MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF
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Reflecting on Success: A Synthesis of Effective Practices of Title I Commendation Schools Receiving Dissemination Grants

This synthesis of effective practices in 26 Massachusetts Title I Commendation Schools documents that it is possible for schools serving substantial populations of low-income students to create a culture of change and successfully put into place practices that lead to improved student academic outcomes. Moreover, these schools have largely accomplished these improvements *without* the benefit of a dramatic infusion of financial resources or significant support from external partners.

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Executive Summary

This synthesis of effective practices in 26 Massachusetts Title I Commendation Schools documents that it is possible for schools serving substantial populations of low-income students to create a culture of change and successfully put into place practices that lead to improved student academic outcomes. Moreover, these schools have largely accomplished these improvements **without** the benefit of a dramatic infusion of financial resources or significant support from external partners.

Looking across the 26 Title I Commendation Schools, two characteristic *overarching approaches* to fostering improvement and four *core strategies* emerged as common threads in their stories of success.

The two *overarching approaches* that characterized these schools were:

1) **implementing a constellation of related practices targeting improvement that was tailored to the specific context of their schools; and**

2) **utilizing a systemic school wide approach to integrate the practices**

That is, these Title I Commendation Schools put in place multiple, mutually reinforcing practices across the four core strategies in a very systematic way in order to achieve their school improvement goals.

Each school used a constellation of practices to achieve its success that was tailored to the specific contexts of its school. The individual practices used by the Title I Commendation Schools tended to cluster under the *ESE Conditions for School Effectiveness* (CSE) that are at the heart of the instructional process, namely: II. Effective School Leadership; IV. Effective Instruction; V. Student Assessment; VII. Professional Development and Structures for Collaboration; and VIII. Tiered Instruction and Adequate Learning Time. (See Appendix A) Each of these Conditions is comprised of multiple elements; each element, in turn, is characterized by indicators of good practice as described in the Conditions for School Effectiveness Self-Assessment.

Practices falling into four *core strategies*, in particular, emerged as common features of the Title I Commendation Schools in this synthesis: (1) Effective School Leadership; (2) Structures for Collaboration (3) Using Data to Inform Instructional Practice; and; (4) Personalized Instruction for Students. As described below, several of these core practice areas reflect particular elements and indicators of good practice and/or cut across more than one of the Conditions for School Effectiveness, rather than encompassing all the elements of a single Condition. Each of

the 26 Title I Commendation Schools employed practices in all four of the *core strategies* described below. The relative emphasis on each of these *core strategies* differed across schools, as did the specific practices implemented within each *core strategy*.

1) Effective School Leadership: Title I Commendation School leaders all had a clear mission and set of goals for school improvement. These principals put their strong mark on their school's instructional practice, climate and culture. What's more, they all successfully communicated these goals to teachers and secured their buy-in to share responsibility for student outcomes. *(This core strategy reflects most elements of good practice described in* CSE II: Effective School Leadership*)*

2) Structures for Collaboration: Creating structures for systematic and frequent collaboration among school staff—typically referred to as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)—was identified as a key element of success in improving student outcomes in most Commendation Schools. The collaboration itself serves as a means to an end, and is one way that these Commendation Schools successfully created school cultures that resulted in **shared responsibility for their students**. (*This core strategy, in particular, reflects several elements and indicators of good practice in* CSE VII. Professional Development and Structures for Collaboration*)*

3) Using Data to Inform Instructional Practice: A core aspect of the collaboration that takes place amongst school staff in these Commendation Schools is a focus on using data to inform instructional practice. Nearly all of the schools attributed their Commendation School status to the use of student assessment data, especially the use of formative assessment data to drive instruction and focus on its rigor. *(This core strategy, in particular, reflects several elements and indicators of good practice in* CSE V. Student Assessment.*)*

4) Personalized Instruction for Students: The grouping of students for instruction is a natural consequence of looking at data to identify students' strengths and challenges. Generally, the Commendation Schools turned to creating flexible and fluid small groups of similar students, which facilitates differentiating instruction and developing more personalized learning environments for students. *(This core strategy, in particular, reflects elements and indicators of good practice in* CSE IV. Effective Instruction *and* CSE VIII. Tiered Instruction and Adequate Learning Time.*)*

Perhaps the most important findings from this synthesis is that implementing practices in the core strategies of the Title I Commendation Schools utilizing an <u>integrated</u> approach drove the types of improvements observed within these schools. This finding supports current research on systemic reform, including the elements of successful whole system reform articulated by Michael Fullan's (2010) and W. Norton Grubb's (2009) description of the importance of compound and complex resources in systemic reform.[1,2]

It is important to keep in mind that the Title I Commendation schools included in this synthesis have widely varying cultures and contexts, so while they share many practices and approaches, the details of their implementation look quite different from school to school. Richer examples of what these approaches look like in these schools and the variety of specific practices implemented within each core strategy, as well as vignettes describing selected schools' trajectories of improvement, appear in the body of this report. It is our hope that district and school leaders throughout the state will be inspired by these stories of school improvement and employ and customize the principles used in these settings to foster this type of improvement in their own schools.

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[1]Fullan, M. (2010). *All Systems Go.* (2010). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
[2] Grubb, W.N. (2009). *The Money Myth.* New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Background and Context for this Synthesis of Effective Practices

This synthesis of effective practices of Title I Commendation Schools took place within the larger context of two related grant programs within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: the Title I Dissemination Grants for Commissioner's Districts and the Title I Commendation Schools Regional Dissemination Grant program.

At the time this study was conducted, schools throughout the Commonwealth were recognized as Commendation Schools when they exited NCLB accountability status, showed high growth on the statewide assessment tests (MCAS) or narrowed gaps in proficiency among subgroups of high need students over a two year period. In the 2010-11 school year, 127 schools in the Commonwealth were identified as Commendation Schools. They included:

> 14 schools in six Commissioner's Districts[3]
> 102 schools in 90 non-Commissioner's districts, and
> 11 charter schools

Just over half the schools receiving commendation status were Title I schools (N=65)—schools identified as serving high numbers or percentages of children from low-income families and thus eligible for Federal assistance under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Title I Commendation Schools were eligible to receive grant funding from two grant programs: 1) the Title I Dissemination Grants for Commissioner's Districts (Commissioner's grants) and 2) the Title I Commendation Schools Regional Dissemination Grants (Regional grants). Both grant programs were designed to:

- recognize and reward Title I Commendation Schools for their accomplishments;

- identify and document effective practices aligned to the ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness (see Appendix A); and

- share professional learning and disseminate those practices to other schools

Expectations around dissemination were different for the two grant programs. Title I Commendation Schools in the Commissioner's Districts were expected to support the dissemination of effective practices from the Commendation Schools to other Title I schools within their own districts. Grantees in the regional dissemination grant program were expected to develop regional partnerships that included schools from at least two districts, a minimum of one Commendation School, and a minimum of one Level 3 school (that is, a school designated

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[3] Commissioner's Districts include the 10 largest urban districts in the Commonwealth.

as being among the lowest 20 percent in performance and least improving schools in the Commonwealth).

Just over one third (N=24) of all the eligible Title I Commendation Schools took part in one of the two grant programs. Awards were made in spring 2012, and all activities were to be completed by the end of August 2012.

Grants of $212,500 were made to five Commissioner's Districts, which amongst them had total of 10 Title 1 Commendation Schools (see Appendix B). Fourteen partnerships were funded through the regional grant program, including 12 Title I and two non-Title I Commendation Schools in 14 separate districts, plus two Title I Commendation charter schools and over 30 Level 3 schools in 20 partnering districts. Grantees were distributed throughout all six regions of the Commonwealth (see Appendix B). Grants for regional partnerships ranged from $18,400 to $75,000. Additional details about the two grant programs can be found in Appendix C.

In late spring 2012, the Office of the Regional System of Support contracted with a team from Evidence-Based Education Research & Evaluation (EBERE LLC) to support a statewide network of the regional grantees, foster cross-partnership learning, document and describe partnerships' efforts to identify and disseminate effective practices in participating districts and schools, and synthesize what was learned across the regional partnerships. In early July 2012, the Commissioner's grantees were included in the work.

This report shares what was learned about the work of the grantees with a focus on common effective practices of the Title I Commendation Schools. A separate report on the development of regional partnerships and dissemination of best practices to non-Commendation schools in their regions and districts was also developed as an internal working document designed to inform ESE staff's efforts to foster dissemination of best practices through district-wide and regional collaborations.

The next section of this report provides an overview of the questions that guided the work of the EBERE team. The subsequent section provides a brief summary description of the characteristics of Commendation schools included in the synthesis. It is followed by a section describing the overarching approaches, strategies, and specific practices that were typical of this set of schools. Numerous examples are included in this section, in order to illustrate that the same approach or practice can look quite different within the specific context of individual schools. The report closes by reflecting on the key lessons learned and is immediately followed by vignettes of four Commendation Schools. These are included to provide a richer and more complete picture of how schools put practices into place that led them to Commendation School status.

Study Overview

The 14 regional grantees and 10 Commissioner's grantees funded through the two grant programs engaged in a diverse set of activities with the intention of defining and sharing successful practices. The major task of the facilitation and documentation project was to collect a common set of data across the grantees in order to gain an understanding of the context in which the Commendation Schools were able to achieve their success, to identify practices that can be replicated and transferred across schools, and to gain insight into the key factors that allowed the commendation schools to facilitate growth in student proficiency. A secondary task was to document how the grantees shared their practices with other schools and districts. The 11 Conditions of School Effectiveness (CSE) provided the overarching framework for data collection with respect to identifying common effective practices used by the Commendation Schools. Data collection used multiple methods, as described in Appendix D. The following key questions guided the work on effective practices:

- In what ways have school and classroom practices changed in the commendation schools that allowed the schools to narrow the proficiency gap and/or demonstrate high growth as required to gain status as a Commendation School?

- To what extent are these practices common across Commendation Schools?

- What evidence exists that these practices contributed to commendation status?

- Under what school conditions were these practices successfully implemented?

Based on interviews, observations and the original applications, individual profiles of each school were created, which defined to the extent possible, the practices that won them commendation status. Since the state has already defined its Conditions of School Effectiveness (CSEs) which "articulate what schools need to have in place to educate their students well", the first step in analyzing these data was to cluster Commendation School practices under the most appropriate CSEs, excluding Condition #1 which addresses district rather than school concerns. (See Appendix A) These data were then further refined to map individual practices onto the specific elements and indicators of good practice within each Condition in the Conditions for School Effectiveness Self-Assessment. These data were then analyzed to search for common themes, which are described in the following section.

This work was limited by the very short time frame for data collection, analysis and reporting. By necessity, the methods used to collect data relied primarily on retrospective self-reporting and perceptions of the respondents. This precluded an independent verification of schools' theories on why they improved. Furthermore, the study did not include a comparison group, which would have afforded the opportunity to observe whether other schools implementing comparable approaches, strategies, and practices experienced similar improvements.

Participating Schools

The 26[4] Commendation Schools included in the data collection and analyses comprise 16 schools in regional partnership districts and 10 schools in Commissioner's districts and thus reflect the urban, suburban, and rural diversity of the state. Demographically they are the state's less affluent schools, but there is a range of low income students served in the partnership schools ranging from a low of 10 percent in Lunenburg to a high of 93 percent in Chelsea and Boston. In the Commissioner's Districts, the variation is less, with schools serving from 54 to 93 percent low income students. Other characteristics of the student population are similarly varied across the Commendation Schools (See Appendix E for information on the characteristics of individual districts and schools.) Almost all the schools are elementary or middle schools in many different grade configurations. Among the partnership districts, there is one Commendation School that is a high school[5] and there is one more among the Commissioner's Districts. There are two charter schools. Most of the principals are "newer," seven years or fewer in the position, but several have served much longer in their districts, although not necessarily as principals.

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[4] The two Commendation Schools in Easthampton have the same principal who treats them as one school, so they have also been treated as one school in the data analysis.
[5] The Salem Charter School is unique in that it includes grades 6-12 and is designated a "Middle School-High School."

Commendation School Practices and Themes

Looking across the 26 Commendation Schools, two characteristic *overarching approaches* to fostering improvement and four *core strategies* emerged as common threads in their stories of success.

Overarching Approaches

The two *overarching approaches* that characterized these schools were:

1) **implementing a constellation of related practices targeting improvement that was tailored to the specific context of their schools; and**

2) **utilizing a systemic school wide approach to integrate the practices**

That is, these Commendation Schools put in place multiple, mutually reinforcing practices across the four core strategies in a very systematic way in order to achieve their school improvement goals.

As part of the data collection process, school staff identified the practices they attribute to their achieving Commendation School status. The number of identified practices in any one school ranged from three to nine, with an average of about five practices per school. Schools often adopted practices under several related CSEs, thus, no single practice identified operates in isolation in these schools. For example, 15 schools implemented practices around effective instruction, student assessment, and professional development for collaboration. Eleven of these 15 also implemented elements of tiered instruction for students.

School staff also articulated how the specific constellation of practices in place in their schools were tailored to their needs, and how they were interrelated with and reinforced one another. This reflects an underlying intentionality in the design and implementation of the practices adopted—a thoughtful, coordinated approach to fostering school improvement, rather than a collection of disparate reform initiatives lacking internal coherence.

Thus, none of the practices identified and described in this report operates in isolation and there is considerable interconnectedness of practices across the core strategies. The use of data for example, is linked to having a structure for collaboration where data can be shared, reviewed and acted upon by staff. Similarly, it is the availability of data that allows staff to make decisions regarding appropriate instructional groupings and targeted interventions.

Core Strategies

The individual practices used by the Title I Commendation Schools, tended to cluster under the *ESE Conditions for School Effectiveness* (CSE) that are at the heart of the instructional process, namely: II. Effective School Leadership; IV. Effective Instruction; V. Student Assessment; VII. Professional Development and Structures for Collaboration; and VIII. Tiered Instruction and Adequate Learning Time. (See Appendix A) Each of these Conditions is comprised of multiple elements; each element, in turn, is characterized by indicators of good practice as described in the Conditions for School Effectiveness Self-Assessment. A greater proportion of Title I Commendations Schools in the Commissioner's districts than those in regional partnerships attributed their improvements to practices around students' social, emotional and health needs and/or family engagement.

Practices falling within four *core strategies*, in particular, emerged as common features of the 26 Commendation Schools in this synthesis:

> **1) Effective School Leadership;**
> **2) Structures for Collaboration;**
> **3) Using Data to Inform Instructional Practice; and**
> **4) Personalized Instruction for Students.**

As described below, these *core strategies* reflect particular elements and indicators of good practice and/or cut across more than one of the Conditions for School Effectiveness, rather than encompassing all the elements of a single Condition. For example, while most schools had adopted a balanced system of formative and benchmark assessments (an element of Condition V. Student Assessment), it was actually the practices around the way those data were used that schools identified as important to their success.

Each of the 26 Title I Commendation Schools employed practices in <u>all four</u> of the *core strategies.* Furthermore, each practice is adapted to a school's unique context; the resulting implementation of the same practice across different contexts, therefore, can look quite different from school to school. Thus, for example, in some schools, effective school leadership consisted of an individual strong manager or organizational leader. In other school contexts, it was shared leadership that facilitated progress, while in others it was an instructional leader that was required to move schools to success.

The remainder of this section provides illustrative examples of specific school-level practices identified for each of the four core strategies. Multiple examples of practices within each core strategy are included to demonstrate the rich variation as implemented by individual schools.

Effective School Leadership

Effective school leadership was a key factor in the success of virtually every Commendation School. Although many of the principals had been in their positions for fewer than seven years, they had put their strong mark on the school's instructional practice, climate and culture. A common characteristic of these leaders is that, although they exemplified different leadership styles, they all had a clear mission and set of goals for school improvement and the ability to communicate these goals to teachers and obtain their buy-in to share responsibility for student outcomes.

Moreover, principals in the Commendation Schools embraced high expectations for all students and they developed systems, structures and routines that allowed staff to have a common understanding of these expectations. Professional development was sometimes used to provide staff with a common language to use in talking with one another about instructional practices as well as a common understanding of the level of academic rigor that needed to be in place to meet student and school goals.

- At Morningside Community Elementary School in Pittsfield the new principal set about providing consistent foundations of time and space. Instructional expectations are clearly communicated to teachers. The principal has provided to teachers a written outline with "non-negotiables" regarding the use of time for a two- hour literacy block— teacher led whole group instruction for 20-30 minutes, teacher led small group differentiated/targeted instruction with students rotating to center activities for 90 minutes, and a 5 minute wrap up in whole or small group. The principal developed a master schedule and has made clear to the staff that the school operates based on the following assumption: "Morningside Community School will put the instructional and social needs of every child before the needs of any faculty, staff, or administrator." And transparency is key. The principal stated: "Everyone has their area of focus, but everyone works with everyone" (i.e., there is a shared responsibility for students).

- At Dryden Memorial Elementary School in Springfield, the principal arrived two years ago and found a teaching staff that was both experienced and collaborative. She was impressed by the staffing model, which includes Instructional Leadership Specialists in ELA and Math, who meet weekly with grade level teams as well as the Principal, go into classes to teach/model lessons and work with students in small group instruction. The principal realized immediately that here was a culture of shared leadership and she capitalized upon it.

- At the H.H. Galligan school in Taunton, the principal points to the school's culture, also known as the 'Galligan Way,' as being key to supporting its high growth. She said: "There is no ownership of a particular group of students. They are all our students and we maximize the time we have with them." The principal has been known to personally

call students when they do not come to school, drive to their homes, pick them up and bring them to school. She places an importance on attendance and maintains high expectations for students to be at school every day. She also has changed the school schedule to allow more time for small group instruction and daily collaborative planning. The principal meets frequently with all of the school's grade level teams. In addition, she convenes a curriculum meeting and a student-centered data meeting, each with all staff present, on a monthly basis. These meetings emphasize data analysis as a vehicle for informing instruction across grade levels and vertically within the school.

- At North End Elementary School in Fall River, commendation status was earned by narrowing the gaps for subgroups, which with a special education population of 27 percent was, according to the Commendation School principal "both an honor and a bit of a surprise." Her school is large (678 students) and was created when three schools and staffs merged into one. "Three different cultures," she says, "so instead of trying to merge them, I decided to create a new one—a culture of shared leadership." To do so, she empowered four school teams, math, literacy, social emotional learning, and instructional leadership, by stepping back and allowing the teams to create their own agendas and make instructional and other school wide decisions. "I sit in to guide," she said, "but I don't direct." The principal does not consider the empowerment of teachers as an end in itself but rather a way to distribute leadership for instructional purposes.

Structures for Collaboration

Most of the Commendation Schools (19 of 26 schools) attributed their success in improving student achievement at least in part to creating structures for systematic and frequent collaboration among school staff. This collaboration, typically referred to as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), was characterized by frequent meetings of grade level teacher teams and structured processes used for a number of specific purposes—to review data for creating small instructional groups, to look at student work to assess student's strengths and weaknesses, or to provide feedback to teachers on ways to improve instructional practices.

Although many principals indicated that they would prefer to have more time in the day for these collaborative meetings, some schools managed to carve out time for teachers to meet together regularly. The collaboration is always a means to an end, and is one way that Commendation Schools have created a culture that results in shared responsibility for students. The collaborative structures are typically used as the mechanism by which teachers get together to look at and use data for instructional decision making. Often it was a gradual process that slowly moved teachers from their traditional attitudes to a culture of collaboration.

- At the Cashman Elementary School in Amesbury, the principal took a systematic approach to introducing PLCs to the school over a three year period. First the principal started a book group for teachers beginning with *On Common Ground: The Power of Professional Learning Communities*. In year 2, the principal offered a course for in-service credit on professional learning communities using on-line resources, and finally in her third year she offered both the PLC course and started a data team with groups of teachers working together after school. Looking at data together and working as a team to plan instruction was effective in meeting student's instructional goals and in forging a collaborative work culture at the school.

- At the Altavesta School in Woburn, PLCs were introduced initially in grades K-2 for early literacy after the principal participated in district-provided professional development on PLCs. First, the K-2 teachers met as a group every two weeks to collaborate on what the teachers could do to improve instruction but there wasn't sufficient time in the schedule. Using their individual prep time, teachers agreed to meet after school and since then they have been able to use the time to work together to examine student work, discuss student learning and monitor student progress. Teachers now talk to one another about students and teaching and have opportunities to share best practices.

- At the Tucker School in Milton, teachers have worked successfully with the PLC model. The principal believes a major strength of the model is that it allows "asking the hard questions and discussing them without blame." The focus of the hard questions is: 1) using formative assessment to plan instruction and 2) finding ways to engage students in their own learning.

- At the Pepin and Center Elementary Schools in Easthampton, the principal, who leads both schools, has been working with staff for the past 4 years on developing a common language around reading instruction. He has limited the number of new initiatives in the school, opting instead to engage the staff in deep, sustained professional development on guided reading with the same professional development provider over time, to address the schools' stagnant ELA performance. The principal worked individually with teachers to review data to help them understand the needs of the students. He continues to meet with teachers weekly to review data. Development of action plans in these weekly meetings is used to help hold teachers accountable for their instruction.

Using Data to Inform Instructional Practice

Nearly all of the Commendation Schools (23 of the 26) attributed their Commendation School status to the use of student assessment data, especially the use of formative assessment data to plan instruction. Most of the schools reported that they gather a variety of data about student achievement (beyond MCAS) and that they do so with frequency. The data are such

that they can be used by teachers to identify individual students' strengths and weaknesses, and target instruction appropriately. Teachers are familiar with sharing and using data and they know how to use it to make instructional decisions.

- Community Day Charter School in Lawrence has developed five key practices which are used for data driven instruction: (1) good baseline data; (2) measurable instructional goals; (3) frequent formative assessment; (4) professional learning communities; and (5) focused instructional interventions. Teachers develop action plans that describe the improvement strategies they will use in their classroom and every student has a set of Personal Education Goals (PEG). PEGs are updated and shared with parents and students three times a year.

- The principal of the Sumner School in Boston introduced a data inquiry cycle to the school where teachers look at data and use it to make decisions about providing targeted interventions to students. Two approaches are used to meeting with teachers in grade level teams (45 minutes weekly) depending on where they are in a data cycle. Either the principal brings data to the meeting to lead a discussion, or team members present data on a child in each classroom and the team asks questions and helps the teacher develop a plan for an intervention; follow up on the child is done in the team meeting six to eight weeks later.

- Salem Academy Charter adheres to strict standards-based instruction using a set of benchmarks based on the Common Core standards that were developed by curriculum team leaders. Benchmarks, skills and concepts are used to map the expectations for the year and these data are pivotal for planning, instruction and assessment. Using Achievement Network's formative assessment system, a data management system is available to teachers, and students can go online to see their own data and grades.

- At Snug Harbor Elementary school in Quincy, the principal has instituted a data driven instructional system, which is notable for the fact that the data from GRADE, DIBELS, DRA, Q-Math Easy CBM Math Assessment, MCAS and MEPA are reviewed by a committee of specialists, teachers and administrators four times a year. Data are used to create individualized groupings, which ensure that all students are in appropriately leveled groups for reading and math instruction.

- At the James Otis Elementary school in Boston, a relentless focus on using data to improve instruction is at the core of the school's improvement. After getting assistance from district staff in reviewing the school's data and having teachers attend professional development with Research for Better Teaching (RBT), school staff were able to refocus their teaching on standards they had not been addressing, and narrow their focus on teaching to smaller areas that needed improvement.

Personalized Instruction for Students

The grouping of students for instruction is a natural consequence of looking at data to identify students' strengths and challenges. Generally, the Commendation Schools turned to creating small, flexible, and fluid groups of similar students, which facilitates differentiating instruction and a more personalized learning environment for students. Some schools purchased commercial programs that differentiate lessons for students at different levels.

Although not emphasized as much by interviewees, instructional grouping can also refer to inclusion, which brought special education into regular classrooms in Billerica, Taunton and Milton. Still another form of grouping is departmentalizing the grades at the elementary level to take advantage of teachers' instructional strengths.

- At Galligan Elementary School in Taunton, emphasis is placed on small group instruction, including homogenous reading groups, heterogeneous skills groups and reciprocal teaching, which involves small groups in which students teach each other. To serve students receiving special education, interventions are "pushed in" to the classroom using co-teaching practices versus "pulling out" students from that environment. The principal notes that as a result, the students on IEP's are increasing their reading levels at faster rates than before.

- In her first year, the principal of Passios School in Lunenburg departmentalized the sixth grade into Math, Reading, Science and Social Studies. Two years later, she departmentalized the fifth grade. In addition, she purchased Study Island, a standards-based program that covers reading, math and science, providing easy to use and assimilate mini units and lessons.

- The principal at Morey School in Lowell credits the collaborative culture and climate at Morey as being key factors in the school's success. Teachers devote time at grade level and in vertical common planning meetings looking at data, progress monitoring and targeting interventions, using small group instruction. The school also has two reading coaches and one math coach who divide their time between co-teaching in the classroom, observing, working with small groups and individual students as well as participating in common planning time.

- At the Patrick Kennedy School in Boston, targeting individual student needs and involving families in understanding expectations for their children have been important elements of the school's success in improving student achievement. The school uses formative data in a 6-week data cycle, providing information to teachers on students in their classrooms as well as to parents on where their students are with basic skills, letting parents know what the school's expectations are for their children. Within the school they use the data to realign resources to meet the needs of the students. The

principal tries to find extra time for students to work with teachers or volunteers on specific skills when they are struggling. Resource time, lunch time, after school, and Saturday tutoring time are all used in order to provide students with the extra targeted instruction they need.

- Memorial High School, in Billerica faced unique cultural and structural issues in trying to institute tiered and differentiated instruction at the high school level, where teachers were used to teaching in silos. They have used differentiated instruction within the classroom and showed results with students receiving Tier 2 interventions even though the principal believes that the teachers do not have access to the right formative data. The assistant superintendent agreed, saying: "The effort was MCAS driven. We needed to structure time and bring teachers together to get deep into the data for them to learn to differentiate." Teachers in the ninth grade cluster have two cross-discipline common planning time sessions per week and, in addition to the standardized assessments, they are encouraged to look at their own tests (from texts or teacher-made) to learn more about what is needed to teach to the needs of individual students. This is another school that demonstrates how a school can respond to the needs of individual students with limited data and limited time for physically regrouping students

Putting it all Together

Perhaps the most important finding from this synthesis is that adopting practices within the four core strategies common to this set of Commendation Schools <u>without</u> an integrated approach is unlikely to lead to the types of improvements observed in those schools. This finding supports current research on systemic reform, including the elements of successful whole system reform articulated by Michael Fullan's (2010) and W. Norton Grubb's (2009) description of the importance of compound and complex resources in systemic reform.[6],[7]

Figure 1 depicts as puzzle pieces the four core strategies that the 26 schools believe led to their Commendation School status. What is critical to keep in mind though, is that school leaders describe deliberately adopting and implementing constellations of practices <u>across the four core strategies</u> that are interconnected and implemented in ways explicitly designed to mutually support and reinforce one another.

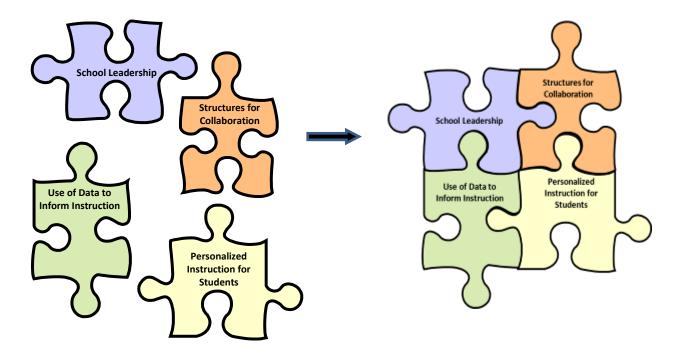**Figure 1: Putting It All Together: Integrating the Four Core Strategies**

Creating structures for teacher collaboration, for instance, was a strategy often described as being foundational to more profound strategic changes such as using data to inform

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[6]Fullan, M. (2010). All Systems Go. (2010). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

[7] Grubb, W.N. (2009). The Money Myth. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

instructional practice or for grouping students for targeted instruction. Although it seems evident from schools' stories of their success that certain pieces of the puzzle fit together in similar ways across schools—it is beyond the scope of this synthesis to provide definitive evidence that these links exist.

Lessons Learned

The following section summarizes other key lessons learned from this synthesis of Title I Commendation Schools.

1. **Improvement Involves Changing School Culture.** Some leaders had an explicit goal to change their schools' cultures. In other instances, implementation of the overarching approaches and core strategies not only led to improved students outcomes articulated in this report, they also had the concurrent effect of laying the groundwork for significant culture change within their schools. Creating a positive and nurturing school culture is a challenge that was met by all 26 Commendation Schools. To do this, they generally used a combination of a focus on school wide communication and setting common expectations. They also used collaborative structures to create transparency and shared responsibility. Two emphases that were especially important were:

   a) ***developing a common vocabulary among staff*** (i.e. getting them all on the same page with regard to specific practices, standards or curricula) and

   b) ***creating a sense of shared responsibility for students*** (i.e., instilling the belief that all students are our students—vs. my students and your students—thus breaking down one of the most common barriers to creating a healthy culture.

2. **There Are Multiple Routes to Fostering Improvement.** The synthesis revealed that there is no specific order in which effective practices leading to school improvement must be implemented. Schools can (and did) adopt practices in different sequences, generally seeking to build on their strengths and fill the gaps they had identified.

3. **No Single Leadership Style Facilitates Success.** Leaders who emphasize changes in instructional practice first, those that focus on changing organizational structures as the foundation of instructional change and principals who practice a shared style of teamwork leadership all succeeded in these schools. What leaders exhibiting these different leadership styles *do* share, however, is a clear mission and set of goals for school improvement and the ability to communicate these goals to teachers and obtain their buy-in to share responsibility for student outcomes.

4. **Quality of Implementation Matters.** Practices were implemented in ways that drove tangible school-wide results. Even though many Commendation Schools have access to the same limited data as other schools, they appear to consider examining the data at a fine

grain size as an important step for planning lessons, identifying students in need of intervention support, and for grouping and regrouping students. Teacher buy-in to the data examination process is enhanced when they see that the results will be used in ways that will help them become more effective instructors.

5. **Teachers Need to Understand Individual Student Needs.** Teachers in these schools seemed to understand the standards and skills that students were expected to know and they used a variety of data to assess student progress towards meeting those standards. When data indicated that the students were not meeting the standards, or needed acceleration, they had multiple strategies available to them to address the situation—opportunities to work collaboratively with others in the school to forge solutions, and flexible groupings to target students' individual needs.

Four Stories of School Success

The 26 Commendation Schools included in this synthesis have widely varying cultures and contexts, so while they share many approaches, strategies, and practices, the details of their implementation look quite different from school to school. This report closes with profiles of four of the Commendation Schools included in this synthesis, to illustrate how they pieced together the puzzle within their schools. Each profile describes the specific strategies the school adopted, how they were used as part of an integrated system, and how this system serves to set common standards and expectations for learning. It is our hope that district and school leaders throughout the state will be inspired by these stories of school improvement and employ and customize the principles used in these settings to foster these types of improvement in their own schools.

TUCKER ELEMENTARY
MILTON, MA
GRADES SERVED: K-5

"Teachers don't have failures here. We have experiments. Sometimes they work and sometimes they don't, but that is the nature of experimentation." (Commendation School Principal)

Tucker Elementary serves 379 students in grades K-5. Each grade level has three program strands: one English curriculum classroom; one English co-taught classroom (inclusion) and one French Immersion classroom. The principal, who has served in that position for three years, believes that nine instructional practices have supported the school's high growth in achievement over the last two years.

- Personal Best Philosophy
- Collaborative professional development
- School-wide Writing Initiative
- Mastery Learning
- Student Leadership
- Extended Time on Learning
- School-wide system of Assessment/Accountability
- Tiered Model of Intervention
- Strong Home-School Partnerships

The principal has created a risk free environment for teachers to implement these and other innovations. She says, "Teachers don't have failures here; we have experiments. Sometimes they work and sometimes they don't, but that is the nature of experimentation. We then try another strategy." Also, underlying the implementation of successful practices, according to the principal, is the school's successful use of the PLC model. She believes a major strength of the model is that it allows "asking the hard questions and discussing them without blame or defensiveness." The focus of the hard questions is 1) using formative assessment to plan instruction and 2) finding ways to engage students in their own learning. Teachers have now been working at the PLC approach for a while and are beyond the defensive stage and are very comfortable with what they are doing. In fact, the principal contends that the school staff understands "strong teaching" and they are collectively now trying to figure out what motivates students to apply themselves to do their personal best.

The principal is also supportive of the efforts of teachers to learn new instructional practice. When the use of writing rubrics was introduced, she realized that teachers needed assistance to understand the various 1-4 levels for grading. Therefore, she personally graded each writing paper produced by students for the first year and provided feedback which allowed the staff to develop a common eye for scoring and benchmark levels of mastery.

MORNINGSIDE COMMUNITY SCHOOL
PITTSFIELD, MA
GRADES SERVED: PK-5

Morningside Community School is a fairly small and diverse school serving about 400 students in grades PK-5 grade; over 90% of the students at Morningside come from low-income families. Morningside received recognition as a Commendation School for both high growth and narrowing achievement gaps. According to the current principal, the success of the Morningside Community School was due to a combination of many things, but that setting expectations and consistent communication are fundamental to the school's success. The principal indicated that he has made clear to the staff that the school operates based on the following expectation: "Morningside Community School will put the instructional and social needs of every child before the needs of any faculty, staff, or administrator."

A variety of strategies have been implemented to make this possible. At the forefront is communication, especially between the school and families. All reporting and school information is provided in English and Spanish. Interpreters are provided for all family meetings, and annual surveys are conducted with families to assess their satisfaction with their child's education. Family nights are held for the whole community as well as for families of ELL students. And transparency is key. The principal stated: "Everyone has their area of focus, but everyone works with everyone."

Over the past few years, the principal has put in a place a number of schoolwide instructional practices in reading and math to address the needs of students. Teachers use research-based core curriculum and intervention materials, conduct regular assessments of all students (including standards-based mathematics benchmarks 3 times a year; reading progress monitoring every other week; school administered reading benchmarks 3 times a year; monthly open response writing probes; spelling inventory 3 times a year, and G.R.A.D.E. in the Fall and Spring of each school year) and more frequent assessments of struggling students, and they hold frequent meetings to analyze data and plan responsive instruction and interventions to support student growth. A 120 minute daily literacy block and 75-90 minute daily mathematics block allows for differentiated small-group instruction and tiered intervention. The principal is a strong instructional leader, attending all professional development sessions provided to teachers so that he is familiar with what practices teachers should be using in their classrooms when he completes his routine classroom visits.

Instructional expectations are clearly communicated to teachers. For example, the principal has provided to teachers a written outline with "non-negotiables" regarding the use of time for the two-hour literacy block—teacher led whole group instruction for 20-30 minutes, teacher led small group differentiated/targeted instruction with students rotating to center activities for 90 minutes, and a 5 minute wrap up in whole or small group. Grade level writing expectations have been developed for all grade levels, and grade level assessment rubrics for open response and composition writing are uniform across grades. In mathematics, grade level "power standards" have been identified to ensure mathematics fluency, instruction is based on

assessment and standards, and previous math MCAS multiple choice and open response questioning is worked into classroom instruction. Consistent problem solving language and strategies are used, as are consistent math vocabulary instructional strategies using symbolism and movement.

These instructional strategies are bolstered by consistent management practices. All classrooms have their instructional schedule posted in large format, including a small group rotation schedule for both reading and math. In addition, technology is used (e.g., Lexia Reading, ALEKS Math) to provide students with explicit, systematic and structured practice on foundational reading and math skills. After school academic enrichment programming in reading and mathematics is supported by the ELL teacher, and academically-based summer programming is also provided.

Professional development and teacher collaboration are also important aspects of Morningside's success. For example, faculty recently have completed a book study of *Creating Robust Vocabulary* (Isabel Beck) and are expected to integrate Beck's vocabulary instructional model into their teaching using specific strategies such as providing visual aids. Teachers have weekly grade level academic coaching meetings in reading and mathematics, common planning meetings three times a week, and faculty lateral team study groups. Half-day professional development opportunities have utilized the small group rotation format as a model for the classroom.

SNUG HARBOR
QUINCY, MA
GRADES SERVED: PK-5

"Living High Expectations"

The story of how Snug Harbor became a Commendation School begins four years ago when this principal came to the school with a three-part mission: 1) Culture and Climate; 2) Accountability: High Expectations for All; 3) Data Driven and Student Centered Decisions. He brought with him a firm belief that quality instruction and high expectations for all are the greatest factor in increasing student achievement. When he arrived at Snug Harbor, he immediately recognized a staff whose focus was truly the students. There existed a culture in which students' academic and social successes were celebrated. Yet, there were instructional shifts that needed to happen in order for all students to have the kind of academic success expected of the 21st Century.

The principal's first focus was on creating a more reflective culture in which staff members, himself included, became willing to have the difficult and honest conversations about instructional practice, student growth, assessments and accountability. To create excitement about the instructional changes and to initiate a more collaborativee teacher culture, many steps were taken. The principal formed teams to analyze the results of the Conditions for School Effectiveness, collaborated with teachers on instructional choices and permeated the school with the philosophy that all students can learn regardless of circumstance. The assistant superintendent said "It's his (the principal's) skills and his manner. The kids and teachers would follow him anywhere."

Professional learning communities were used as a lever to undertake the philosophic and instructional changes the principal intended to make. For example, as part of Accountability: High Expectations for All, one goal is "responsibility to all our students and their success" and another is "living high expectations." It takes a collaborative culture for teachers to move from a "my students" viewpoint to an "our students" philosophy. It also requires a belief in the mindset that given the proper supports all students can demonstrate proficiency. This belief is something the principal and his teachers live and proved through local assessments and the MCAS as well.

Believing in students is one thing, ensuring that all students learn at a high level is something else. To ensure that all students learn, the principal utilizes a data driven instructional system, which is notable for the fact that the data from GRADE, DIBELS, DRA, Q-Math Easy CBM Math Assessment, MCAS and MEPA are reviewed by a committee of specialists, teachers and administrators four times a year.   At these meetings, student progress or lack thereof is discussed at length. Teachers collaborate to discuss instructional choices, analyze data and inform instruction based on this data. At the heart of these meetings is making sure that each student gets the proper in-class and out of class supports necessary, to guarantee academic

progress.   At these meetings, the data is used to create individualized groupings, called *Walk To Read* and *Walk To Math*, which ensure that all students are in appropriately leveled groups for a portion of their reading and math program. This ensures that all students, for 45-60 minutes a day, are met at their instructional level.   During this time teachers have an opportunity to really individualize instruction according to students' strength and need. The principal asserts that effective teaching of foundational skills in the early grades is essential to raising achievement scores as students progress through elementary school. He believes that quality instruction, reflective practice and a belief that all students can learn is the real reason for the commendation.

H.H. GALLIGAN SCHOOL
TAUNTON, MA
GRADES SERVED: K- 4

The H.H. Galligan School in Taunton has been recognized as a commendation school for two consecutive years (2010 & 2011) and the school's principal is determined to make it for a third year. Galligan is a neighborhood school, serving 250 students in grades K- 4; 77% of Galligan's students come from low income families and 23% are receiving special education services. The principal credits the school's culture, a.k.a. the Galligan Way, as being instrumental in supporting its high growth and hence, its commendation status. She says, "It's the teachers. There is no ownership of a particular group of students. They are all of our students and we maximize the time we have with them. We believe you can teach a kid who never does his homework. We don't rely on that. We remove all of those factors. We know we are all they have. When I interview teachers to fill positions, that's exactly what I tell them." The principal has been known to personally call students when they do not show up at school, drive to their homes, pick them up and bring them to school. She places an importance on attendance and maintains high expectations for students to be at school every day.

Since coming to Galligan in 2009, the principal has reallocated staff to maximize their strengths as interventionists. She also changed the school schedule to allow more time for small group instruction and daily collaborative planning. "I see myself as an educational leader," says the principal with great pride, as this her first principalship. She conducts daily walkthroughs during the school's 120 minute literacy block.

At Galligan, emphasis is placed on small group instruction, including homogenous reading groups, heterogeneous skills groups and reciprocal teaching, which involves small groups in which students teach each other. Interventions are "pushed in" in the classroom using co-teaching practices versus "pulling out" students from that environment. By using a "push in" approach, all students experience the same high expectations and consistent exposure to grade level material. The principal notes that as a result of "pushing in", they do not lose time during transitions and have found that students on IEP's were increasing their reading levels at faster rates than before. Additionally, small group stations are set up across grade levels to group students with peers in other classes and to expose them to other teachers as well. All of this is enabled by a strong, dedicated teaching staff who plan collaboratively at each grade level and have the full support of their principal. As the principal shared, "My staff work at 100% capacity, taking no breaks, giving it their hearts and souls."

The principal has an engaging leadership style and meets frequently with all of the school's grade level teams. In addition, she convenes a curriculum meeting and a student-centered data meeting, each with all staff present, on a monthly basis. These meetings emphasize data analysis as a vehicle for informing instruction across grade levels and vertically within the school. She states, "It is important to involve everyone, even if you don't always agree with each other. I believe in taking people's strengths and working with them." Additionally, the

principal attends professional development training and workshops along with her staff. She says, "If I want my staff to do something, I need to be there to show them how important it is." Specifically, she notes that the Bay State Reading Institute (BSRI) has been a significant resource in providing literacy support and professional development at Galligan. The principal credits BSRI as being influential in the improved use of small group instruction, particularly the implementation of reciprocal teaching in the school. In addition, Galligan just completed a second year using the Reading Street program (Pearson) which they believe to be an effective program.

Galligan's success can be attributed to its strong student-centered culture, combined with best practices in instruction and curriculum as informed by data, which is shared and analyzed collaboratively across the school

Appendix A: Conditions for School Effectiveness

The Conditions for School Effectiveness (CSEs) articulate what schools need to have in place in order to educate their students well. These conditions, voted into regulation by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2010, can be used as benchmarks against which schools can gauge their practice in key areas.

Conditions for School Effectiveness

I. **Effective district systems for school support and intervention:** The district has systems and processes for anticipating and addressing school staffing, instructional, and operational needs in timely, efficient, and effective ways, especially for its lowest performing schools.

II. **Effective school leadership:** The district and school take action to attract, develop, and retain an effective school leadership team that obtains staff commitment to improving student learning and implements a clearly defined mission and set of goals.

III. **Aligned curriculum:** The school's taught curricula are aligned to state curriculum frameworks and the MCAS performance level descriptions, and are also aligned vertically between grades and horizontally across classrooms at the same grade level and across sections of the same course.

IV. **Effective instruction:** Instructional practices are based on evidence from a body of high quality research and on high expectations for all students and include use of appropriate research-based reading and mathematics programs; the school staff has a common understanding of high-quality evidence-based instruction and a system for monitoring instructional practice.

V. **Student assessment:** The school uses a balanced system of formative and benchmark assessments.

VI. **Principal's staffing authority:** The principal has the authority to make staffing decisions based on the School Improvement Plan and student needs, subject to district personnel policies, budgetary restrictions and the approval of the superintendent.

VII. **Professional development and structures for collaboration:** Professional development for school staff includes both individually pursued activities and school-based, job-embedded approaches, such as instructional coaching. It also includes content-oriented learning. The school has structures for regular, frequent collaboration to improve implementation of the curriculum and instructional practice. Professional development and structures for collaboration are evaluated for their effect on raising student achievement.

VIII. **Tiered instruction and adequate learning time:** The school schedule is designed to provide adequate learning time for all students in core subjects. For students not yet on track to proficiency in English language arts or mathematics, the school provides additional time and support for individualized instruction through tiered instruction, a data-driven approach to prevention, early detection, and support for students who experience learning or behavioral challenges, including but not limited to students with disabilities and English language learners.

IX. **Students' social, emotional, and health needs:** The school creates a safe school environment and makes effective use of a system for addressing the social, emotional, and health needs of its students that reflects the behavioral health and public schools framework.

X.   ***Family-school engagement:*** The school develops strong working relationships with families and appropriate community partners and providers in order to support students' academic progress and social and emotional well-being.

XI.   ***Strategic use of resources and adequate budget authority:*** The principal makes effective and strategic use of district and school resources and has sufficient budget authority to do so

APPENDIX B: REGIONAL AND COMMISSIONER'S DISTRICT DISSEMINATION GRANTEES

REGIONAL DISSEMINATION GRANTEES			
Applicant & Original Partners	**Region**	**Commendation Schools**	**Level 3 and Other Participating Schools**
Billerica/Methuen//Peabody/Haverhill	Northeast	Billerica Memorial High School	Methuen High School (L3) Peabody Veterans Memorial (L3) Haverhill High School (L3)
Community Day Charter/GLRVTS	Northeast	Community Day Charter School	Greater Lawrence Regional Vocational Technical School (GLRVTS) (L3)
Chelsea/Malden	Greater Boston	Ferryway (Malden) Sokolowski School (Chelsea)	Clark Avenue (L3) Joseph A. Browne (L3)
Easthampton/Northampton/Westfield	Pioneer Valley	Pepin Elementary Center Elementary	Maple Elementary (Other) Bridge Street (L3) Franklin Elementary (L3) White Brook Middle (Other) JFK Middle (Other) Middle School South (L3) Easthampton High School (L3) Northampton High School (Other) Westfield High School (Other) Westfield Vocational Technical (L3)
Gill-Montague/Ralph C. Mahar Regional/West Springfield Regional/ Mohawk Regional	Pioneer Valley	Gill Elementary School	Montague Elementary (L3) Fisher Hill (Other) Ashley School (Other) Hawlemont Regional School (Other) Colrain Central School (Other) Rowe Elementary School (Other)

Applicant & Original Partners	Region	Commendation Schools	Level 3 and Other Participating Schools
Holbrook/Wareham/Randolph	Southeast	South School	Wareham Middle School (L3) Margaret L. Donovan Elementary (Other)
Leominster/Fitchburg/Narragansett Regional/Winchendon	Central	Fall Brook Elementary	Northwest Elementary (L3) Johnny Appleseed Elementary (Other) Southeast Elementary (Other) McKay Campus (L3) Reingold Elementary (L3) South Street Elementary (L3) Crocker Elementary (Other) Memorial Intermediate (L3) Longsjo Intermediate (Other) Fitchburg Arts Academy (L3) Baldwinville Elementary (L3) Phillipston Memorial (Other) Templeton Center School (Other) Toy Town Elementary (L3) Memorial Elementary (Other)
Lunenburg/Gardner	Central	Thomas C. Passios (non-Title I)	Lunenburg Primary (Other) Elm Street (L3)
Milton/Randolph	Greater Boston & Southeast	Tucker School	Kennedy School (Other)
Pittsfield/North Adams	Berkshires	Morningside Community School	Brayton Elementary Drury High School
Quincy/Randolph	Southeast	Snug Harbor School	Clifford Marshall (L3) Lincoln-Hancock (L3) F.W. Parker (L3) Martin E. Young (L3)

Applicant & Original Partners	Region	Commendation Schools	Level 3 and Other Participating Schools
Salem Academy Charter/Salem	Northeast	Salem Academy Charter	Collins Middle (L3) Nathaniel Bowditch School (L3) Saltonstall School (Other)
Taunton/Randolph	Southeast	H.H. Galligan	Lyons Elementary School
Woburn/Amesbury/Beverly /Haverhill/Gloucester /Peabody	Northeast	Mary D Altavesta Charles Cashman Elementary	Golden Hill Dr. Paul Nettle Pentucket Lake Tilton Beeman Memorial Veterans Memorial Cove William Welch

COMMISSIONER'S DISTRICTS DISSEMINATION GRANTEES			
Boston Public Schools	Commissioner's District	Charles Sumner Elementary Eliot Elementary James Otis Elementary Patrick Kennedy New Mission High	
Fall River	Commissioner's District	North End Elementary	
Lowell	Commissioner's District	C.W. Morey Elementary Abraham Lincoln Elementary	
Springfield	Commissioner's District	Dryden Memorial Elementary	
Worcester	Commissioner's District	Columbus Park	

Appendix C: *Title I Dissemination Grants for Commissioner's Districts* and *Title I Commendation Schools Regional Dissemination Grant Program*

In early spring 2012, Title I Commendation Schools became eligible for a first of its kind grant program through the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) to document and disseminate effective practices from their schools to other schools within their district and/or region. Two grant programs were established with similar purposes:

> 1) Title I Commendation Schools Regional Dissemination Grants (Regional grants); and
> 2) Title I Dissemination Grants for Commissioner's Districts (Commissioner's grants).

The purpose of the *regional grants* was to reward the Commendation Schools, as well as to fund efforts to identify and document their effective practices and disseminate those practices to Level 3 schools (schools within the lowest 20% of performance statewide) within their region. Grantees were expected to develop regional partnerships that included at least one Commendation School, one Level 3 school, and the regional District and School Assistance Center (DSAC)[8], and work in partnership with the DSAC to facilitate professional learning across the partnership and region. Partnerships could also include educational collaboratives or other consultants. Fourteen partnerships were funded through the regional grants, including 12 Title I and two non-Title I Commendation Schools in 14 separate districts, plus two Commendation charter schools and over 30 Level 3 schools in 20 partnering districts. Grantees were distributed throughout all six regions of the Commonwealth (see Appendix B). Grant awards ranged from $18,400 to $75,000. The regional grants were administered through the Office of the Regional System of Support, which directs the State's District and School Assistance Centers.

The Commissioner's grants served to recognize and reward Title I Commendation Schools in the Commissioner's Districts and had the additional purpose of supporting dissemination of effective practices from the Commendation Schools to other Title I schools within the district. These grants provided a reward of $15,000 to each Title I Commendation School to support continuation of successful strategies and practices that led to their improvements, with additional funding provided to support district-led systems and strategies for disseminating effective practices from the Commendation Schools to other Title I schools in the district. Grantees were expected to work closely with leadership teams/teachers in the Commendation Schools to facilitate documentation and strategic and systemic sharing of practical information on how the Commendation School planned and implemented specific initiatives and strategies

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[8] ESE has established six regional District and School Assistance Centers (DSACs) to help districts and their schools strategically access and use professional development and targeted assistance to improve instruction and raise achievement for all students. In collaboration with partner organizations, DSACs use a regional approach that leverages the knowledge, skills, and expertise of local educators to address shared needs through an emphasis on expanding district and school capacity for sustained improvement. The six DSAC regions are: Berkshires, Central, Greater Boston, Northeast, Pioneer Valley, and Southeast.

to narrow achievement gaps and significantly increase student achievement. Grants were made to 10 schools in five Commissioner's Districts (see Appendix B). The Commissioner's grants were administered by ESE's Center for Accountability and Targeted Assistance.

Grantees under both programs were expected to identify effective practices that are aligned to the ESE's Conditions for School Effectiveness, which set standards for success for districts and schools (see Appendix A). Awards were made in spring 2012, and all activities were to be completed by the end of August 2012.

Appendix D: Study Methods

Data

Our approach to gathering data that allowed us to address the key study questions is shown in Figure D.1 below. In order to be useful to ESE, the data to be collected had to focus on not just the commendation school success, but also on understanding the implementation of the partnerships, including the process used by each partnership to identify the best practices they shared and the success of and challenges to the partnership work. We also asked about the perceived value of the partnerships and solicited suggestions for how the value might be increased.

As shown in the figure, we collected data using a variety of strategies—document reviews, interviews, statewide meetings of grantees and observations of partnership activities. These strategies allowed us to obtain data at multiple levels—state, region, partnership, district and school.

Document Reviews included grant applications, meeting notes and agendas from partnership meetings, and any available documents prepared by Commendation Schools as part of their grant activity, such as professional development curricula. The purpose of the document review was to gather evidence regarding effective practices as well as plans for, and implementation of, dissemination activities.

Interviews were conducted with a range of respondents at the state, region, district, partnership and school levels using semi-structured interview protocols framed by the Conditions for School Effectiveness. Interviews were conducted primarily by telephone, but also occurred occasionally in-person during statewide meetings of grantees (see below) and during visits to partnership activities. Interview respondents included: (1) ESE grant administrators (n=3); (2) regional DSAC administrators (n=6); (3) regional and Commissioner's grant coordinators (n=18); (4) regional and Commissioner's grant Commendation School principals (n=27); (5) a sample of Level 3 school participants and administrators (n=17); (6) district administrators (n=7); and (7) an outside facilitator hired by one of the partnership. The purpose of the interviews was to collect detailed information about the practices that led each school to commendation status as well as the conditions under which these practices were implemented. Data on dissemination strategies and the successes and challenges of the partnership activity also was obtained through this strategy.

Statewide meetings[9], while not purely a data collection strategy, provided opportunities for data collection through observation of and information generated during meeting activities.

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[9] Note that Commissioner's grantees were not added to the work until July, 2012. While the grantees were all invited to attend, only one district attended during the July meeting and that district did not present.

Face to face meetings were held monthly in May, June and July. A webinar is being planned for mid-August. During the June and July meetings, the agenda was devoted to presentations of grantees' "stories" of becoming a commendation school with a full group discussion afterwards. Ten regional grantees presented their stories at these statewide meetings. A presentation template was provided to each partnership for this purpose to ensure that a common set of information was collected across grantees. This facilitated our ability to identify common themes in the use of effective practices and strategies. Limited data on the work of the partnerships and dissemination strategies was also collected during the grantee meetings.

Observations of partnership activities were completed for nine of the 14 regional grants using an observation protocol that allowed us to capture standard information across observations, including participants, activity focus and content, provider, and participant engagement. The observations allowed us to see the grants in action and learn about strategies being used by the grantees to share information about successful practices. Although we attempted to complete observations of at least one meeting or activity for each of the grantees, the timing of the work made this impossible in some cases. For example, several of the regional grantees included facilitated or modeled walkthroughs between Level 3 and Commendation Schools that occurred prior to the end of the school year, but before our contract for the documentation work was established. Similarly, most of the dissemination work of the Commissioner's grantees occurred before those schools were included as part of our contract. Conversely, some of the activities occurred just days before our contract ended, and we could not document the activity and include it in our report. In addition, limited resources did not allow us to observe the full measure of the activities as in most cases, the activities occurred across multiple days, and most partnerships had multiple activities occurring during the short time period of the grant. Thus, we have just a snapshot of what occurred in a sample of the partnerships.

In addition to the original data collection described above, we also used extant data about the grantees and Commendation Schools that was available on ESE's website, such as grant purposes and funding amount, and the characteristics of the Commendation Schools.

Methods

Each member of the study team was assigned to become an "expert" on a set of grantees. Experts were responsible for learning about all aspects of the grant from all possible perspectives, starting with the grant application and moving to DSAC, district and school involvement, to Level 3 school participation for the regional grants as well as observing at least one meeting or activity to the extent possible. Data gathering for the Commissioner's Districts took a similar path although given the timing, it was more limited. We gathered documentation on grant applications where possible and interviewed district administrators, grant coordinators and Commendation School principals for this set of grantees.

Figure D.1: Data Collection Strategy by Study Question

Study Question	Document Reviews	Interviews	Statewide Meetings	Partnership Activity Observations
In what ways have school and classroom practices changed in the commendation schools that allowed the schools to narrow the proficiency gap and/or demonstrate high growth as required to gain status as a commendation school? Are these practices common across commendation schools?	X	X	X	
What evidence exists that these practices contributed to commendation status?	X	X	X	
Under what school conditions were these practices successfully implemented?		X	X	
In what ways do the dissemination grants contribute to the identification, communication and transfer of successful practices?	X	X		X
In what ways do the partnerships contribute to planning for the improvement of instruction and student learning at the Level 3 schools?		X		

Data were synthesized into a standard partnership or Commissioner's district template that provides a profile for each grantee describing fundamental features of their Commendation School, their grant development, partnership and dissemination activities, and plans for continuation of the work beyond the grant end date. These profiles were then reviewed across all grantees to identify common themes related to Commendation School status and dissemination activities. Team members identified themes independently and then met multiple times to come to consensus on a set of themes to include in the final report.

Appendix E: Characteristics of Commendation Schools Receiving Title I Dissemination Grants

Region	District Name	School Name	Grades Served	Grade Level	March 2011 Enrollment	March 2011 Low Income %	March 2011 Special Education %	March 2011 Limited English Proficient %	Commended For
Berkshires+	Pittsfield	Morningside Community School	PK - 05	ES	405	87.9%	11.4%	9.9%	High growth, Narrowing proficiency gaps
Berkshires+	Easthampton	Center School	K - 04	ES	204	32.8%	10.3%	5.4%	High growth
Berkshires+	Easthampton	Neil A Pepin	K - 04	ES	201	33.3%	15.4%	1.5%	High growth, Exiting 2010 NCLB accountability status
Central	Leominster	Fall Brook	K - 05	ES	628	42.0%	16.6%	13.4%	High growth, Narrowing proficiency gaps
Central	Lunenburg	Thomas C Passios Elementary	03 - 05	ES	364	10.4%	14.8%	1.1%	Narrowing proficiency gaps
Greater Boston	Chelsea	Frank M Sokolowski Elementary	01 - 04	ES	483	92.8%	9.7%	22.8%	High growth
Greater Boston	Malden	Ferryway	K - 08	ESMS	891	70.6%	10.8%	14.5%	Narrowing proficiency gaps
Greater Boston	Milton	Tucker	K - 05	ES	370	31.6%	17.0%	2.2%	High growth
Northeast	Amesbury	Charles C Cashman Elementary	PK - 04	ES	554	24.2%	18.4%	1.3%	High growth, Narrowing proficiency gaps
Northeast	Billerica	Billerica Memorial High School	09 - 12	HS	1,602	12.2%	18.1%	0.4%	Exiting 2010 NCLB accountability status
Northeast	Woburn	Mary D Altavesta	K - 05	ES	215	30.2%	19.5%	8.8%	High growth, Narrowing proficiency gaps
Northeast	Community Day Charter School	Community Day Charter	K - 08	ESMS	331	69.8%	16.6%	35.3%	High growth
Northeast	Salem Academy Charter	Salem Academy Charter School	06 - 12	MSHS	307	48.2%	19.5%	4.9%	High growth

Region	District Name	School Name	Grades Served	Grade Level	March 2011 Enrollment	March 2011 Low Income %	March 2011 Special Education %	March 2011 Limited English Proficient %	Commended For
Pioneer Valley	Gill-Montague	Gill Elementary	K - 06	ES	134	29.9%	14.2%	0.7%	Exiting 2010 NCLB accountability status
Southeast	Holbrook	South	04 - 06	ES	289	34.3%	18.3%	2.8%	High growth
Southeast	Quincy	Snug Harbor Community School	PK - 05	ES	435	49.9%	31.7%	11.5%	Narrowing proficiency gaps
Southeast	Taunton	H H Galligan	K - 04	ES	253	73.5%	22.5%	9.5%	High growth
Commissioner's District	Boston	Charles Sumner	PK - 05	ES	491	84.1%	22.6%	48.3%	Narrowing proficiency gaps
Commissioner's District	Boston	Eliot Elementary	PK - 08	ESMS	314	54.1%	23.9%	20.1%	High growth, Narrowing proficiency gaps
Commissioner's District	Boston	James Otis	PK - 05	ES	375	92.8%	6.7%	71.5%	High growth, Exiting 2010 NCLB accountability status
Commissioner's District	Boston	Patrick J Kennedy	PK - 05	ES	273	90.1%	14.3%	60.1%	High growth
Commissioner's District	Boston	New Mission High School	09 - 12	HS	252	83.3%	20.2%	4.4%	Narrowing proficiency gaps, Exiting 2010 NCLB accountability status
Commissioner's District	Fall River	North End Elementary	PK - 05	ES	695	67.5%	29.2%	2.6%	High growth
Commissioner's District	Lowell	Abraham Lincoln	PK - 04	ES	479	86.2%	13.8%	62.8%	High growth
Commissioner's District	Lowell	Charles W Morey	PK - 04	ES	508	83.9%	13.2%	48.8%	Exiting 2010 NCLB accountability status
Commissioner's District	Springfield	Dryden Memorial	PK - 05	ES	309	68.6%	21.4%	9.4%	Narrowing proficiency gaps
Commissioner's District	Worcester	Columbus Park	PK - 06	ES	406	83.5%	27.6%	47.3%	High growth