | 26% | 29% | 10% | -- | -- | -- | 21% | -- | |
| Palmer High | -- | -- | -- | 48% | 37% | 23% | 36% | 53% | |
| District | 26% | 29% | 10% | 46% | 34% | 21% | 28% | 48% | |
| State | 49% | 50% | 48% | 52% | 48% | 46% | 49% | 59% | |

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| **Table 16: Palmer Public Schools**  **Science Next-Generation MCAS Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations and**  **MCAS Percent Proficient or Advanced by School and Grade, 2019** | | | | | |
|  | **Next-Generation MCAS** | | |  | **MCAS** |
| **School** | **5** | **8** | **5 & 8** |  | **10** |
| Old Mill Pond | 36% | -- | 36% |  | -- |
| Palmer High | -- | 25% | 25% |  | 72% |
| District | 35% | 23% | 28% |  | 70% |
| State | 49% | 46% | 48% |  | 74% |

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| **Table 17: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS ELA Grades 3-8 Percent Meeting and Exceeding Expectations by School, 2019** | | | | | | | | | | |
| **School** | **All** | **High Needs** | **Econ. Dis.** | **SWD** | **EL** | **African American** | **Asian** | **Hispanic** | **Multi-race** | **White** |
| Old Mill Pond | 40% | 25% | 26% | 9% | 12% | -- | -- | 32% | 38% | 43% |
| Palmer High | 41% | 30% | 33% | 3% | 8% | -- | -- | 38% | 29% | 42% |
| District | 38% | 25% | 27% | 5% | 9% | 21% | 33% | 34% | 27% | 41% |
| State | 52% | 32% | 33% | 16% | 32% | 33% | 72% | 33% | 56% | 59% |

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| **Table 18: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS Math Grades 3-8 Percent Meeting and Exceeding Expectations by School, 2019** | | | | | | | | | | |
| **School** | **All** | **High Needs** | **Econ. Dis.** | **SWD** | **EL** | **African American** | **Asian** | **Hispanic** | **Multi-race** | **White** |
| Old Mill Pond | 21% | 10% | 10% | 4% | 12% | -- | -- | 22% | 31% | 20% |
| Palmer High | 36% | 26% | 28% | 8% | 17% | -- | -- | 32% | 29% | 37% |
| District | 28% | 18% | 18% | 5% | 16% | 5% | 47% | 25% | 24% | 29% |
| State | 49% | 29% | 29% | 15% | 32% | 28% | 76% | 29% | 51% | 56% |

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| **Table 19: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS ELA Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grade 10, 2019** | | | | | | | | | | |
| **School** | **All** | **High Needs** | **Econ. Dis.** | **SWD** | **EL** | **African American** | **Asian** | **Hispanic** | **Multi-race** | **White** |
| Old Mill Pond | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Palmer High | 54% | 28% | 35% | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 59% |
| District | 49% | 26% | 32% | 0% | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 56% |
| State | 61% | 36% | 38% | 22% | 18% | 38% | 78% | 37% | 65% | 69% |

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| **Table 20: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS Math Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations in Grade 10, 2019** | | | | | | | | | | |
| **School** | **All** | **High Needs** | **Econ. Dis.** | **SWD** | **EL** | **African American** | **Asian** | **Hispanic** | **Multi-race** | **White** |
| Old Mill Pond | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Palmer High | 53% | 33% | 42% | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 57% |
| District | 48% | 29% | 36% | 0% | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 53% |
| State | 59% | 33% | 35% | 18% | 24% | 35% | 82% | 33% | 60% | 67% |

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| **Table 21: Palmer Public Schools**  **Next-Generation MCAS Science Percent Meeting and Exceeding Expectations by School, 2019** | | | | | | | | | | |
| **School** | **All** | **High Needs** | **Econ. Dis.** | **SWD** | **EL** | **African American** | **Asian** | **Hispanic** | **Multi-race** | **White** |
| Old Mill Pond | 36% | 22% | 24% | 19% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 27% | 50% | 38% |
| Palmer High | 25% | 10% | 12% | 0% | 0% | 0% | -- | 21% | 0% | 27% |
| District | 28% | 14% | 16% | 6% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 23% | 23% | 31% |
| State | 48% | 27% | 27% | 17% | 23% | 24% | 67% | 26% | 51% | 56% |

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| **Table 22: Palmer Public Schools**  **MCAS Science Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced in Science by School and Group,**  **2016­-2019** | | | | | | |
| **School** | **N (2019)** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **4-yr Change** |
| Old Mill Pond | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Palmer High | 71 | 64% | 62% | 67% | 72% | 8% |
| African American/Black | 3 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Asian | 2 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 2 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Multi-race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 3 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| White | 61 | 67% | 59% | 66% | 77% | 10% |
| High needs | 26 | 26% | 35% | 51% | 54% | 28% |
| Economically disadvantaged | 22 | 40% | 44% | 54% | 64% | 24% |
| Students with disabilities | 7 | 7% | 0% | 43% | -- | -- |
| EL | 2 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |

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| **Table 23: Palmer Public Schools**  **Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rates by Student Group, 2016–2019** | | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N**  **(2019)** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2019)** |
| African American/Black | 4 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 79.9 |
| Asian | 5 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 95.2 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 7 | -- | 50.0 | 71.4 | 71.4 | -- | 74.4 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 1 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 87.6 |
| White | 88 | 85.0 | 90.8 | 82.7 | 92.0 | 7.0 | 92.7 |
| High needs | 55 | 73.2 | 71.4 | 67.9 | 85.5 | 12.3 | 78.8 |
| Economically disadvantaged\* | 47 | 75.5 | 74.3 | 73.0 | 85.1 | 9.6 | 78.5 |
| Students with disabilities | 22 | 43.5 | 52.2 | 54.2 | 68.2 | 24.7 | 73.9 |
| EL | 2 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 64.6 |
| All | 105 | 84.1 | 86.0 | 81.4 | 91.4 | 7.3 | 88.0 |

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| **Table 24: Palmer Public Schools**  **Five-Year Cohort Graduation Rates by Student Group, 2015­-2018** | | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N**  **(2018)** | **2015** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2018)** |
| African American/Black | 2 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 84.5 |
| Asian | 2 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 95.5 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 7 | -- | -- | 50.0 | 85.7 | -- | 77.6 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 4 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 88.7 |
| White | 81 | 86.8 | 89.0 | 94.7 | 85.2 | -1.6 | 93.4 |
| High needs | 53 | 70.3 | 78.6 | 78.6 | 73.6 | 3.3 | 81.4 |
| Economically disadvantaged\* | 37 | 68.6 | 79.6 | 82.9 | 78.4 | 9.8 | 81.0 |
| Students with disabilities | 24 | 60.0 | 52.2 | 60.9 | 62.5 | 2.5 | 76.4 |
| EL | 4 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 69.7 |
| All | 97 | 87.1 | 87.6 | 89.5 | 84.5 | -2.6 | 89.7 |

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| **Table 25: Palmer Public Schools**  **In-School Suspension Rates by Student Group, 2016­-2019** | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2019)** |
| African American/Black | -- | 16.7 | 4.3 | 0.0 | -- | 3.4 |
| Asian | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 0.5 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 7.1 | 3.7 | 4.4 | 0.0 | -7.1 | 2.3 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | -- | -- | 2.8 | 0.0 | -- | 2.3 |
| White | 4.1 | 4.2 | 1.8 | 0.3 | -3.8 | 1.6 |
| High needs | 6.8 | 5.6 | 3.2 | 0.1 | -6.7 | 2.7 |
| Economically disadvantaged\* | 6.3 | 5.9 | 3.6 | 0.1 | -6.2 | 2.9 |
| Students with disabilities | 8.3 | 6.1 | 4.6 | 0.0 | -8.3 | 3.3 |
| EL | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 1.7 |
| All | 4.4 | 4.4 | 2.2 | 0.2 | -4.2 | 1.9 |

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| **Table 26: Palmer Public Schools**  **Out-of-School Suspension Rates by Student Group, 2016­-2019** | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2019)** |
| African American/Black | -- | 7.1 | 12.8 | 12.8 | -- | 6.2 |
| Asian | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 0.8 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 5.6 | 4.3 | 7.7 | 9.9 | 4.3 | 5.0 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | -- | -- | 5.6 | 12.0 | -- | 3.5 |
| White | 3.8 | 3.6 | 4.8 | 8.1 | 4.3 | 2.0 |
| High needs | 6.2 | 4.6 | 6.7 | 10.1 | 3.9 | 4.7 |
| Economically disadvantaged\* | 6.0 | 4.6 | 7.1 | 10.3 | 4.3 | 5.4 |
| Students with disabilities | 8.9 | 6.7 | 8.6 | 13.0 | 4.1 | 5.7 |
| EL | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 3.6 |
| All | 3.8 | 3.6 | 5.3 | 8.5 | 4.7 | 3.0 |

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| **Table 27: Palmer Public Schools**  **Dropout Rates by Student Group, 2016-­2019** | | | | | | |
| **Group** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2019)** |
| African American/Black | 16.7 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | -16.7 | 2.6 |
| Asian | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.5 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 5.9 | 8.7 | 0.0 | 0.0 | -5.9 | 4.3 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 16.7 | -- | 0.0 | 14.3 | -2.4 | 1.8 |
| White | 4.6 | 1.0 | 1.3 | 1.8 | -2.8 | 1.0 |
| High needs | 14.3 | 3.0 | 2.5 | 3.9 | -10.4 | 3.5 |
| Economically disadvantaged | 13.9 | 2.0 | 2.5 | 3.2 | -10.7 | 3.8 |
| Students with disabilities | 16.7 | 5.1 | 4.2 | 5.7 | -11.0 | 3.1 |
| EL | -- | -- | 0.0 | -- | -- | 7.1 |
| All | 4.9 | 2.0 | 1.1 | 1.8 | -3.1 | 1.8 |

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| **Table 28: Palmer Public Schools**  **Advanced Coursework Completion by Student Group, 2018-2019** | | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2018** | **2019** | **Change** | **Target** |
| African American/Black | 6 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Asian | 7 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 17 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 1 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| White | 154 | 72.0 | 65.6 | -6.4 | 76.2 |
| High needs | 82 | 45.9 | 42.7 | -3.2 | 53.2 |
| Economically disadvantaged | 65 | 51.6 | 49.2 | -2.4 | 59.0 |
| Students with disabilities | 31 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| EL | 5 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| All | 186 | 69.5 | 64.5 | -5.0 | 73.8 |

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| **Table 29: Palmer Public Schools**  **Progress toward Attaining English Language Proficiency, 2018-2019** | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | **Non-high school** | | | | | **High school** | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2018** | **2019** | **Change** | **Target** | **N (2019)** | **2018** | **2019** | **Change** | **Target** |
| EL | 22 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| All | 22 | 63.6 | 54.5 | -9.1 | 66.3 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |

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| **Table 30: Palmer Public Schools**  **Chronic Absence Rates\* by Student Group, 2018-2019** | | | | | | | | | | |
|  | **Non-high school** | | | | | **High school** | | | | |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2018** | **2019** | **Change** | **Target** | **N (2019)** | **2018** | **2019** | **Change** | **Target** |
| African American/Black | 13 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 6 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Asian | 10 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 7 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Hispanic or Latino | 28 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 17 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Multi-Race, non-Hispanic or Latino | 9 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 1 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| White | 291 | 14.3 | 14.4 | 0.1 | 12.5 | 154 | 72.0 | 65.6 | -6.4 | 76.2 |
| High needs | 164 | 25.9 | 30.5 | 4.6 | 23.0 | 82 | 45.9 | 42.7 | -3.2 | 53.2 |
| Economically disadvantaged | 113 | 29.8 | 34.5 | 4.7 | 25.3 | 65 | 51.6 | 49.2 | -2.4 | 59.0 |
| Students with disabilities | 67 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 31 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| EL | 9 | -- | -- | -- | -- | 5 | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| All | 352 | 16.6 | 16.8 | 0.2 | 15.0 | 186 | 69.5 | 64.5 | -5.0 | 73.8 |
| \* Chronic absence is defined as the percentage of students absent 10 percent or more of their total number of student days of membership in a school. | | | | | | | | | | |

Leadership and Governance

Contextual Background

*School Committee Governance*

Palmer’s five-member school committee generally focuses its attention on appropriate business as defined by Massachusetts state law. The committee regularly reviews and approves policy; establishes and approves the annual budget; tracks financial transactions; and evaluates the superintendent. However, the committee does not pay sufficient attention to the establishment and promotion of the district’s strategic mission, and a review of committee meeting minutes suggests that the committee turns its focus to operational issues at times. For example, there were several instances captured in the minutes when members were advised to follow “the chain of command,” a clear indication that they were involving themselves in the daily operations of the district.

*District and School Improvement Planning*

The district does not have a broadly inclusive improvement planning process that would result in district and school improvement plans with measurable goals that drive the district’s work and are systematically monitored. District and school improvement plans are not consistently monitored during the school year.[[3]](#footnote-4) In addition, the current allocation of resources in the district challenges its capacity to meet the learning and social-emotional needs of a changing student population.

Strengthening of the district’s improvement planning will require the district to continue to build its capacity to collaboratively address important issues related to student opportunities and achievement.

*Budget Development*

By all accounts, it appears that the district has developed a positive working relationship with the Town of Palmer. The district has recently benefitted from increased financial support of the operating budget from the town and has worked cooperatively with the new town manager on several capital improvement projects. In recent years the district has reduced the number of out-of-district placements. Moreover, district leaders have aggressively pursued grant funding to support new curriculum and professional development opportunities in the district.

*District and School Leadership*

The small district leadership team consists of the superintendent, the director of finance, the director of student services, and the two school principals. The district has not assigned specific leadership responsibilities for curriculum development and revision, human resources, professional development, and the educator evaluation system. Although many staff members perform activities in these critical domains in an ad-hoc manner, no one has explicit responsibility. This challenges Palmer’s ability to manage the district effectively and to meet important administrative demands.

**Challenges and Areas for Growth**

**The district does not have a broadly inclusive improvement planning process that would result in district and school improvement plans with measurable goals that drive the district’s work and are systematically monitored.**

* 1. While the district improvement plan (DIP) and school improvement plans (SIPs) are aligned, the benchmarks for attainment of their common goals are not always stated in measurable terms.

1. The high school SIP is missing timelines and measurable accountability benchmarks.

2. While the DIP and the elementary SIP have timelines for goal attainment, the benchmarks for achieving these goals are not always useful for measuring growth in professional practice and student performance.

a. Some benchmarks are targeted and measurable. For example, the elementary SIP sets forth the following benchmark for measuring the impact of the pilot implementation of the TeachPoint educator evaluation management system: Staff that participate will share at least 80% of their evaluation documents through this platform.

b. Other benchmarks simply reiterate desired outcomes. For example, the following DIP benchmark to promote the use of assessment data to guide instruction does not have a measurable component: Teacher based intervention cycles will be supported by interventionists focusing on different components and routines of curriculum delivery.

c. The DIP and the elementary SIP are missing strategies for progress monitoring, persons/groups responsible for carrying out the activities, and the timeline for completion.

3. The superintendent and principals acknowledged this shortfall in their district planning process.

* 1. Key stakeholders have not participated consistently in the development of improvement plans.

The district improvement committee composed of teachers and administrators meets in the spring to identify district progress and needs and provide input on the development of the DIP.

School committee members reported that they did not participate in the development of the DIP and did not review and approve the SIPs annually.

Although the elementary school did not convene a school council meeting during the 2018-2019 school year, the elementary school council reviewed the elementary school SIP in 2019-2020.

1. District and school improvement plans are not consistently monitored during the school year.

The superintendent told the team that district progress toward the attainment of DIP goals was not monitored periodically during the school year. The superintendent stated that the district improvement committee assessed progress annually, and there was an intention to make an assessment at mid-year. It was unclear to the team whether a mid-year assessment had taken place during the 2019-2020 school year.

The school committee receives an annual progress report on district progress toward DIP goals, but interim progress reports are not issued at intervals during the school year.

The elementary school SIP was monitored by the elementary school council and the instructional leadership team in 2019-2020.

The high-school principal reported that since the high-school SIP did not include written benchmarks, department heads and team leaders informally evaluated progress.

**Impact**: Systematic alignment, implementation, and evaluation of annual district and school improvement plans are critical to improving student performance. The district has taken an important step by aligning district and improvement school plans. However, this effort will be not an effective lever for raising student outcomes and achievement until the district develops plans with measurable benchmarks that are developed and understood by key stakeholders and monitored regularly.

**The current allocation of resources in the district challenges its capacity to meet the learning and social-emotional needs of a changing student population.**

1. According to DESE data about 2018 in-district per-pupil expenditures, Palmer allocates considerably more of its total spending on in-district pupils on teachers (i.e. classroom teachers and specialists) than comparable districts with similar student demographics.
2. According to DESE data, Palmer expended 40 percent of its total spending on in-district pupils on teachers, while on average districts with comparable student demographics expended 33.8 percent of their total spending on in-district pupils on teachers.

**B.** According to RADAR Benchmarking for 2019, Palmer’s ratio of 8.6 teachers per 100 students exceeded the statewide average of 7.8 teachers per 100 students.

**C.** School committee members, district and school leaders, and leaders of the Palmer Teachers Association, expressed the view that the commitment of resources to teaching services in Palmer was greater than necessary, resulting in very small class sizes.

1. The team found small class sizes in many observed classes, especially at the high school.

a. For example, at the elementary level (Pre-K-5), the number of students in observed classes ranged from 11 to 19. Of the 17 observed classes, 3 classes had between 11 and 15 students; 3 classes had 16 students; 5 classes had 17 students; 1 class had 18 students; and 4 classes had 19 students. In one class, the observer did not note the number of students.

b. In observed classes in grades 6-8, the number of students ranged from 8 to 20. Of the 14 observed classes, 4 classes had between 8 and 14 students; 3 classes had 15 students; 2 classes had 17 students; 4 classes had 19 students; and 1 class had 20 students.

c. In observed classes in grades 9-12, the number of students ranged from 4 to 35. Of the 14 observed classes, 3 classes had between 4 and 9 students; 4 classes had between 12 and 15 students; 3 classes had 17 students; and 3 classes had between 19 and 23 students. One class had 35 students; it was a combined ELA/history class which met once a week at the end of a unit.

**D.** As shown in Table 31 below, Palmer has experienced an increase in the percentage enrollment of students with more challenging educational needs during the five-year interval from 2016 to 2020.

**Table 31: Palmer Public Schools**

**Changes in the Percentage Enrollments of Selected Student Groups, 2016-2020**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **Percentage of District Enrollment 2015-2016** | **Percentage of District Enrollment 2019-2020** | **Increase** |
| First Language not English | 3.1 | 4.9 | 1.8 |
| English learners | 1.5 | 3.6 | 2.1 |
| Students with disabilities | 19.5 | 19.7 | .2 |
| Economically disadvantaged | 34.0 | 46.1 | 12.1 |

* 1. According to DESE data, Palmer allocates fewer resources to student support services than districts with comparable student demographics.

In 2018, Palmer expended 13 percent of its total spending on in-district pupils on student support (i.e., guidance and pupil services), while districts with comparable student demographics on average expended 16.6 percent of their total spending on in-district pupils on student support.

* 1. District and school leaders expressed the need for increased student support services.

Principals expressed the view that additional guidance counselors, adjustment counselors, and applied behavioral analysists were needed to address the social-emotional and behavioral needs of a changing student population.

**Impact:** Strategic allocation of resources is critical to maximizing the use of available funds to meet students’ needs. Overfunding in one budget area can lead to underfunding in another, challenging a district’s ability to provide students with all that they need to be successful. Palmer’s efforts to improve student outcomes and achievement will likely be ineffective if the district does not act to identify and provide resources proportionate to the learning, social-emotional, and behavioral needs of all students.

**Recommendations**

**The district should develop clear improvement plans that are characterized by measurable benchmarks, clear timelines, and regular cycles of review and modification. These plans should be developed with input from all district stakeholders.**

**A.** Under the leadership of the superintendent, the district should convene a representative group of stakeholders to develop measurable goals, including specific targets for improving student performance, opportunities, and outcomes, for its planning documents.

1. The goals should be based on an analysis of historical, longitudinal, and current disaggregated data related to student performance, opportunities, and outcomes.

2. The goals should be SMART: (Specific and Strategic; Measurable; Action-oriented; Rigorous, Realistic, and Results-focused; and Timed and Tracked).

3. The district and schools should develop plans that include clear and measurable benchmarks for both student achievement and teacher performance.

a. Using state performance measures as well as local benchmark, formative and summative assessment data, the district should establish measurable benchmarks for student performance.

b. Changes to the instructional practice and overall performance of teachers that are vital to the implementation of plan initiatives should be benchmarked.

4. The district should develop a process for using the most recent student data to continually monitor and update district and school improvement plans.

**B.** The district should strengthen its practice of integrating district and school plans by establishing a formal review and approval process for these plans.

District leaders should formally review SIPs each year to ensure that all plans meet the important criteria set forth by the district.

Principals and school councils should ensure that each SIP includes specific measures to determine the progress of school-based initiatives.

All SIPs should be submitted to the school committee for review and approval.

Each school should have a clear plan in place at the start of the school year to serve as a guide for school improvement.

**C.** The district and its schools should establish structures, procedures, and protocols to monitor and review benchmarks regularly.

The district should consider using elements of its existing management and meeting structure to review improvement plan progress regularly. Leadership, instructional leadership team, department and faculty meetings provide important opportunities to review benchmark data. Using routine structures in this way can help to create powerful habits associated with accountability and reflection in the district.

Classroom learning walks should be used more frequently to capture trends associated with desired teacher performance and to assess the impact of professional development efforts.

The district should use the analysis of benchmark data to establish a culture of inquiry in the district.

Benchmark reviews should provide opportunities for stakeholders to provide input that may be useful for improvement plan revision, where necessary.

The school committee should review benchmark data regularly and develop procedures that hold the superintendent accountable for the implementation of the district’s improvement plan.

**D.** The planning initiatives described above should have the benefit of input from both families and teachers.

* + 1. The district should continue to solicit parent voice through school councils and surveys of the school community.
    2. Teachers should be provided with opportunities for meaningful input into the development of both district and school improvement plans.

**Benefit**: The systematic alignment, implementation, and evaluation of annual district and school improvement plans are key ingredients in the process of improving student achievement. Tight alignment between district and school improvement plans, together with regular reviews of goals, initiatives, and benchmarks, provide a powerful means through which curriculum, instruction, and student services vital to improved student achievement are provided to students. The participation of stakeholders in plan development and the frequent and open review of progress can help to ensure the plans’ viability and sustainability and can reinforce stakeholders’ understanding of the district’s mission.

**Recommended resources:**

* DESE’s *Planning for Success* tools (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/success/>) support the improvement planning process by spotlighting practices, characteristics, and behaviors that support effective planning and implementation and meet existing state requirements for improvement planning.
* *Focused Planning for Accelerating Student Learning* (<http://www.mass.gov/edu/docs/ese/accountability/dsac/focused-planning.pdf>) provides guidance for districts to accelerate achievement for all students through the development of a focused, actionable and sustainable Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP).
* *District Accelerated Improvement Planning - Guiding Principles for Effective Benchmarks* (<http://www.mass.gov/edu/docs/ese/accountability/turnaround/level-4-guiding-principles-effective-benchmarks.pdf>) provides information about different types of benchmarks to guide and measure district improvement efforts.

**2. The district should critically review resource allocation in the district to identify opportunities to provide students with social-emotional support through traditional avenues such as guidance and pupil services.**

**A.** The district should use DESE’s tools such as RADAR and Edwin Analytics to further analyze student performance and its allocation of resources.

**B.** District leaders should deepen their understanding of resource allocation through a review of spending patterns in districts with similar characteristics.

**C.** District leaders should identify the stakeholders who should be involved in establishing a plan to reallocate funds to student support services. Potential stakeholders could include district and school leaders, teachers, school committee members, school council members, and town officials.

**D.** Identified stakeholders should consider conducting a root cause analysis to gain a better understanding of the reasons for spending imbalances and develop a plan for altering spending patterns.

1. The district should analyze the current and projected student enrollment at the high school to determine whether it is sufficient to sustain the level of staffing necessary. It might consider strategies such as cross-district partnerships that could expand opportunities for high-school students while prioritizing fiscal sustainability.

**Benefits**: The changing student population in the district presents a clear need for increased student support. A thorough analysis of resource allocation will benefit the district by providing an opportunity to develop stronger systems of student support within its current level of funding. This analysis can also provide an opportunity to discuss and to analyze the district’s broader student support needs.

**Recommended resources:**

* DESE’s *School Finance Statistical Comparisons* web page (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/statistics/>) provides comparisons of per-pupil expenditure, long-term enrollment, teacher salaries, and special education direct expenditure trends.
* *Shifting Resources Strategically to Fund District Priorities* (<https://dmgroupk12.com/solutions/strategic-budgeting>) describes how to reallocate existing funds to support key strategic efforts in three key areas: general education staffing levels, special education services, and federal funds such as Title I, II, and III. It also lists “Ten Mistakes to Avoid” and a list of reflection questions to guide districts’ reallocation.
* *Transforming School Funding: A Guide to Implementing Student-Based Budgeting* (<https://www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/2752-student-based-budgeting-guide.pdf>), from Education Resource Strategies, describes a process to help districts tie funding to specific student needs.
* In *Spending Money Wisely: Getting the Most from School District Budgets* (<https://dmgroupk12.com/> ; scroll down to Research & Publications section), authors Nathan Levenson, Karla Baehr, James C. Smith, and Claire Sullivan identify and discuss the top ten opportunities for districts to realign resources and free up funds to support strategic priorities. Drawing on the wisdom of leading thinkers, district leaders, and education researchers from across the country, the authors gathered a long list of opportunities for resource reallocation. To distill these down to the ten most high-impact opportunities, each opportunity was assessed based on its financial benefit, its impact on student achievement, its political feasibility, and its likelihood of success relative to the complexity of implementation.
* *Smarter School Spending for Student Success* (<http://smarterschoolspending.org/>) provides free processes and tools to help districts use their resources to improve student achievement.

Instruction

Contextual Background

In the absence of designated leadership for curriculum and instruction, the superintendent and the director of student services as well as principals, assistant principals, and department heads in grades 6-12 have assumed some of the primary responsibilities, in an ad hoc manner.

*Curriculum Selection and Use*

At the elementary school the literacy leadership team---which includes literacy interventionists and grade-level teachers---and the instructional leadership team (ILT) support teaching and learning. The high school has been developing an ILT with the support of an external partner. At the time of this review, the high-school ILT was creating schoolwide rubrics for argumentative writing.

The elementary school has chosen curricular materials to help teachers plan instruction in core subjects. The elementary school follows the Wonders program for literacy (McGraw-Hill), adopted in 2018-2019 and Eureka Math (EngageNY), adopted in 2019-2020. In addition, the Enhanced Core Reading Instruction (ECRI) phonics program is being implemented in kindergarten through grade 2 and to some extent in grades 3-5. ECRI is supported through collaboration with an external partner who provides monthly embedded professional development for teachers and monitors implementation of the ECRI program. There are scope and sequence documents and pacing guides for both literacy and mathematics. Teachers have access to all ECRI and Wonders materials in a shared Google file. For grade 5, the science curriculum is Mystery Science and the social studies curriculum is Social Studies Alive.

Standards-aligned curricular materials are not consistently provided to teachers at the high school (grades 9-12). Most high-school teachers create their own curriculum and resources for instruction. While some subjects and grades have pacing guides/scope and sequence documents, they are not systematically available. The school is challenged to achieve vertical alignment in core subjects from grade 5 through grade 12.

*Classroom Instruction*

The district is in the process of developing a co-teaching model at the elementary level and in grades 6-8. Participating special and general educators attend training provided by an external consultant and have scheduled planning time together. Although there is no common planning time for other teachers, teachers at the elementary level use their personal preparation time to plan grade-level instruction together. In 2019-2020, the district introduced professional learning communities (PLCs) at the elementary and high schools in cross-curricular groupings.

Instruction in grades 6-12 is delivered in 84-minute blocks.

Although at the time of the review in February 2020 the district had a protocol to conduct learning walks, only one learning walk had been conducted since the beginning of the school year in September 2019.

*Student Access to Coursework*

To support social and emotional learning, the elementary school has daily morning meeting and buddy check-ins and follows the Zones of Regulation program. Elementary staff has participated in trauma training. The school has implemented the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports model (PBIS. In addition, staff has recently participated in book studies--.

While PBIS has started in grades 6-8, it has not made progress in the high school. In grades 6-8, teachers have been trained in Second Step to support social-emotional learning.

While the district has a growing English learner population[[4]](#footnote-5) and students with disabilities represent 19.7 percent of the student population,[[5]](#footnote-6) the district has not conducted a formal analysis of how these traditionally underserved students are represented in Advanced Placement (AP) and honors classes, and in internships and externships opportunities for juniors and seniors.

Strength Findings

**1. The district is developing practices, resources, and structures to strengthen teaching and learning at the elementary level through a data-informed intervention program.**

* 1. In kindergarten through grade 5, the district is supporting the development of a data-informed intervention strategy known as WINN (What I Need Now) that is based on the Massachusetts Tiered System of Support model. Interviews and documents reviewed indicated that the WINN initiative began in the fall of 2019 and was being implemented by classroom teachers, special education teachers, Title I teachers, two literacy and three mathematics interventionists, and reading specialists.
     1. School leaders and teachers reported that interventionists began working in the elementary school in 2018-2019 and that they played a critical role in the WINN program. The roles and responsibilities of interventionists (except for one mathematics interventionist who works exclusively with students) include planning the weekly intervention focus with grade-level teachers in a 6-8 week cycle; providing embedded professional development (PD) for teachers in literacy and mathematics; and working with students in 30-minute intervention blocks.

a. In addition, one literacy and one mathematics interventionist spend half of their time providing direct support to teachers by coaching, co-teaching, and debriefing. Interventionists support teachers in delivering core instruction in mathematics and literacy to meet the needs of all learners.

b. Interventionists also lead data cycle meetings and help classroom teachers use data analysis to guide the composition of intervention groups. Interviews with school leaders and teachers and documents reviewed by the team indicated that these data cycle meetings took place every 6-8 weeks.

c. Interventionists meet weekly with the elementary principal.

* + 1. District and school leaders and teachers reported that literacy and mathematics interventions and classroom instruction were informed by a range of assessment tools to measure individual student progress toward mastery of learning goals. Student progress is tracked on individual student spreadsheets. WINN data meetings where teachers meet with interventionists to discuss data are held five times annually.

a. Assessments used to inform interventions and plan instruction include but are not limited to the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Learning Skills Next (DIBELS Next), Read 180, and STAR assessments for literacy and mathematics that include universal screeners, goal setting data, and progress monitoring tools for at-risk students. Interventionists ensure that the STAR assessments are aligned with the standards.

b. Interviews and a document review indicated that elementary teachers were being trained in a train-the-trainer model to use Add+VantageMR (AVMR) to identify students’ strengths and needs and to advance their numeracy understanding and development.

c. An outside consultant has provided guidance in the design of an assessment plan for literacy as well as guidance for the mathematics assessment plan.

d. A mathematics interventionist meets with a different grade-level team on every third Friday to discuss data.

**B.** The intervention program is viewed as having a positive impact on teaching and learning in kindergarten through grade 5 as well as providing valuable assessment data to better address the learning needs of all students.

1. School leaders reported that the results from the mid-year benchmark assessments showed that students were making effective progress. For example, grade 5 students who received intensive support based on the results of the fall testing have improved and did not need intensive support any longer. Teachers reported that they were excited about the data they now had.

2. In addition, district leaders reported that before the implementation of the WINN program, the district did not have a tiered system of support and students with disabilities had to be pulled out of their general education classes for supportive instruction. They also reported that the kind of data teachers now used better informed teacher assistance teams (TATs). District leaders expressed the view that before the implementation of the WINN intervention program, there were too many referrals of students for special education evaluations and too few classroom-based support services.

a. According to interviews, before the implementation of the WINN program and data cycles, the ratio for the provision of services for students with disabilities was 75 percent pull out to 25 percent push-in. At the time of the review, the ratio had been reversed to 75 percent push-in to 25 percent pull-out.[[6]](#footnote-7)

**Impact**: Students benefit from an evidence-based intervention program that is supported by a strong assessment plan. Early interventions for students struggling academically likely prevent more profound learning barriers in higher grades. Finally, this data-driven approach focused on student growth has the potential to support improvement of the instructional core in literacy and mathematics at the elementary level.

1. **At the elementary level, the district has introduced and is implementing an evidence-based phonics instructional model in collaboration with an external partner.**
2. At the time of the review, the elementary school was in the second year of implementation of Enhanced Core Reading Instruction (ECRI), an evidence-based phonics approach developed with the support of a consultant.

Interviews with district leaders and teachers and documents indicated that the district established a partnership with a consultant in 2017-2018 to help develop a coherent literacy program. This resulted in teachers selecting the Wonders literacy program. While the Wonders program is aligned with the rigorous Massachusetts standards at each grade level, it is missing foundational skills (phonics), especially in kindergarten through grade 2, but also in grades 3-5.

a. In 2017-2018 the district did not have a unified approach to teaching literacy and phonics, and there were no standardized assessments.

To address these challenges, district leaders and teachers reported that the district contracted with a consultant to support the implementation of ECRI, an evidence-based phonics instructional approach, at the elementary level.

* + - 1. District leaders reported that teachers wanted to implement a strong phonics program to supplement the Wonders program.

The external partners provided on-going embedded professional development for teachers to ensure the full implementation of ECRI phonics in kindergarten through grade 2 and support for teachers in grades 3-5 in phonics instruction.

* + - * 1. The consultants also ensure that the Wonders literacy program is being implemented with fidelity.

**B.** Teachers receive robust instructional support to implement the ECRI program and school leaders, including literacy interventionists and the literacy instructional leadership team (ILT), monitor the status of implementation.

When asked about instructional support for literacy, elementary teachers told the team that they received extensive monthly training. For example, one recent ECRI training included a full day of training for grade 4 teachers.

1. Paraprofessionals also attend ECRI trainings.

Consultants work closely with district leaders, the elementary principal, literacy interventionists, and ILT members in delivering embedded professional development (PD).

In addition to providing PD for teachers, ECRI consultants conduct classroom walkthroughs to collect ECRI implementation data, and walkthroughs focused on phonics instruction in grades 3-5.

a. ECRI consultants visit classrooms multiple times during the year and use a formally designed implementation matrix to ensure instructional fidelity across classrooms and grades.

School leaders, including the literacy interventionists and the literacy ILT, provide ongoing information to teachers concerning both the implementation of ECRI, and the critical instructional goals of ECRI that teachers need to address in phonics instruction.

**Impact**: By providing an evidence-based phonics program and ensuring that the program is implemented with fidelity, the district supports student’ mastery of critical foundational reading skills. By providing multi-faceted PD to support teachers as they build their instructional expertise in literacy, the district is likely laying the foundation for all elementary students to acquire stronger literacy skills, which will likely result in improved student outcomes.

**3.**  **In observed elementary classes, the team found effective implementation of almost all characteristics of effective instruction in the instructional inventory.**

**A. Focus Area #1: Learning Objectives & Expectations** In most observed lessons, teachers explained lesson content effectively, and students knew what they were learning and why. Activities were well-planned and clearly connected to the content of the lesson. Teachers frequently and skillfully conducted formative assessments to check on students’ understanding and provide feedback to students.

1. The team noted examples of objectives written in student-friendly language. In these classes, teachers used “I can statements” such as “I can read words with e, ee, ea…” or “I can recognize sight words.”

2. In 94 percent of observed elementary classes, the team found sufficient and compelling evidence that teachers planned activities that directly matched to the learning objective (characteristic #3). The team noted that lessons frequently had multiple activities for small-group work in centers that matched the learning objective.

a. For example, in one class where the learning target was long e sounds, all center activities, including independent Lexia learning, audio book listening, independent/partners work, and work at the teacher table, were connected to the learning target.

3. In 77 percent of observed elementary classrooms, the team found sufficient and compelling evidence that teachers frequently conducted formative assessments to check on students’ understanding, provide feedback, and adjust instruction (characteristic #4).

a. The team noted different examples of how elementary teachers checked students’ understanding, including through small-group work at the teacher’s table, circulating around the room to check on individual student’s progress, working with individual students to check their understanding, cold calling on students, and using strategies such as thumbs up/thumbs down.

**B. Focus Area # 2: Student Engagement & Higher-Order Thinking** The team found very strong student engagement in nearly all elementary classes.

1. In 94 percent of observed elementary classes, the team found sufficient and compelling evidence of students taking responsibility for their learning and being fully engaged (characteristic #5). The team described these classes as having strong student participation in their own learning.

a. In most observed elementary classes, students worked in small groups or with partners, completing activities.

i. For example, in a grade 3 math class, students “turned and talked” about fractions as a part of a whole.

**C. Focus Area # 3: Inclusive Practice & Classroom Culture** The team found lessons designed to support and challenge students with varied learning needs in most observed classes.

1. The team found sufficient and compelling evidence of lessons that supported and challenged students regardless of their learning needs (characteristic # 9) in 82 percent of observed elementary classes. Team members described these classes as having multiple supports for students. The examples noted included small-group instruction with opportunities for students to work directly with their teachers, including special education teachers who provided differentiated instruction. In many classes, paraprofessionals supported students.

a. For example, in a grade 5 ELA class, co-teachers worked with students in small groups “to fit individual needs.”

2. The team found teachers using multiple, flexible instructional strategies to meet the needs of all learners (characteristic #10) in 94 percent of observed elementary classes.

a. The team found that most observed classes included small-group work that provided a variety of instructional strategies to accommodate a broad range of student learning styles. For example, in a grade 3 ELA class, a teacher and a paraprofessional worked with groups of two to four students at different tasks, some at computers.

**Impact:** The district’s elementary school is developing effective practices for classroom instruction including frequent checks for student understanding and strong student engagement in learning environments that address the varied needs of all learners. When teachers share a common understanding of effective instructional practices and consistently implement them within a school, it will likely help students to progress in their learning.

**Challenges and Areas for Growth**

**4. In observed classes at the high school, the team found inconsistent and limited implementation of effective instructional practices.**

* 1. **Focus Area #1: Learning Objectives & Expectations** In most observed grades 6-12 classes, teachers referenced objectives and matched classroom activities to learning targets. However, in the area of checking for student understanding, the team found that the use of formative assessment was limited in grades 9-12.

1. The team found sufficient and compelling evidence of teachers frequently checking for understanding, providing feedback, and adjusting instruction (characteristic #4) in 71 percent of observed classes in grades 6-8 and in only 36 percent of observed classes in grades 9-12.

a. Examples of the effective feedback observed in grades 6-8 included teachers circulating around the room to monitor students’ work, cold-calling on students, effective questioning techniques, using exemplars, and using strategies such as thumbs up/thumbs down to check for understanding.

i. Examples of less effective checking for understanding in grades 6-8 included teachers relying exclusively on whole-group responses, or not conducting any checks for understanding.

b. In most observed classes in grades 9-12 the team found limited evidence of teachers conducting frequent checks for understanding and adjusting the lesson. For example, the team did not observe the use of formative assessment strategies to check for understanding such as exit tickets and end-of-class summaries. The team noted a narrow range of questioning techniques that did not support checking for understanding. For example, teachers in grades 9-12 classes did not pose clarifying questions, called exclusively on volunteers, repeatedly called on the same students rather than cold calling, and accepted whole-group responses.

* 1. **Focus Area # 2: Student Engagement & Higher-Order Thinking** Student engagement varied widely from class to class and opportunities for higher-order thinking were inconsistent in observed classes in grades 6-12.

1. The team found sufficient and compelling evidence of students taking responsibility for their learning and being fully engaged (characteristic #5) in 50 percent of classes in grades 6-8 and in 64 percent of classes in grades 9-12.

a. In grades 6-8,the team noted high student engagement in observed classes where teachers conducted a variety of activities and frequently interacted with students.

b. In grades 9-12, the team noted high student engagement in observed classes where teachers used Chromebooks for lessons or classroom assignments, frequently interacted with students, and assigned small-group work and pair work.

c. Overall, in grades 6-12, the team observed limited student engagement in classes characterized by whole-group instruction and teacher-directed lessons.

2. The team found sufficient and compelling evidence of students engaged in higher-order thinking skills (characteristic #6) in 50 percent of observed grades 6-8 classes and in 57 percent of observed grades 9-12 classes.

a. Evidence of students using higher-order thinking in observed grades 6-12 classes included students answering “why” or probing questions, explaining their answers, solving complex problems, conducting research, and analyzing texts. Students were also observed to be using higher-order thinking skills when they planned and made presentations.

b. In contrast, in grades 6-12, the team found that lessons where teachers did most of the thinking, explaining, and work did not provide students with the opportunity to use higher-order thinking skills. The team also noted that worksheet activities in grades 6-8 classes often did not require students to exercise higher-order thinking.

* 1. **Focus Area #3: Inclusive Practice & Classroom Culture** The team found that most lessons in observed grades 6-12 classes were not designed to support and challenge all students regardless of their leaning needs.

The team found sufficient and compelling evidence of lessons designed to support and challenge all students regardless of their learning needs (characteristic #9) in only 21 percent of grades 6-8 classes and in only 29 percent of grades 9-12 classes.

The team found positive examples of practices meeting the needs of all learners in a very small number of classes observed in grades 6-12. Some examples noted by the team included differentiated assignments; guided notes; visuals, including interactive white boards and videos; group work with Chromebooks; and support staff assisting students in the classroom.

In most observed grades 6-12 classes, all students were given the same task to do; the team did not find evidence of differentiation of content, process, or product. Instruction was often teacher-centered and whole group.

The team found sufficient and compelling evidence that teachers used a variety of instructional strategies (characteristic #10) in 57 percent of grades 6-8 classes and in only 29 percent of grades 9-12 classes.

a. Teachers used the same approach throughout the lesson in most observed grades 9-12 classes, and teacher-directed lessons predominated. In a few observed classes, students were given a variety of experiences and choices in the lesson, but this was not typical.

b. There was sufficient and compelling evidence of teachers using a variety of strategies in 57 percent of observed grades 6-8 classes. Examples include small-group work, opportunities for students to make models, and science lab of work. However, in many observed grades 6-8 classes, all students were working on the same task with the same format throughout the lesson.

**Impact**: Checking for understanding is an important formative assessment tool to help teachers determine what students are learning throughout the lesson. When teachers’ checking for understanding is limited or ineffective, they cannot be certain that students are making expected progress toward attaining the learning goals of the lesson. Without the opportunity for meaningful engagement in their own learning, students are not getting what they need to experience deeper learning and improved outcomes. Finally, when inclusive practices are not consistently present in lessons, teachers cannot ensure that all students regardless of their learning needs have access to the content of the lesson.

**Recommendations**

**The district should ensure that all teachers provide effective instruction that challenges and supports all students. In particular, the district should ensure that teachers in grades 6-12 have access to high-quality, comprehensive, standards-based, and horizontally and vertically aligned curricular resources and the support they need to implement the curricula effectively.**

1. The district should convene a representative group of teachers and instructional leaders to identify key instructional practices.

The district can use DESE’s educator evaluation rubric and its instructional inventory tool to support this work.

The recommended product of these meetings is a set of expectations that challenges and engages all students.

3. The district should prioritize these instructional practices as its “non-negotiables.”

4. In grades 6-12, emphasis should be placed on student ownership of learning in lessons that include higher-order thinking, questioning techniques that support checking for understanding, and strategies for checking on student understanding, providing feedback, and adjusting instruction.

5. In kindergarten through grade 5, emphasis should be placed on increasing opportunities for students to use higher-order thinking.

**B.** Once the set of expectations has been defined, district leaders should develop a plan to communicate these expectations with staff.

1. The district is encouraged to provide opportunities for educators to discuss ideas and strategies from the set of instructional expectations. These opportunities might include faculty meetings, department meetings, instructional leadership team meetings, professional learning communities, and grade-level meetings.

2. The district should develop structures to support peer observation to both model instructional feedback and encourage peer feedback.

3. Equitable opportunities should be provided by level for teachers to share best practices.

**C.** Teachers should receive appropriate guidance and feedback as they implement the district’s instructional expectations.

1. Professional development should focus on elements of the instructional expectations as applied to the specific curricula that teachers and students work with every day.

2. Principals and other instructional leaders should ensure that all teachers have the information and support necessary to meet the district’s expectations for high-quality instruction.

3. The district should continue to provide teachers with high-quality feedback[[7]](#footnote-8) that helps them to improve their instruction.

**D.** The district should develop a coherent plan to address the need for curricular materials and resources to plan rigorous instruction in grades 6-12, based on the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks.

1. The district should develop a plan to develop meaningful instructional resources, such as scope and sequence documents in core curricula to help guide grades 6-12 teachers in planning units of study and lessons aligned with grade- level standards.

1. The district should strengthen its efforts to ensure vertical alignment of the curriculum in grades 5-12.

**E.** The district should consider conducting more frequent learning walks including both school leaders and teachers to address inconsistencies in effective teaching and learning practices in grades 6-12.

* + - 1. The district should consider establishing guidelines for peer classroom observations at all levels for the purpose of improving teaching and learning practices.

**Benefits:** Implementing this recommendation will result in clearly articulated expectations for teachers and administrators for best instructional practices districtwide. In addition, enhanced, aligned curricular resources, including aligned scope and sequence documents to plan instruction in grades 6-12, will ensure that the content of instruction has the appropriate instructional rigor based on the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks. A district that provides high-quality instruction for all students, while ensuring ongoing professional support for teachers and administrators, creates and sustains a culture of continuous improvements, resulting in professional growth and increased student achievement.

**Recommended resources:**

* DESE’s *"What to Look For" Observation Guides* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/frameworks/observation/>) describe what observers should expect to see in a classroom at a particular grade level in a specific subject area. This includes the knowledge and skills students should be learning and using (as reflected in state learning standards) and best practices related to classroom curriculum, instruction, and assessment for each subject area. The guides are not designed to replace any evaluation system or tools districts currently use; but are a resource to help classroom observers efficiently identify what teachers and students should be experiencing in specific subjects and grade levels.
* Jobs for the Future’s *Common Instructional Framework* (<https://www.jff.org/resources/common-instructional-framework/>), a core component in Early College Designs for schools, contains six powerful teaching and learning strategies to build college readiness.

Human Resources and Professional Development

Contextual Background

*Infrastructure*

The district does not have a Human Resources (HR) department. HR procedures and issues are managed jointly by central office staff and school leaders. District HR policies are included in the school committee policy manual, but not in staff handbooks.

*Recruitment, Hiring, Assignment*

Open positions are advertised on SchoolSpring and the district has occasionally searched this database for candidates and asked them to apply. The district does not have a strategy to hire and retain a diverse staff. The proximity to higher paying districts such as Springfield makes this task difficult.

In the 2018-2019 school year the district retained only 80 percent of its teachers. District leaders said that the reasons for the turnover included retirements, non-renewals, and resignations. District leaders conduct exit interviews with teachers who resign, and personnel changes are regularly reported to the school committee.

*Supervision, Evaluation, and Educator Development*

Although DESE put forth the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework in 2012, the district adapted the framework in 2016. The district’s educator evaluation system is missing key components and has not been fully implemented. The district is piloting TeachPoint as an educator evaluation management system, but its use is optional. TeachPoint is being used partially at the elementary school, and not at the high school. It is unclear whether the district will use TeachPoint going forward.

The district provides many professional development (PD) opportunities for teachers. It has formed partnerships with an external provider to ensure faithfulness of implementation of the adopted literacy, phonics, and mathematics programs at the elementary school. The elementary school devotes one half-day PD session to workshops presented by teachers. The high school provides training by an external partner to facilitate the creation of a vision and focus for the school.

Teachers are encouraged to attend external workshops and trainings, and faculty meetings are another source of PD. The district does not have a district PD committee to provide vision and direction for the program, and there is little coordination of PD between the district’s two schools. PD needs and priorities are not specified in district and school improvement plans.

The district has a strong mentoring and induction process. Teachers remain with their mentors for three years. In the first year, group monthly mentoring meetings are supplemented by additional structured meetings between mentors and mentees.

*Recognition, Leadership Development and Advancement*

Although there are limited opportunities for teacher leadership in the district, the instructional leadership teams in both schools have become more active in recent years and allow teacher involvement in school leadership. Several school leaders, including the high-school principal, came from the teacher ranks.

**Challenges and Areas for Growth**

**The district’s educator evaluation system is missing key components and has not been fully implemented.**

1. The team reviewed the evaluative documents of 13 elementary-school (kindergarten through grade 5) and 16 high-school (grades 6-12) teachers.
2. The 13 elementary evaluative documents were incomplete. Self-assessments and educator plans were missing. When asked, school leaders stated that self-assessments and educator plans were not required at this time to make the process easier for teachers.
3. In addition, only 7 of the 13 elementary-school evaluative documents had teacher goals. School leaders told the team that the assistant principal responsible for monitoring this requirement was no longer with the district, and the goals for these teachers could not be located.
4. Of the 16 high-school evaluative documents, only 5 had teacher goals. Self-assessments were missing.
5. The team noted an absence of high-quality teacher goals.
6. Only 9 of the 29 evaluative documents (31 percent) reviewed by the team contained goals written in SMART goal format.[[8]](#footnote-9)
7. Elementary school leaders reported that district and school leaders had prepared a menu of goals linked to school improvement plans, and teachers “copied and pasted” the goals that they selected from this menu onto the form. Elementary leaders expressed the view that this had taken the reflective component out of the educator evaluation process in an effort to make it less burdensome for teachers and that they should try to restore it.
   1. In 2018, the Palmer Teachers Association and the Palmer School Committee negotiated the indicators of the educator evaluation rubric that were subject to evaluation. DESE revised the Model Teacher Rubric in 2018, and the version used by the district is not reflective of these updates.
      * 1. An amendment to the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework eliminated the separate student impact rating and added a new student learning indicator. Student learning is now embedded in Standard 2 (Teaching all Students) of the Model Teacher Rubric. Evaluators are required to consider evidence of impact on student learning when determining performance ratings. However, the district is not evaluating this indicator. In addition, the team did not find evidence that the district used multiple measures of student learning to determine teacher performance ratings.
        2. The 2018-2021 collective bargaining agreement does not require teachers to submit evidence unless they are rated *Needs Improvement,* or seek to advance from a rating of *Proficient* to a rating of *Exemplary*. The Framework requires the use of multiple sources of evidence to inform evaluation ratings, including artifacts of practice collected by the educator. Elementary school leaders stated that they searched for this evidence and did not require teachers to collect and submit it.
   2. Multiple interviewees referred to the changing demographics in the district.[[9]](#footnote-10) However, the rubric in the collective bargaining agreement is missing the indicators for cultural proficiency and culturally proficient family communication. Teachers are not required to present evidence, nor are they evaluated on these indicators.
   3. State regulations require districts to collect and use student feedback as a source of evidence in the teacher evaluation process and staff feedback a as a source of evidence in the administrator evaluation process, beginning in 2015. Although the collective bargaining agreement states an intent to negotiate this component of the educator evaluation system, negotiations have not taken place and the district has not initiated any action to collect and use student and staff feedback.
   4. The collective bargaining agreement states that a standing committee should conduct an annual review of the educator evaluation procedure and forms. This committee has not been formed.
8. The rollout of TeachPoint as an educator evaluation management system has been disorganized and ineffective.

In 2016, TeachPoint was referenced in a strategy document issued by the district in 2016. The district introduced TeachPoint as an option in 2019 but did not provide TeachPoint training. The high school opted not to use TeachPoint. Elementary school teachers reported that approximately half of the elementary staff are using TeachPoint in school year 2019-2020.

Elementary school leaders reported that although they made videos on how to use TeachPoint available to elementary teachers, they were entering most of the data for them to make the process easier. The team did not find evidence that the introduction of TeachPoint was negotiated with the Palmer Teachers Association. Teachers’ association representatives expressed the concern that use of TeachPoint would result in an expansion of clerical work for teachers. They added that high-school teachers were unaware that some elementary teachers were using TeachPoint.

The evaluations of elementary teachers not using TeachPoint were written on photocopies of the forms, and some of the evaluation forms themselves were handwritten.

**Impact:** An evaluation system that is partially implemented and missing key components does not provide teachers and evaluators with sufficient data to make an accurate assessment of teacher performance and does not promote reflection on professional practice and student performance that results in professional growth.

* + 1. **The district’s educator evaluation system does not prioritize opportunities for educators to receive high-quality feedback[[10]](#footnote-11) that helps them improve their practice.**

1. A review of evaluative documents indicated that constructive and actionable feedback was missing from formative assessments/evaluations and summative evaluations. The feedback given to teachers by evaluators was often descriptive rather than instructive.

Much feedback consisted of “continue to” statements and reminders of expectations, such as posting agendas and objectives.

Comments labeled as “next steps” appeared on some high-school observation forms reviewed by the team. When asked, school high school leaders reported that they had stopped making these comments because the teachers’ association objected.

Teachers stated that they were not typically given feedback by their evaluators. When given, feedback was often verbal rather than written and not actionable. Teachers’ association representatives reported that the mode of feedback was inconsistent, citing an example of written feedback in one instance and a hallway conversation in another.

School leaders expressed the need to improve the quality of feedback to teachers and to provide feedback in writing.

1. The team reviewed eight summative evaluations of principals and central office staff. All of the feedback by evaluators was descriptive, complimentary, and unlikely to promote professional growth. There were no mid-year formative evaluations.
2. A review of evaluative documents and interviews with teachers, district leaders, and school leaders indicated that calibration exercises to improve inter-rater reliability were not taking place consistently.

A review of evaluative documents indicated that not all evaluators required teachers to express their goals as SMART goals in order to make the outcomes measurable.

Teachers expressed the view that the quality of the feedback they received varied depending on the evaluator assigned and characterized feedback as “very uneven.”

Interviewees stated that the district engaged a consultant at the end of the 2018-2019 school year to help principals improve the reliability of their ratings.

**D.** The implementation of announced and unannounced observations is not consistent.

1. District leaders stated that at the high school, teachers without professional teacher status received three unannounced observation visits and one announced observation visit per year, while teachers with professional teacher status received four unannounced observation visits per year. Teachers’ association officials said that some teachers at the high school had received only one unannounced observation visit in the 2018-2019 year.

2. District leaders stated that at the elementary school, teachers without professional teacher status received two unannounced observation visits and one announced observation visit, while teachers with professional teacher status received one to six unannounced observation visits. Elementary teachers said that teachers without professional teacher status had three unannounced observations in their summative evaluation year.

**E.** District leaders expressed concern that if they were evaluating a teacher whose performance was a concern, they were limited by the collective bargaining agreement to six unannounced observation visits per year.

**Impact**: The evaluation process is critical to improving educators’ practices and ultimately student performance. When an evaluation system is inconsistent and does not provide teachers with constructive, actionable feedback, it cannot fulfill its purpose. This means that educators and evaluators will spend a great deal of time implementing a system that does not promote reflection and professional improvement and is unlikely to result in improved student achievement.

**3. Professional development (PD) is not explicitly aligned with the priorities in district planning documents. The PD program is exclusively school based and is not coordinated and evaluated for effectiveness. Many teachers view the PD program as ineffective.**

1. PD in the district is not an intentional, carefully planned process with well-defined measurable goals.
2. The Massachusetts Standards for Professional Development require that PD should be an intentional, deliberate, and carefully planned process with well-defined measurable goals that are directly aligned with the priorities articulated in district planning.
3. The district improvement plan (DIP) refers to PD as one of seven elements of collaboration around best practice and states the philosophy that PD should be built around teacher choice in literacy, social emotional learning, math, science, social studies, technology and itinerant service strategies. The DIP does not include explicit and specific PD goals.

3**.** With the disbanding of the district PD committee four years before the onsite review, the district no longer has a process for the development of districtwide PD initiatives, based on student outcomes and teacher needs.

4. The district does not coordinate the PD activities of the two schools to ensure the coherence of the PD program.

5. Successive PD sessions tend not to build on each other.

6. There is no calendar of PD activities to help teachers envision the content and scope of the program for the year.

**B**. PD is exclusively school based, not explicitly connected to district and school planning documents, and not evaluated for effectiveness.

1. Specific benchmark measures for PD are missing in the high-school SIP. It contains only a list of previous PD topics.

2. High-school leaders engaged an external consultant to plan and present PD sessions.

a. High-school leaders reported push-back from the staff during the first year of these sessions but said that there was now “buy-in” from the instructional leadership team.

b. High-school teachers expressed the view that PD was repetitive and not useful for improving their practice.

3. The elementary-school SIP repeats the philosophy of PD as stated in the DIP and contains a benchmark for the development of professional learning ideas that will be offered to staff at faculty meetings and on half-day PD days.

4. Elementary school leaders have engaged external consultants to provide PD on the implementation of its adopted literacy and mathematics programs, including consultation, demonstration lessons, and feedback from walkthroughs.

5. However, half-day PD sessions at the elementary school are loosely organized around a menu of offerings presented by peers. Teachers with interest and expertise in a topic submit a proposal for the approval of school leaders and teachers are free to choose which sessions best fit their needs. [[11]](#footnote-12) Sessions are not coordinated with those at the high school or linked to school planning documents.

a. Some elementary teachers expressed the view that the peer-presented sessions were not well planned and often organized at the last minute.

b. Teachers stated that some presentations would have been useful to all teachers, but many teachers did not have benefit of them because they had chosen to attend another session.

6. The team did not find evidence that school-based PD was systematically evaluated for effectiveness.

**Impact**: Without a collaborative plan that is linked to district goals and priorities and provides learning experiences for educators that connect and build upon each other, the district misses opportunities to support educators’ efforts to improve their professional practice and leaves students without the benefit of their teachers’ professional learning.

**Recommendations**

**The district should fully implement all components of its educator evaluation system, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that all educators receive high-quality feedback.**

1. The district should implement systems to ensure high-quality verbal and written feedback.

**B.** The district should support and monitor the skills and practices of evaluators to ensure that the feedback they provide is specific, instructive, actionable, and relevant to professional growth and student outcomes.

1. Evaluators should participate in calibration training and activities to ensure consistency, quality, and accuracy in the evaluation process and documentation.

**C.** Teachers should complete all of the components required by the collective bargaining agreement, including the self-assessment and educator plan forms, since these are critical to both the reflective and the planning components of the evaluation system.

**D.** All teachers should be required to express their goals as SMART goals, as appropriate, and there should be additional training on the formulation of SMART goals.

**E.** The district should ensure that new teachers receive training on the educator evaluation system, perhaps as part of the mentor program.

**F.** The school committee and the teachers’ association should reconvene the evaluation committee to assess the current status of the educator evaluation system and to consider negotiating full implementation of the educator evaluation system.

1. The committee should consider increasing the Indicators currently evaluated in the rubric to include the Student Learning Indicator and the two cultural proficiency indicators.

2. The requirement to consider multiple sources of evidence to inform evaluation cannot be meaningfully achieved without evidence provided by the teacher. Submitting authentic, representative samples of evidence is the teacher’s opportunity to share a story of their performance and contribute more directly to their evaluation. The committee should also consider ways to consider evidence of impact on student learning when determining educators’ performance ratings.

3. The committee should consider revisiting the minimum/maximum numbers of observations required at each level.

4. The committee should negotiate how to meaningfully include student and teacher feedback in the evaluation process.

**Benefits:** An educator evaluation system that has all essential elements working together to produce a high-quality evaluation and that rewards the hard work of educators with constructive and actionable feedback will likely lead to improved teacher practice, improved instruction, and improved student performance. An educator evaluation system that encourages evaluators and educators to be reflective about their practice will be valued by all participants.

**Recommended resources:**

* DESE’s *OPTIC: Online Platform for Teaching and Informed Calibration* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/calibration/>) is a professional development tool supporting Massachusetts educators to refine a shared understanding of effective, standards-aligned instructional practice and high quality feedback.
* DESE’s *Calibration Video Library & Protocols* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/calibration/>) is a collection of professionally created videos of classroom instruction produced by the School Improvement Network, along with sample training protocols and activities. These videos depict a range of practice—this is not a collection of exemplars—to support within-district calibration activities that promote a shared understanding of instructional quality and rigor.
* DESE’s Educator Evaluation Training Module (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/training-resources.html>) is an introductory course on the Educator Evaluation Framework and Model System.
* *A Protocol for developing S.M.A.R.T Goal Statements* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/>) is designed to support educators in developing S.M.A.R.T. goal statements using the appropriate evaluation rubric and an ESE-developed protocol. *The Evidence Collection Toolkit* (http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/) is designed to help districts establish clear and consistent expectations for evidence collection and promote a meaningful process for the collection, analysis, and sharing of high-quality artifacts. The toolkit Includes: brief guidance, examples of district strategies, a worksheet for district decision-making, and a handout of Evidence Collection Tips for Educators.
* *On Track with Evaluator Capacity* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/pln/OnTrack-EvaluatorCapacity.pdf>) is an interactive document that provides specific strategies, lessons learned, and links to district-created resources. It was produced by eight districts that were part of a Professional Learning Network for Supporting Evaluator Capacity.
* *Quick Reference Guide: Opportunities to Streamline the Evaluation Process* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/resources/QRG-Streamline.pdf>) is designed to help districts reflect on and continuously improve their evaluation systems:
  + What’s working? What are the bright spots?
  + How can we streamline the process to stay focused on professional growth and development?
  + What do we need to adjust to ensure our system is valuable to educators and students?
* *Identifying Meaningful Professional Development* (<https://youtu.be/zhuFioO8GbQ>) is a video in which educators from three Massachusetts districts discuss the importance of targeted, meaningful professional development and the ways districts can use the evaluation process to identify the most effective PD supports for all educators.
  + 1. **The district should develop a professional development program that is coherent, informed by data and includes well-defined, measurable goals that are aligned with district, school, and educator goals.**

1. The district’s professional development (PD) plan should describe a set of learning experiences that is varied, systematic, informed by student and educator data, with specific, measurable goals aligned with district, school, and educator goals.
2. The district should convene a representative standing PD committee composed of district leaders, school leaders, and teachers to design PD that is aligned with DIP goals. The committee should prepare a yearly PD plan and calendar with the goal of coordinating between the two schools, increasing coherence, and designing PD that leads to all teachers mastering new concepts.
3. The district should evaluate the effectiveness of district PD programs and supports.

**D.** PD programming should be sufficiently differentiated to accommodate the individual learning needs and the experience and expertise of teachers, including grade-level, content, and career stage.

**E.** All PD programs and activities at both the district and school levels should be regularly evaluated by staff. The PD committee should analyze educator evaluation, student performance, and other data to plan and improve future PD.

**Benefits:** When professional development is designed and planned using district and school priorities, with input from teachers and administrators, it is possible to increase the coherence of the PD program, increase teachers’ mastery of new concepts, and improve their professional practice.

**Recommended resources:**

* *The Massachusetts Standards for Professional Development* (<http://www.doe.mass.edu/pd/standards.html>) describe, identify, and characterize what high quality learning experiences should look like for educators.
* DESE’s *Professional Development Self-Assessment Guidebook* (<http://www.mass.gov/edu/docs/ese/accountability/dsac/professional-development-self-assessment-guide.pdf>) provides tools for analyzing professional development offerings’ alignment with the Massachusetts Standards for Professional Development, the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework, and the Standards and Indicators of Effective Practice.
* DESE’s High-Quality Professional Development Planning and Assessing Cycle ([http://www.doe.mass.edu/pd/PlanAssess)](http://www.doe.mass.edu/pd/PlanAssess/) This four-step cycle is designed to help district and school PD teams design and implement high-quality professional development for educators. The process is described in four phases. The first two phases comprise a planning process and the second two phases comprise an assessment process.

Financial and Asset Management

Contextual Background

*Adequate Budget*

The district exceeded its net school spending (NSS) requirement for the four years before the onsite review, and its total spending on education increased by approximately five percent per year. The district budget for fiscal year 2020 is $18,486,772, including certain grants and revolving funds and an allocation from the town general fund of $16,480,010.

In contrast to increases in required NSS, town allocations to the district over the three years before the onsite review increased by approximately two percent per year. This discrepancy is due in part to declining enrollment and increasing charter school tuitions. The percentage of the district’s overall budget that is allocated to teachers is higher than in comparable districts, while the percentages allocated to administration, instructional leadership, guidance, and pupil services are below those of comparable districts.

The town is governed by a town council, which is assisted by the town manager. He began his duties in the town in 2018. District leaders and town officials described the relationship between district leaders and town officials as improved, and the town has provided financial assistance to the district for fire damage remediation at the high school, capital projects for facilities, employee benefits, and maintenance of school grounds and fields. According to Department of Revenue data, the town’s fiscal year 2020 free cash is $3.5 million, and its fiscal year 2019 stabilization fund is $2.4 million. Town officials reported a willingness to put some of these funds toward school and grounds capital projects.

*Financial Tracking, Forecasting, Controls, and Audits*

Business operations in the district are managed by the director of finance and a specialist who handles accounts payable, payroll, and grants management. There has been turnover recently in the director of finance position, with three directors between 2016 and 2018. At the time of the onsite review, in addition to managing district finances and preparing the fiscal year 2021 district budget, the director of finance and a specialist were completing a financial procedures manual, working with town officials to update the agreement on town expenditures in support of the schools, and preparing to use the town’s MUNIS software system for district finances.

District leaders reported that budget deficits in 2016-2017 were created by a high number of out-of-district special education placements. To bring budgets back into balance, the district reduced the number of out-of-district placements by approximately one half, made staff reductions including librarians and teachers, and closed the middle school.

*Capital Planning and Facility Maintenance*

The two district schools opened in 1991 are maintained by the facilities director, three maintenance employees, and four school custodians. They are cleaned by an outside contractor. The facilities director plans to retire in 2020. District leaders and town officials are exploring the possibility of assigning his replacement to town as well as school facilities.

A fire at the high school in 2019 was disruptive, requiring the building to be closed for two weeks. Considerable smoke remediation as well as the reconstruction of burned areas were necessary, funded for the most part by a $2 million insurance settlement. The town assisted with the remediation and funded additional fireproofing. The district has a preventative maintenance plan, with most maintenance performed by in-house personnel, and an annual capital plan of needed improvements, including security cameras, bleachers, pool improvements, HVAC[[12]](#footnote-13) equipment, tiling, and painting. At the time of the onsite review, the district was implementing a one-to-one Chromebook program in grades 4-12 and funding most technology infrastructure upgrades through E-Rate funds.

*Strength Findings*

**1. The district manages its finances effectively, with clear procedures for the legal procurement of goods and services and for accurate payrolls, resulting in the effective use of town and grant funds. Reports are submitted regularly to administrators and the school committee to keep them advised of the current financial condition of the district.**

* 1. The district has effective procedures for the legal procurement of goods and services and has clear practices to ensure that they are followed.
     1. Interviews with district leaders and a document review indicated that the district had a draft financial procedures manual outlining procurement and payroll procedures for use by all administrators in the district, and that district leaders were working to complete it.
     2. Business office staff reported that they used Blackbaud financial software for tracking financial transactions, including line item budgets; encumbering purchase orders and salaries; recording payments; and calculating balances. They are working with town officials to convert to the town’s MUNIS software to improve the coordination of district and town financial data and reduce the need to reconcile accounts.
     3. Business office staff reported that district and school leaders and clerks used the district’s financial management software to initiate requisitions for goods and services, which were then approved by the business manager, before passing the purchase order or contract on to the vendor.
        1. District and school leaders and clerks follow Massachusetts Chapter 30B requirements for quotes and bids when needed, such as for busing and cleaning contracts. In addition, they communicate with town officials who have Massachusetts Certified Public Purchasing Official (MCPPO) certification and who help the district with bids and contracts.
        2. The district uses Collaborative for Educational Services and state CommBuys contracts for many supplies, contracted services, and equipment purchases to take advantage of discounts and save time on advertisements and bids.
        3. The school committee approves major contracts, such as those for busing and cleaning.
     4. The school committee also approves the district budget, line item transfers, and warrants for both accounts payable and payroll.
  2. Procedures for ensuring accurate payrolls are effective.
     1. Business office staff described the procedures and approvals that help ensure accurate payrolls and benefits, including salaries for new hires, leaves of absence, sick leave, and retirement pay. The procedures include cross checking against town payrolls, timecards, and each school clerk’s reports on attendance.
     2. Business office staff stated, and documents confirmed, that the district used several forms to ensure that payrolls were accurate. The forms cover new employee salary and benefit calculations, payroll changes, and exit employee details.
     3. District leaders and business office staff reported that at the time of the onsite review they had gone over a year without any payroll errors or special payroll warrants.

1. The business office collaborates with district and school leaders to make effective use of grants for school programs and to ensure that all grant funds are expended.
   * 1. In addition to competitive and entitlement grants administered by DESE, district office staff reported they have made use of grants from National Grid and Massachusetts Electric for energy projects, and from E-Rate for technology infrastructure.
     2. Interviewees reported and a document review confirmed that the specialist met with district and school leaders to prepare applications for competitive and entitlement grants. District and school leaders and the specialist review the programs to be funded by each grant, such as mentoring, professional development consultants, paraprofessionals, interventionists, and special education services. District and school leaders and the specialist also prepare a spending plan for funding each service and the grant application, which includes a narrative drafted by the administrator who supervises the grant.
     3. The business office draws down and reconciles each grant monthly to ensure that grant funds are efficiently and completely expended and prepares a report for the grant administrator indicating the remaining funds to be invoiced and expended.
     4. Business office staff reported that the district has successfully spent grants down. For example, when the district had $900 left unspent in a grant for fiscal year 2018, district and school leaders and the specialist contacted DESE for help drawing down the remaining funds effectively.
   1. Interviewees reported that the district has found efficiencies and savings, such as reallocating staff and reducing deficits in special education out-of-district tuitions. The district reduced the number of out-of-district placements from 35 to 17 in fiscal year 2017, by creating new in-district programs.
   2. Interviews and a document review indicated that financial reports on the status of the budget, grants, and personnel were given to the school committee and administrators monthly.
2. Interviews with district and school leaders and a review of school committee meeting minutes indicated that the school committee received monthly reports on the status of the budget, including the budget, amount spent and encumbered, and the balance available for each budget line. The director of finance explains issues such as overages because of facility repairs, new hires, a new contract with maintenance staff, and legal fee increases, and adds explanatory notes about such issues in the report.
3. Reports on the status of grants are provided to the school committee regularly, as are personnel reports detailing openings, appointments, and separations of personnel.
4. District and school leaders also review expenditure reports monthly to manage their budgets and grants.

**Impact**: The effective financial management practices in the district have helped keep its financial transactions legal and expenditures within budget. Efficiencies such as reducing tuitions and reallocating staff have helped make better use of the district’s limited resources. Regular reports keep administrators and school committee members informed and prepared to address issues as they arise and make well-informed decisions about budget transfers, grant applications, and drawing funds down effectively.

1. **Town support for the district has brought its funding above the Net School Spending (NSS) requirement and made it possible to implement several capital improvement projects. Collaboration between district leaders and town officials contributes to effective budget development and financial management.**
2. The town has increased its funding for education to a level above required NSS.
3. Town funding for education was below the NSS requirement from 2011 through 2015; however, in fiscal year 2018 the NSS amount exceeded the requirement by 14.5 percent and in fiscal year 2019, budgeted spending reached 21.5 percent above the required level.
4. Interviewees reported that the district had a deficit because of unexpected increases in out-of-district special education tuitions in fiscal year 2017. Interviews with town officials and a document review indicated that the town had allocated additional funding to the district to help it get through this crisis.
5. The town has supported several capital projects in the district.
6. District leaders and town officials reported that the town was funding capital projects such as fire remediation at the high school, HVAC equipment, replacement of bleachers, and studies of the fields and track. The town is using available free cash and stabilization funds rather than bonding them. The town may need a debt exclusion vote to fund the replacement of the athletic track.
7. Business office staff told the team that the town has supported other capital projects, including handicapped access, security cameras, carpeting, and a gym floor. With Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) assistance, the district has completed “green” roof and insulation projects.
8. A fire in the high school in 2019 required considerable repairs and cleanup, paid by a $2 million insurance claim. The town assisted with the remediation and funded additional fireproofing.
9. Town and district leaders collaborate on the development of the district budget and financial management for the district.

The superintendent and town officials described an improved relationship and frequent communication with town officials concerning funding of the school budget and other district needs through discussions between the superintendent and the town administrator, and an annual joint meeting of the school committee with the town council.

District leaders reported that they also met with town officials to discuss procurements and bids, update the agreement on town expenditures in support of education, plan district use of the town MUNIS financial software, and decide how to share the services of the new district facilities director.

**Impact**: Collaboration between the district and the town contribute to healthy decisions about the budget and other matters. Town assistance after the high-school fire and with capital needs of the schools have contributed to a supportive atmosphere. Increased town support for the district budget has helped maintain, and in some cases improve programs and services. Likewise, town support for capital projects has helped keep school facilities safe, secure, and suitable environments for education.

***Challenges and Areas for Growth***

**Budget documents do not clearly connect funding requests to district and school planning documents and student performance data. The district does not include historical spending data in the budget to indicate trends over time.**

* 1. The budget documents for fiscal year 2021 provided to the school committee include a PowerPoint summary and spreadsheets with line item detail; however, the connection between the proposed budget and district and school planning documents is not explicitly stated.
     + 1. The district improvement plan (DIP) and school improvement plans (SIPs) do not include 2020-2021 initiatives; therefore, these initiatives are not reflected in the budget documents.
       2. A summary of the 2019-2022 DIP and 2019-2020 DIP initiatives was included in the budget PowerPoint presentation along with district priorities, but the 2020-2021 initiatives were missing, and the connection between DIP objectives and proposed budget priorities was unclear.
          1. For example, the proposed adjustment counselor position is not clearly linked to improvement plans. Co-teaching initiatives in the school plans are not mentioned in the budget documents, and the budget priority for new literacy curriculum materials and intervention staff is not explicitly tied to improvement plan objectives.
          2. Interviewees confirmed that there was no PowerPoint for the fiscal year 2020 proposed budget, and the PowerPoint presentation for the fiscal year 2019 proposed budget does not reference district plans and initiatives to justify budget drivers and proposed staffing increases.
       3. Graduation and dropout rates and high needs student percentages are noted in the budget PowerPoint, but these data are not linked to budget requests, such as the proposed adjustment counselor position. Student performance data are also missing.
          1. Interviewees confirmed that student performance data were not typically provided to justify budget needs.
  2. Historical spending data, including comparisons to actual spending in previous years and trends in spending, are not included in the budget documents.
     + 1. The spreadsheets for staffing include only proposed fiscal year 2021 staff, without comparisons to current and historical staffing levels. This makes it difficult to identify additions and reductions.
  3. Some of the budget documentation is not user friendly, and there are occasional inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the figures.

1. The PowerPoint presentation for the proposed fiscal year 2021 budget included anticipated Chapter 70 and foundation budget aid, revenues from grants and other outside sources, proposed expenses, DIP objectives for fiscal year 2020 (but not fiscal year 2021), and budget priorities and reductions.
2. The PowerPoint summary describes some district needs, priorities, and reductions; however, the implications are not always clearly stated. For example, the document states the need to provide for an increasing English learner population but does not include proposals or priorities for additional staffing or funding to address this need.
3. A summary spreadsheet includes some offsets, such as the facilities revolving fund, but does not include other offsets, such as the revolving fund for athletics.
4. Some budget proposals in the spreadsheets are not explained, such as an increase of $298,277 in elementary special education teachers accompanied by a decrease of $359,469 for elementary special education specialists. There is a similar change in high-school special education staffing without explanation.
5. There are several typographical errors and inconsistent figures in the spreadsheets, which are confusing. These include different amounts for the fiscal year 2020 budget on different spreadsheets, omission of the facilities revolving fund on one spreadsheet, and a supporting spreadsheet for athletic officials which does not match the proposed fiscal year 2021 amount.
   1. The spreadsheets indicate a total fiscal year 2021 net school budget of $21,437,355 on one page and $21,428,540 on another.
   2. The spreadsheet detail includes notes explaining many major changes in the budget lines, but some are vague. For example, the increase of $140,577 (63.5 percent) in out- of-state tuitions omits an explanation, and a decrease of $140,794 (3.1 percent) in high-school teachers “due to personnel changes” does not specify the positions lost.
   3. The salary backup data lists every position in the district with a projected salary, but current staffing and salary data are missing for comparison. Positions that have been added or eliminated are not specified.
   4. The budget spreadsheets for the proposed fiscal year 2020 budget include similar discrepancies; the spreadsheets have different amounts for the net school budget and do not include fiscal year 2019 salary amounts for comparison.
6. The PowerPoint budget proposals, such as an additional school adjustment counselor, technology, and capital improvements, are not detailed in the spreadsheets or notes. Similarly, the PowerPoint notes budget reductions, such as attrition of teachers and reallocation of resources, but the PowerPoint presentation and the spreadsheets do not specify them.

**Impact**: A clear understanding of what is included in budget proposals is critical to ensuring that the school committee can make informed decisions. The absence of actual expenditures from previous years makes it difficult to know how realistic proposed budget figures amounts are. Errors and inconsistencies in budget documents can result in a lack of confidence in proposed budgets as well as confusion about what being proposed. It is particularly important that proposed budget changes be clear, especially additions and reductions in staffing, so that the school committee and the public can understand the implications for district systems and programs. A proposed budget without an explicit connection to district and school goals, and without student performance data and clear information about funding and staffing, does not give stakeholders a clear picture of how resources are allocated to support the district’s priorities.

***Recommendations***

**The district should develop a budget document that is clear, complete, and explicitly aligned with district and school improvement plan goals.**

1. The district should produce a budget document that contains all essential information about the financial operations of the district.

The inclusion in the PowerPoint presentation of the DIP and achievement data for high needs students is helpful and could be used to help justify district needs and budget proposals.

A description of the DIP initiatives planned for the upcoming year would help clarify the need for certain budget proposals.

The relationship between district improvement plans and initiatives and budget requests, such as requests for adjustment counselors and interventionists should be stated explicitly.

Explanatory notes should be included to justify major increases and reductions in budget lines.

1. Input from school committee members and interested members of the public could provide meaningful input on effective formats for the budget presentation and the kind of supportive details to include in budget documents.

1. A subcommittee to review the documentation and presentations could be an effective way to solicit ideas and implement revisions.

* + - 1. The subcommittee might review budget documents used in other districts for useful ideas.

1. To make the documents more user-friendly, attention should be given to improving their accuracy and to including historical actual spending and staffing data.
2. The district should consider posting the proposed budget PowerPoint summary and spreadsheets on the district website to make this information more widely available to the public.

**Benefits** from implementing this recommendation could include increased school committee and public understanding of how district planning documents provide the rationale for budget requests and the benefits and costs associated with these requests. This may result in more informed stakeholder participation in the budget process and greater support for district improvement plans.

**Recommended resources:**

* The Massachusetts Association of School Business Officials (MASBO) (<https://www.masbo.org/>) is a source for documents used in other districts and ideas for effective budget presentations and documents.

Appendix A: Review Team, Activities, Schedule, Site Visit

Review Team Members

The review was conducted from February 25–27, 2020, by the following team of independent DESE consultants.

1. Thomas Pandiscio, Leadership and Governance
2. Suzanne Kelly, Instruction
3. John Retchless, Human Resources and Professional Development
4. George Gearhart, Financial and Asset Management
5. James Hearns, *review team coordinator*

District Review Activities

The following activities were conducted during the review:

The team conducted interviews with the following financial personnel: town manager, town council president, director of finance, facilities director, payroll, accounts payable and grants specialist, and student services administrative assistant.

The team conducted interviews with the following members of the school committee: chair and four members.

The review team conducted interviews with the following representatives of the teachers’ association: president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary.

The team conducted interviews/focus groups with the following central office administrators: superintendent, director of student services, and facilities director.

The team visited the following schools: Old Mill Elementary (Pre-K-5), and Palmer High School (6-12).

During school visits, the team conducted interviews with students, students’ families, and 2 principals, and focus groups with 8 elementary-school teachers (Pre-K-5), 7 middle-school level teachers (6-8), and 8 high-school level teachers (9-12).

The team observed 45 classes in the district: 17 in pre-kindergarten through grade 5; 14 in grades 6-8; and 14 in grades 9-12.

The review team analyzed multiple data sets and reviewed numerous documents before and during the site visit, including:

* + Student and school performance data, including achievement and growth, enrollment, graduation, dropout, retention, suspension, and attendance rates.
  + Data on the district’s staffing and finances.
  + Published educational reports on the district by DESE, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), and the former Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA).
  + District documents such as district and school improvement plans, school committee policies, curriculum documents, summaries of student assessments, job descriptions, collective bargaining agreements, evaluation tools for staff, handbooks, school schedules, and the district’s end-of-year financial reports.
  + All completed program and administrator evaluations, and a random selection of completed teacher evaluations.

Site Visit Schedule

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Tuesday**  02/25/2020 | **Wednesday**  02/26/2020 | **Thursday**  02/27/2020 |
| Interviews with district staff and principals; review of personnel files; teacher focus groups; and visits to Palmer High School and Old Mill Elementary School for classroom observations. | Interviews with town personnel; interviews with district, school, and instructional leaders; review of personnel files; interviews with school committee members; interviews with teachers’ association representatives; focus group with families; visits to Palmer High School and Old Mill Elementary School for classroom observations. | Interviews with students; follow-up interviews; district review team meeting; and visits to Palmer High School and Old Mill Elementary School for classroom observations; District wrap-up meeting with the superintendent. |

Appendix B: Enrollment, Attendance, Expenditures

**Table B1a:** **Palmer Public Schools**

**2019–2020 Student Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **District** | **Percent**  **of Total** | **State** | **Percent of**  **Total** |
| African-American | 36 | 2.8% | 87,053 | 9.2% |
| Asian | 35 | 2.7% | 67,527 | 7.1% |
| Hispanic | 160 | 12.3% | 205,136 | 21.6% |
| Native American | 2 | 0.2% | 2,081 | 0.2% |
| White | 1,006 | 77.1% | 549,006 | 57.9% |
| Native Hawaiian | -- | -- | 781 | 0.1% |
| Multi-Race, Non-Hisp./Lat. | 65 | 5.0% | 37,244 | 3.9% |
| All | 1,304 | 100.0% | 948,828 | 100.0% |
| Note: As of October 1, 2019 | | | | |

**Table B1b: Palmer Public Schools**

**2019–2020 Student Enrollment by High Needs Populations**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **District** | | | **State** | | |
| **N** | **Percent of High Needs** | **Percent of District** | **N** | **Percent of High Needs** | **Percent of State** |
| Students w/ disabilities | 260 | 36.2% | 19.7% | 176,741 | 37.9% | 18.4% |
| Econ. dis. | 601 | 83.7% | 46.1% | 310,873 | 66.6% | 32.8% |
| EL | 47 | 6.5% | 3.6% | 102,861 | 22.0% | 10.8% |
| All high needs students | 718 | 100.0% | 54.4% | 466,930 | 100.0% | 48.7% |
| Notes: As of October 1, 2019. District and state numbers and percentages for students with disabilities and high needs students are calculated including students in out-of-district placements. Total district enrollment including students in out-of-district placement is 1,321; total state enrollment including students in out-of-district placement is 959,394. | | | | | | |

**Table B2a: Palmer Public Schools**

**Attendance Rates, 2016–2019**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2019)** |
| African American/Black | 48 | 95.4 | 93.7 | 94.2 | 93.7 | -1.7 | 94.1 |
| Asian | 35 | 96.7 | 97.5 | 97.6 | 96.0 | -0.7 | 96.2 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 160 | 93.3 | 93.3 | 93.1 | 93.0 | -0.3 | 92.7 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hisp./Lat. | 77 | 92.8 | 93.2 | 93.0 | 94.0 | 1.2 | 94.4 |
| White | 1,109 | 94.9 | 94.6 | 95.2 | 95.1 | 0.2 | 95.1 |
| High needs | 817 | 93.3 | 93.1 | 93.8 | 93.6 | 0.3 | 93.3 |
| Econ. dis. | 696 | 93.5 | 93.0 | 93.6 | 93.3 | -0.2 | 92.7 |
| SWD | 289 | 92.2 | 92.6 | 93.0 | 93.4 | 1.2 | 93.0 |
| EL | 42 | 93.0 | 94.6 | 93.7 | 93.3 | 0.3 | 93.2 |
| All | 1,431 | 94.7 | 94.5 | 94.9 | 94.8 | 0.1 | 94.6 |
| Notes: The attendance rate is calculated by dividing the total number of days students attended school by the total number of days students were enrolled in a particular school year. A student’s attendance rate is counted toward any district the student attended. In addition, district attendance rates included students who were out placed in public collaborative or private alternative schools/programs at public expense. Attendance rates have been rounded; percent change is based on unrounded numbers. | | | | | | | |

**Table B2b: Palmer Public Schools**

**Chronic Absence Rates\* by Student Group, 2016–2019**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Group** | **N (2019)** | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** | **4-yr Change** | **State (2019)** |
| African American/Black | 48 | 2.8 | 19.0 | 19.1 | 27.1 | 24.3 | 16.2 |
| Asian | 35 | 7.1 | 3.2 | 2.6 | 14.3 | 7.2 | 7.5 |
| Hispanic or Latino | 160 | 24.0 | 23.0 | 25.1 | 24.4 | 0.4 | 21.7 |
| Multi-Race, non-Hisp./Lat. | 77 | 20.4 | 23.0 | 22.2 | 19.5 | -0.9 | 13.7 |
| White | 1,109 | 11.1 | 12.2 | 10.5 | 10.0 | -1.1 | 9.7 |
| High needs | 817 | 19.3 | 19.9 | 18.9 | 19.2 | -0.1 | 19.4 |
| Econ. dis. | 696 | 19.4 | 20.7 | 20.5 | 21.1 | 1.7 | 22.5 |
| SWD | 289 | 22.2 | 23.1 | 21.8 | 19.4 | -2.8 | 20.3 |
| EL | 42 | 29.2 | 17.9 | 25.0 | 26.2 | -3.0 | 20.3 |
| All | 1,431 | 12.3 | 13.8 | 12.9 | 12.9 | 0.6 | 12.9 |
| \* Chronic absence is defined as the percentage of students absent 10 percent or more of their total number of student days of membership in a school. | | | | | | | |

**Table B3: Palmer Public Schools**

**Expenditures, Chapter 70 State Aid, and Net School Spending Fiscal Years 2017–2019**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **FY17** | | | **FY18** | | | **FY19** | | |
|  | **Estimated** | | **Actual** | **Estimated** | **Actual** | | **Estimated** | | **Actual** |
| Expenditures | | | | | | | | | |
| From local appropriations for schools: |  | | | | | | | | |
| By school committee | $15,303,594 | $15,585,614 | | $15,585,614 | | $15,906,053 | | $15,303,594 | $16,011,966 |
| By municipality | $7,577,024 | $6,972,480 | | $7,052,584 | | $6,868,877 | | $7,577,024 | $6,991,335 |
| Total from local appropriations | $22,880,618 | $22,558,094 | | $22,638,198 | | $22,774,930 | | $22,880,618 | $23,003,301 |
| From revolving funds and grants | -- | $2,080,240 | | -- | | $2,228,851 | | -- | $2,542,776 |
| Total expenditures | -- | $24,638,334 | | -- | | $25,003,781 | | -- | $25,546,077 |
| Chapter 70 aid to education program | | | | | | | | | |
| Chapter 70 state aid\* | -- | $10,784,150 | | -- | | $10,829,000 | | -- | $10,873,130 |
| Required local contribution | -- | $6,592,394 | | -- | | $6,595,198 | | -- | $6,739,159 |
| Required net school spending\*\* | -- | $17,376,544 | | -- | | $17,424,198 | | -- | $17,612,289 |
| Actual net school spending | -- | $18,885,645 | | -- | | $19,949,538 | | -- | $21,396,648 |
| Over/under required ($) | -- | $1,509,101 | | -- | | $2,525,340 | | -- | $3,784,359 |
| Over/under required (%) | -- | 8.7% | | -- | | 14.5% | | -- | 21.5% |
| \*Chapter 70 state aid funds are deposited in the local general fund and spent as local appropriations.  \*\*Required net school spending is the total of Chapter 70 aid and required local contribution. Net school spending includes only expenditures from local appropriations, not revolving funds and grants. It includes expenditures for most administration, instruction, operations, and out-of-district tuitions. It does not include transportation, school lunches, debt, or capital.  Sources: FY16, FY17, and FY18 District End-of-Year Reports, Chapter 70 Program information on DESE website  Data retrieved 1/13/20 | | | | | | | | | |

**Table B7: Palmer Public Schools**

**Expenditures Per In-District Pupil**

**Fiscal Years 2017–2019**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Expenditure Category** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| Administration | $581 | $643 | $589 |
| Instructional leadership (district and school) | $773 | $677 | $764 |
| Teachers | $5,461 | $5,890 | $6,285 |
| Other teaching services | $949 | $1,146 | $1,288 |
| Professional development | $44 | $62 | $87 |
| Instructional materials, equipment and technology | $349 | $284 | $379 |
| Guidance, counseling and testing services | $388 | $498 | $514 |
| Pupil services | $1,305 | $1,440 | $1,820 |
| Operations and maintenance | $931 | $969 | $990 |
| Insurance, retirement and other fixed costs | $2,874 | $2,973 | $3,106 |
| Total expenditures per in-district pupil | $13,655 | $14,582 | $15,823 |
| Sources: [Per-pupil expenditure reports on DESE website](http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/statistics/ppx.html)  Note: Any discrepancy between expenditures and total is because of rounding. | | | |

Appendix C: Instructional Inventory

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus Area #1: Learning Objectives & Expectations** |  | Insufficient Evidence | Limited Evidence | Sufficient Evidence | Compelling Evidence | Avg Number of points |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (1 to 4) |
| 1. The teacher demonstrates knowledge of the subject matter. | **ES** | 0% | 0% | 76% | 24% | 3.2 |
| **MS** | 0% | 21% | 71% | 7% | 2.9 |
| **HS** | 7% | 7% | 79% | 7% | 2.9 |
| **Total #** | 1 | 4 | 34 | 6 | 3.0 |
| **Total %** | 2% | 9% | 76% | 13% |  |
| 2. The teacher ensures that students understand what they should be learning in the lesson and why. | **ES** | 6% | 12% | 65% | 18% | 2.9 |
| **MS** | 0% | 14% | 57% | 29% | 3.1 |
| **HS** | 0% | 29% | 71% | 0% | 2.7 |
| **Total #** | 1 | 8 | 29 | 7 | 2.9 |
| **Total %** | 2% | 18% | 64% | 16% |  |
| 3. The teacher uses appropriate classroom activities well matched to the learning objective(s). | **ES** | 0% | 6% | 76% | 18% | 3.1 |
| **MS** | 14% | 7% | 50% | 29% | 2.9 |
| **HS** | 0% | 29% | 71% | 0% | 2.7 |
| **Total #** | 2 | 6 | 30 | 7 | 2.9 |
| **Total %** | 4% | 13% | 67% | 16% |  |
| 4. The teacher conducts frequent checks for student understanding, provides feedback, and adjusts instruction. | **ES** | 6% | 18% | 65% | 12% | 2.8 |
| **MS** | 7% | 21% | 57% | 14% | 2.8 |
| **HS** | 7% | 57% | 29% | 7% | 2.4 |
| **Total #** | 3 | 14 | 23 | 5 | 2.7 |
| **Total %** | 7% | 31% | 51% | 11% |  |
| **Total Score For Focus Area #1** | **ES** |  |  |  |  | 12.1 |
| **MS** |  |  |  |  | 11.7 |
| **HS** |  |  |  |  | 10.6 |
| **Total** |  |  |  |  | 11.5 |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus Area #2: Student Engagement & Higher-Order Thinking** |  | Insufficient Evidence | Limited Evidence | Sufficient Evidence | Compelling Evidence | Avg Number of points |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (1 to 4) |
| 5. Students assume responsibility to learn and are engaged in the lesson. | **ES** | 0% | 6% | 53% | 41% | 3.4 |
| **MS** | 7% | 43% | 36% | 14% | 2.6 |
| **HS** | 14% | 21% | 57% | 7% | 2.6 |
| **Total #** | 3 | 10 | 22 | 10 | 2.9 |
| **Total %** | 7% | 22% | 49% | 22% |  |
| 6. Students engage in higher-order thinking. | **ES** | 0% | 76% | 18% | 6% | 2.3 |
| **MS** | 7% | 43% | 43% | 7% | 2.5 |
| **HS** | 0% | 43% | 57% | 0% | 2.6 |
| **Total #** | 1 | 25 | 17 | 2 | 2.4 |
| **Total %** | 2% | 56% | 38% | 4% |  |
| 7. Students communicate their ideas and thinking with each other. | **ES** | 6% | 24% | 71% | 0% | 2.6 |
| **MS** | 7% | 50% | 36% | 7% | 2.4 |
| **HS** | 14% | 29% | 50% | 7% | 2.5 |
| **Total #** | 4 | 15 | 24 | 2 | 2.5 |
| **Total %** | 9% | 33% | 53% | 4% |  |
| 8. Students engage with meaningful, real-world tasks. | **ES** | 0% | 18% | 71% | 12% | 2.9 |
| **MS** | 0% | 29% | 57% | 14% | 2.9 |
| **HS** | 7% | 36% | 57% | 0% | 2.5 |
| **Total #** | 1 | 12 | 28 | 4 | 2.8 |
| **Total %** | 2% | 27% | 62% | 9% |  |
| **Total Score For Focus Area #2** | **ES** |  |  |  |  | 11.2 |
| **MS** |  |  |  |  | 10.4 |
| **HS** |  |  |  |  | 10.1 |
| **Total** |  |  |  |  | 10.6 |

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Focus Area #3: Inclusive Practice & Classroom Culture** |  | Insufficient Evidence | Limited Evidence | Sufficient Evidence | Compelling Evidence | Avg Number of points |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (1 to 4) |
| 9. The teacher ensures that students are engaging in challenging tasks regardless of learning needs. | **ES** | 0% | 18% | 76% | 6% | 2.9 |
| **MS** | 14% | 64% | 21% | 0% | 2.1 |
| **HS** | 21% | 50% | 29% | 0% | 2.1 |
| **Total #** | 5 | 19 | 20 | 1 | 2.4 |
| **Total %** | 11% | 42% | 44% | 2% |  |
| 10. The teacher uses a variety of instructional strategies. | **ES** | 0% | 6% | 82% | 12% | 3.1 |
| **MS** | 7% | 36% | 57% | 0% | 2.5 |
| **HS** | 21% | 50% | 29% | 0% | 2.1 |
| **Total #** | 4 | 13 | 26 | 2 | 2.6 |
| **Total %** | 9% | 29% | 58% | 4% |  |
| 11. Classroom routines and positive supports are in place to ensure that students behave appropriately. | **ES** | 0% | 6% | 65% | 29% | 3.2 |
| **MS** | 7% | 14% | 29% | 50% | 3.2 |
| **HS** | 0% | 14% | 79% | 7% | 2.9 |
| **Total #** | 1 | 5 | 26 | 13 | 3.1 |
| **Total %** | 2% | 11% | 58% | 29% |  |
| 12. The classroom climate is conducive to teaching and learning. | **ES** | 0% | 12% | 59% | 29% | 3.2 |
| **MS** | 7% | 14% | 21% | 57% | 3.3 |
| **HS** | 0% | 21% | 71% | 7% | 2.9 |
| **Total #** | 1 | 7 | 23 | 14 | 3.1 |
| **Total %** | 2% | 16% | 51% | 31% |  |
| **Total Score For Focus Area #3** | **ES** |  |  |  |  | 12.4 |
| **MS** |  |  |  |  | 11.1 |
| **HS** |  |  |  |  | 9.9 |

1. According to DESE data, the rate of out-of-school suspensions at Palmer High School increased from 8.6 percent in 2018 to 12.7 percent in 2019. See Table 26 in the Student Performance section of this report for out-of-school suspension rates for 2018 and 2019, disaggregated by student group. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. High-quality feedback is specific, timely, and actionable. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. District leaders reported that school councils met monthly and reviewed the progress of the SIPs using data including MCAS data, assessment data, events, and program reviews. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. According to DESE data, between 2015 and 2020 the proportion of English learners fluctuated with an overall increase, from 1.2 percent in 2015 to 1.5 percent in 2016 to 1.9 percent in 2017 to 2.5 percent in 2018 to 2.4 percent in 2019 to 3.6 percent in 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. In 2020, students with disabilities accounted for 19.7 percent of Palmer’s enrollment. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. According to Understood.org, push-in services are those in which “Specialists work closely with students in the general education classroom. Instructional support, differentiated instruction or related services are provided in the classroom.” Pullout services take place when “Specialists work closely with students outside of the general education classroom. Instructional support or related services are provided in small groups or one-on-one in a separate setting.” (<https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/special-services/special-education-basics/the-difference-between-push-in-and-pull-out-services>) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. High-quality feedback is specific, timely, and actionable. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. SMART goals are Specific and Strategic; Measurable; Action-Oriented; Rigorous, Realistic, and Results-Focused; and Timed and Tracked. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. According to DESE data, between 2015 and 2020 the proportion of Hispanic students in the district increased from 6.1 percent to 12.3 percent; of African-American students, from 1.7 percent to 2.8 percent; of Asian students, from 1.7 percent to 2.7 percent; of Multi-Race, non-Hispanic students, from 3.0 percent to 5.0 percent; and of Native American students, from 0.1. percent to 1.2 percent. Between 2015 and 2020, the proportion of White students in the district decreased steadily from 87.2 percent in 2015 to 77.1 percent in 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. High-quality feedback is specific, timely, and actionable. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. District leaders reported that following the PD a survey was sent to staff to rate the overall effectiveness of the PD. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. HVAC stands for heating, ventilation, and air conditioning. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)