

To: Gill-Montague School Committee
From: Michael Sullivan, Ed.D, Superintendent of Schools
Date: February 10, 2014
Re: Superintendent Entry Report

This entry report attempts to paint a picture of the strengths, challenges and opportunities faced by the Gill-Montague Regional School District (GMRSD) at the present time, eight months after my arrival as superintendent of schools. While this has been insufficient time to develop a deep understanding of every facet of the district, I have been able to begin dialogues with staff and stakeholders, review key documents, and observe the work of the organization. It has been a pleasure to observe teachers, interview civic leaders, meet with school leaders, and listen to parents over these past few months. This entry plan cannot cover all I have learned but it attempts to synthesize what I believe to be the district's most telling and compelling characteristics, those that may provide guideposts as we set a course for the district's future.

This report is divided into the following nine sections:

- I. Governance, Leadership, and Administration
- II. District Vision, Mission, Core Values and Learning Principles
- III. Student Performance
- IV. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment
- V. Adult Learning and Professional Development
- VI. School Culture
- VII. Parents and Community
- VIII. Support Operations
- IX. District Finances

Each report section is further divided into three parts; an essential theme, a summary of current conditions, and a list of opportunities for further inquiry or improvement. While, I hope this report will be useful to a district-wide strategic planning process in the near future, it is not intended to serve as such a plan and areas suggested for further analysis or potential growth should not be considered recommendations.

I. Governance, Leadership, and Administration

Theme: The GMRSD school committee and administrative team have worked hard to put themselves in a position where the support of student learning receives their sustained focus.

Current Conditions:

1. From June 2007 to August 2013 GMRSD was labeled “underperforming” by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). During this period DESE guided, supported, and monitored the development and execution of a series of district turnaround or accelerated improvement plans (AIP). In August 2013, DESE released the district from Level 4 status and GMRSD is currently guided by its own plan to operationalize the AIP through June 2014. (See Appendix A for a chronology of DESE involvement with the district.)
2. The district has had five superintendents since 2007. There has also been frequent turnover and reconfiguration of principal, assistant principal, and central office administrative positions. Stakeholders frequently observe that the lack of continuity of district leadership has contributed to shifting priorities, fluid expectations, inconsistent organizational procedures, and a lack of strong, trusting relationships.
3. In 2013-14, apart from the new superintendent and new high school principal, all administrators remain in their same positions from the prior year. This year the administrative team is demonstrating enthusiasm and initiative in becoming an effective leadership team. Group norms and protocols are followed, shared goals have been established, and there exists a willingness to measure performance and hold people accountable. Two concrete examples of the team’s work include a highly improved execution of the educator evaluation system and a clear, targeted, and measured implementation of this year’s AIP.
4. An important function of district leadership is to establish systems for the routine monitoring of organizational effectiveness. These include processes for setting goals, selecting key measures of progress and success, monitoring progress, making mid-course corrections, evaluating results, communicating results, and celebrating successes. While the AIP contains a set of tasks and benchmarks, the leadership team has not incorporated these into a well-developed organizational improvement structure as described above.
5. The school committee has two important goals in the district AIP:
 - a. to improve communication within the committee and among all stake holders for the purpose of creating confidence, clarity and transparency
 - b. to become a more effective school committee by adopting operational norms for agendas and school committee practices.

Evidence of the committee's commitment and success at achieving these goals includes the recent completion of a multi-year Governance Support Project led by Deb Moiles from the Massachusetts Association of School Committees. Outcomes of this intensive training included the creation and adoption of school committee operational norms, an enhanced understanding of the roles and responsibilities of committee members, and the collaboration of the committee to develop a set of goals used to inform a superintendent evaluation process.

In addition, the committee recently undertook a community-wide survey to inform its ongoing efforts to improve district and community communications, it has sponsored a training for school councils, it has invited town finance committee members to presentations on school finances, and it has commissioned a communications task force that has written a District Communications Plan and undertaken other initiatives to improve district-community communications. Finally, the school committee routinely reads and discusses articles pertaining to current state and district initiatives such as the Common Core standards, PARCC assessments, and initiatives that impact the instructional core. The committee is clearly making significant progress in working together to bring more focus and energy to issues of student learning.

Opportunities for Inquiry or Growth:

1. Develop a district strategic plan with input from all stakeholders to chart a course for measurable improvement over the next two to three years. Develop school improvement plans aligned to the district strategy.
2. Consider the individual professional development needs for the administrative team and school committee so that they may continue to improve in their roles.
3. Develop structures and practices for organizational effectiveness that will anchor and drive district initiatives and allow the district to operate as an organization that learns and adapts to change.

II. District Vision, Mission, Core Values and Learning Principles

Theme: The district is poised to inspire and empower its citizens and staff by engaging in processes that will clarify its vision, energize its mission, articulate its core values, and dedicate itself to a set of learning principles.

Current Conditions:

1. Since 2007 the district has developed and rallied around a Turnaround Plan, two updated Turnaround Plans, a Strategic Vision, a Year of Assessment Plan, an Accelerated Improvement Plan, an updated Accelerated Improvement Plan, and an operational plan to implement the Accelerated Improvement Plan.
2. The current annual Accelerated Improvement Plan consists of four strategic objectives, 15 initiatives, and 74 separate activities. While all four strategic objectives address pressing district needs, the district lacks the time and resources to address all of the initiatives well, simultaneously.
3. Faculty, staff, and administration commonly express the belief that they have worked diligently to address the AIP goals but that the sheer number of initiatives coupled with the turnover in teachers and administrators have resulted in some efforts feeling more like exercises in compliance rather than opportunities for genuine and lasting improvement.
4. The district mission statement is not commonly known and has not been stated on any of the last six year's improvement plans. No recent vision statement, district core values, or learning principles exist. The administrative team has recently developed a set of learning principles but these have yet to be considered for adoption by the district as a whole.
5. As superintendent, I shared my core values with the district on "opening day" in August. Those values were my personal core values and upon reflection I believe it would be more pertinent to share the core values that most closely inform my decision making at work. Here they are:
 - Integrity: adherence to a set of principles
 - Consideration: continuous and careful thought; thoughtful and sympathetic regard
 - Learning: The ability of individuals and groups to grow—to understand and act upon new knowledge.
6. The school committee has recently adopted a set of three goals. The goals emphasize student-centered learning and students' innate value; the promotion of a professional learning culture and staff empowerment; and family, community and district collaborative support of students. These goals have a humanist emphasis and make no mention of curriculum standards, MCAS performance, or preparation for competition in a global marketplace.

Opportunities for Inquiry or Growth:

1. The hard work of the last several years has laid a strong foundation for future growth and improvement. Despite the frequency of new or revised improvement plans, the district and its stakeholders may benefit from coming together to share their aspirations and then forging these into a common vision and mission. These could then inform the formulation of a specific and detailed district strategy or strategic plan.
2. The school committee's goals, the administrative team's learning principles, the superintendent's core values, and the daily actions and commitments of faculty and staff demonstrate shared qualities. They articulate the desire that our schools promote the dignity and self-worth of our students and that we teach students in ways that build upon their natural curiosity. They also share a vision of student learning demonstrated foremost through authentic and meaningful experiences and a belief that while improved standardized test scores are important, these should be a byproduct of the learning we aspire to support, not an end in itself. The district would do well to build upon this vibrant foundation.

III. Student Performance

Theme: While key measures show recent improvements in student academic learning and social and emotional growth, persistent pockets of low performance remain.

Current Conditions:

1. a. MCAS test results show a pattern of significant improvement at the middle and high school levels while performance at the elementary level remains a serious concern.

Percentage of Students Scoring Advanced or Proficient (MCAS)

Year	ELA Gr. 4	Math Gr. 4	ELA Gr. 8	Math Gr. 8	ELA Gr. 10	Math Gr. 10
2010	41%	40%	67%	33%	69%	60%
2013	37%	32%	78%	56%	92%	84%

1. b. Student MCAS performance at Montague Elementary has been an area of consistent concern. The table below shows the school's performance relative to demographically similar schools across the state:

2013 MCAS Performance	Grade span	Total Enroll.	% Low Income	% SPED	% ELL	% Prof. or Adv.	Median SGP	% Prof. or Adv.	Median SGP	% Prof. or Adv.
						ELA	ELA	Math	Math	Science
Boston - Chittick ES*	PK - 05	319	74.3	17.2	15.4	28%	61.0	23%	42.0	8%
Boston - E. Greenwood*	K - 05	390	76.9	17.2	27.2	28%	49.0	24%	41.0	14%
Gill-Montague - Montague ES*	PK - 05	377	62.9	17.2	8.0	39%	45.0	31%	43.0	34%
Dennis-Yarmouth - Baker*	PK - 03	408	55.4	17.6	6.6	45%	--	62%	--	--
Salem - Bates*	K - 05	331	51.7	19.6	6.9	46%	45.0	59%	75.0	59%
Salem - Mann Laboratory*	K - 05	298	63.1	19.8	12.4	47%	53.5	46%	59.0	35%
Weymouth - Seach*	K - 04	364	58.5	14.6	18.4	49%	57.0	58%	60.5	--
Waltham - Plympton ES*	K - 05	412	52.4	17.0	17.2	51%	45.5	53%	41.0	61%
Gloucester - Beeman Memorial*	K - 05	297	57.9	16.2	6.1	53%	34.0	47%	54.5	32%
Dennis-Yarmouth - Small ES*	04 - 05	338	42.6	17.5	9.2	54%	55.0	54%	56.0	36%
Lynn - Sisson*	PK - 05	471	61.1	15.7	6.8	71%	45.5	63%	23.5	28%

1.c. Relative to its demographically similar schools, Gill Elementary School's performance showed average performance and well above average growth.

2013 MCAS Performance						% Prof. or Adv.	Median SGP	% Prof. or Adv.	Median SGP	% Prof. or Adv.
Comparable Schools Overview	Grade span	Total Enroll.	% Low Income	% SPED	% ELL	ELA	ELA	Math	Math	Science
Blackstone-Millville - Maloney*	4-5	204	20.6	16.2	0.5	62%	50	50%	33	61%
Brewster - Eddy ES*	3-5	216	26.9	14.8	0.9	73%	55	71%	58	81%
Easthampton - Pepin*	K - 04	197	31	14.2	0.5	44%	47.5	58%	69.5	--
Foxborough - Taylor ES*	K - 04	279	16.8	13.3	1.1	62%	55	68%	68	--
Gill-Montague - Gill ES*	K - 06	142	21.8	13.4	0.7	67%	64	68%	71	59%
Gloucester - Plum Cove*	K - 05	211	24.2	10.4	0.5	67%	59	62%	80	68%
Petersham Center*	K - 06	117	23.1	14.5	0.9	79%	67	45%	32.5	44%
Shutesbury Elementary*	PK - 06	145	20	14.5	0	75%	67	71%	70	67%
Somerset - Wilbur*	K - 05	174	25.3	13.8	1.1	74%	62.5	57%	50.5	38%
Swansea - Brown*	3-5	270	26.3	11.9	1.1	70%	54	67%	58	59%
Williamsburg	PK - 06	160	16.9	13.8	1.3	64%	45	51%	49	89%

1.d. Great Falls Middle School's 2013 MCAS performance, relative to demographically similar schools, showed well above average performance in ELA and average performance in math and science.

2013 MCAS Performance						% Prof. or Advanced	Median SGP	% Prof. or Advanced	Median SGP	% Prof. or Advanced
Comparable Schools Overview	Grade Span	Total Enroll.	Low Income	SPED	ELL	ELA	ELA	Math	Math	Science
Boston - Harbor*	6-9	282	73.4	33	13.1	44%	53.5	22%	41.5	8%
Quincy - Sterling MS*	5-8	355	69.6	21.1	5.1	53%	48	32%	49.5	30%
Quincy - Point Webster MS*	5-8	385	69.4	26.8	5.2	57%	53	40%	47	43%
Dennis-Yarmouth - Mattacheese MS*	6-8	339	53.7	23.9	6.2	62%	42	37%	35.5	15%
Palmer - Converse MS*	5-7	385	49.6	20	1.8	65%	52.5	39%	31	53%
Cambridge - Cambridge Street *	6-8	254	50.8	28	2.4	66%	56	48%	52	38%
Cambridge - Putnam Avenuel*	6-8	241	59.3	24.9	0.4	66%	44	48%	43	46%
Cambridge - Vassal Lane*	6-8	293	44	27.3	14.7	67%	50	62%	59	43%
Gill-Montague - Great Falls MS*	6-8	250	53.6	19.6	4.8	69%	53	49%	56	45%
Quincy - Broad Meadows MS*	6-8	306	52.9	21.6	1.6	71%	45	51%	38.5	39%
Excel Academy Charter *	5-8	216	75	16.2	6.9	90%	76	84%	73	76%

1.e. Turners Falls High School's 2013 MCAS performance, relative to demographically similar schools, showed average performance in ELA with strong growth and well above average performance in math, also with strong growth scores.

Comparable Schools Overview						ELA	ELA	Math	Math	Science
Demographically Similar High Schools	Grade span	Total Enroll.	% Low Income	% SPED	% ELL	2013 MCAS % Prof. or Advanced	2013 MCAS Growth-- Median SGP	2013 MCAS % Prof. or Advanced	2013 MCAS Growth-- Median SGP	2013 MCAS % Prof. or Advanced
Lawrence - HS Learning Center*	9-12	229	74.7	22.3	7	55%	--	9%	--	8%
Westfield - Westfield Voc Tech*	9-12	465	50.8	25.4	3.7	84%	44.5	67%	48	44%
Boston - Lyon Upper 9-12*	9-12	134	56	35.1	7.5	87%	68	79%	40.5	32%
Athol-Royalston - Athol High*	9-12	389	51.9	24.7	0.5	90%	77	72%	47.5	76%
Codman Academy Charter*	9-12	147	74.1	21.8	2	92%	74	75%	74	71%
Gill-Montague - Turners Fall High*	9-12	281	44.5	19.9	2.1	92%	66	86%	64	65%
Ayer Shirley - Ayer Shirley Reg HS*	9-12	318	39.3	14.8	3.1	95%	65	88%	52.5	85%
Boston - Fenway High*	9-12	320	67.2	16.6	11.6	95%	55.5	84%	51	65%
Boston - Another Course to College*	9-12	220	75.5	19.5	9.5	96%	53	48%	33	37%
City On A Hill Charter*	9-12	292	81.8	17.5	6.2	96%	59	74%	68	73%
Medford - Medford Voc Tech High*	9-12	210	37.6	33.3	1	97%	78	78%	63	67%

1.f. In terms of state accountability placement, Montague Elementary is a Level 3 school, scoring in the lowest 20% of elementary schools in the state. Gill Elementary performed at Level 1, while the middle and high school are Level 2 schools.

2. High school dropout and graduation rates have been an area of concern for the district. Below is a trend analysis of the district's 4-Year Adjusted Graduation Rate:

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2012 (State)	2013
% Graduated	75.6	79.1	77.8	82.5	70.5	84.7	85.7%

Historically, students who have dropped out have been disproportionately students with identified disabilities and low income. The rates between males and females have been similar. For the cohort of 70 students scheduled to graduate in 2013: 60 graduated on time, 5 were still enrolled the following year, 4 dropped out or earned GED, and one obtained a certificate of attainment. Seven were low income, five were special ed., five were males, one was Hispanic, and one was African American.

3. Student attendance rates are a concern in some areas when compared to state averages. As shown in the table below, the average number of days absent per year exceeds the state average at Montague Elementary and Turners Falls High School. Further cause for

concern is that 16% of high school students exceeded nine unexcused absences in 2012-2013.

	Gill	Montague	GFMS	TFHS	State Avg.
Attendance Rate	96.0	93.9	95.1	92.1	94.8
Average # of Days Absent	6.8	10.0	8.3	13.0	9.0
Unexcused Absences >9	0.0	6.1	8.7	16.2	9.3

4. Suspension rates in 2012-2013 are shown below (The rate equates to the number of suspensions per 100 students). As with attendance data, the out-of-school suspension rates are high at Montague Elementary and extremely high at the high school.

	Gill	MES	GFMS	TFHS	State Avg.
# of Internal Suspensions	0	5	5	111	
# of Students Internally Suspended	0	5	5	?	
Internal Suspension Rate	0	1.3	2	39.5	3.4
# of External Suspensions	7	36	21	43	
# of Students Externally Suspended	7	23	16	29	
External Suspension Rate	4.9	9.5	5.6	15.3	5.4

Opportunities for Inquiry or Growth:

1. As measured by MCAS test results, student achievement and growth are trending upward at Gill Elementary, Great Falls Middle School, and Turners Falls High School. Montague Elementary has not yet made improvement. The district needs to gain a fuller understanding of why past improvement initiatives have not born better results. We need to inquire more deeply about the root causes of the obstacles to student learning in both ELA and mathematics.
2. While the high school graduation rate showed marked improvement last year, more needs to be understood about the root causes of the high rates of student absence and suspension at the high school.
3. Programs intended to develop student social and emotional learning skills exist across the district:
 - Pre k – Kindergarten: Tools of the Mind
 - Grades 1-5: Responsive Classroom
 - Grade 6-8: Developmental Design
 - Grades 9-12: Advisor-Advisee Program

At all levels, staff raise questions about the impact of these programs and whether or not any lack of success is due to the nature of the program or a lack of implementation fidelity. These questions have been raised frequently over recent years and need to be addressed more thoroughly, including, perhaps, the exploration of the link between weak literacy skills and student behavior and engagement.

IV. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Theme: The district's Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) has been driven by the same four issues for the last three years:

- The district's curriculum is not consistently aligned with state standards
- The district does not have a clear system for analyzing data
- The teacher evaluation tool does not promote growth or overall effectiveness
- The professional development plan is not able to address district needs

The district has worked hard and made progress on all of these issues, simultaneously, which is commendable given the issues' complexity and resource intensive needs. However, the downside of having multiple, simultaneous, change initiatives has been uneven results and work that takes a long time, needs revisiting, and/or needs more intensive support.

Current Conditions:

1. Curriculum maps have been developed in most subjects; however, in many areas they still need to be further developed into discrete units of instruction, with specific time estimates, enumerated mastery learning objectives, and corresponding specific common assessments. The districts maps are on a series of *Word* documents, and although accessible electronically, they are not on a curriculum mapping program.
2. For the purposes of assessing student achievement in ELA and math skills, the district supplements MCAS testing with a commercial multiple choice test program called Measure of Academic Progress (MAPs). MAPs tests are administered in grade K-10 three times a year and analyzed by school data teams and teachers during collaborative meetings. Two challenges exist in this area. First, there is insufficient time for teacher collaboration to review test results and plan how to adjust instruction according to test result analyses. Second, many teachers believe the material tested on MAPs assessments do not necessarily align with their curricula, resulting in limited usefulness of the test results.
3. A district data specialist, the director of curriculum and instruction, and a district-wide coach in math and another in ELA lead district efforts in the effective use of student performance data. Teachers in the district have received substantial training in how to access and interpret student performance data.
4. The state's new educator evaluation system was initially implemented in 2012-2013. In 2013-2014 several important improvements have been made to the system. A computer software program was brought in to help manage the sizeable document workload. Educators and evaluators received training in the system's change in emphasis (with fewer high stakes full period observations and with more frequent informal observation and feedback sessions). Clearer timelines and procedures were developed. There has

also been a reduction in the number of performance elements to be evaluated and those that are focus areas align with the district's AIP goals.

5. The AIP makes frequent reference to district-wide, research-based, instructional best practices (affectionately known as DWRPIBPs). These may be summarized as the following:

- Develop mastery objectives for each lesson
- Post and communicate lesson objectives to students
- Teach in ways that engage students
- Develop student higher-order thinking
- Differentiate instruction
- Use a variety of formative assessments to inform and adjust instruction

District faculty currently submit weekly plans to their principals that list mastery objectives and assessments that will measure student performance of these. Evaluators also routinely check for posted mastery objectives when visiting classrooms. Teachers also submit a detailed lesson plan for a differentiated lesson every two weeks.

6. Faculty and administrators participate in monthly Learning Walkthroughs to collaboratively learn about the implementation efforts of DWRBIBPs in each school.
7. Evidence from learning walkthroughs, evaluator observation, and outside consultants suggests that, as a district, there is room for improvement in the frequency with which teachers engage students in project-based, hands-on, and authentic learning activities and in the frequency with which teachers develop higher-order thinking.
8. The issue of professional development is the topic of the next section of this report.

Opportunities for Inquiry or Growth:

1. The district may benefit from having more highly developed curriculum maps that will bring consistency across classrooms and alignment between grade levels. Integrating maps with lesson plans in an easily accessible electronic environment may also be a possibility worth investigating.
2. Teachers have had significant professional development in differentiated instruction and it is frequently well practiced across the district. To better support struggling students an important next step may be to a consistent system-wide approach to interventions outside of the general education setting. An RTI system and sufficient staffing levels to provide literacy, math, and behavior interventions may need future attention.
3. Another facet of curriculum development that would benefit from increased attention may be the selection of a research supported, and common core standards aligned, elementary literacy program.

4. In addition, it may be advisable to develop specific common writing assignments, across subjects, at the secondary level, where students write and revise pieces in each area of the new literacy standards; narrative, explanation, argument, and research. Such writing pieces could anchor curriculum units with common assessments, engage students in purposeful tasks, and develop higher-order thinking skills.

V. Adult Learning and Professional Development

Theme: Despite noble efforts, GMRSD lacks the collaboration time, coaches, and professional development funds to support multiple improvement initiatives that require teachers and staff to develop new and often complex teaching techniques, ancillary skills, and, at times, paradigm shifts in how they see their work.

Current Conditions:

1. The extent of district-wide time professional development each year is two days in August (6.5 hours each), and half days (2.5 hours each) in September, October, December, January, February, March and May for a total of 30.5 hours per year.
2. Time for teacher collaboration time varies by level as follow:
 - Elementary: 1 teaching period per week and perhaps part of one faculty meeting a month
 - Middle: Daily interdisciplinary team meetings and one after school department meeting a month
 - High School: One after school department meeting a month.
3. The district has two in-house staff who provide coaching for all educators; a math coach and a ELA coach. All other training is provided by outside parties.
4. To address the goals of the AIP, professional development is needed in the following areas; curriculum mapping, mastery objectives, student engagement, higher-order thinking, differentiated instruction, formative assessment, data-driven instruction, and educator evaluation. In addition, teachers need training in subject specific programs as they are introduced in their grade level and subject area. Also, training needs exist in the district in the areas of developing effective group collaboration skills and mentoring. Finally, new teachers in particular need training in district social and emotional programs, the use of district computer programs, and other areas such as de-escalation strategies. (Approximately 20 new teachers were hired this year out of a total teaching staff of just under 100).
5. The imbalance between the district's training needs and the resources to address them has been an ongoing source of frustration for all parties. Administrators have established mandated training schedules based upon AIP priorities, not always with sufficient input from teachers. Faculty meeting time has often been used for training, crowding out time for other building needs. Parents have expressed displeasure at having half days at all, as they may need to make special child care arrangements on these days. Teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators, all wish for more training time and targeted feedback, to learn to do things with greater expertise and thus greater feelings of success.
6. Exit interviews with teachers who left the district at the end of last year and reports from other sources consistently expressed the view that not only have there been too many initiatives at one time but that the lack of capacity to support them led administrators to

hold teachers accountable to initiatives at only a compliance level. In other words, the district ended up measuring things that were easy to measure like lesson plan submission rates and the number of pieces of evidence submitted for evaluations rather than in providing extended training, targeted feedback, and celebrations of meaningful successes.

7. In spite of this gloomy picture, staff has reported gaining valuable knowledge and skill from past training in differentiated instruction, Responsive Classroom, Calkins Writing, and many other subject specific programs. Many teachers have been working hard to learn to teach English Language Learners through a Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) course and scores of teachers are advancing their careers through outside college and university courses.
8. In a recent survey of training priorities, teachers expressed a collective interest in three DWRBIBs and in classroom management. In an attempt to differentiate some training and to shift the district's training approach, a bit, towards providing choice, time for reflection, collaboration, and experimentation, a recent early release day was designed which attempted to provide more of these dimensions. The work of the day was grounded in reading selections from a text provided to each teacher that will provide a focal point, common language and shared ideas for the district's collaborative adult learning. The feedback from this professional development day was quite positive.

Opportunities for Inquiry or Growth:

1. The district needs to give serious consideration to how it can best provide training to its staff. The full complement of options should be examined, from summer institutes, to substitute coverage for targeted release days, to additional district-wide half days, to the hiring of additional coaches, to online professional learning communities.
2. The district needs to rigorously plan and prioritize its training needs with an eye towards addressing its highest priority needs in a way that will bring true and lasting improvement—even if this comes at the expense of not addressing other training needs in the near term.
3. An uncommon idea that may be worthy of consideration would be to have grade 5 and/or 4 teachers teach only ELA or math, so that they would have the time to develop deeper expertise, and thus teach more effective lessons, in just one of these areas.

VI. School Culture

Theme: Although each of the district's four schools is unique, taken as a whole, staff sees itself as hard working and focused upon the needs of students. Staff has great respect and strong feelings of collegiality for each other. However, frequent administrator turnover and a perception of the AIP as having taken on too much all at once have contributed to feelings of frustration and disempowerment. Consequently perhaps, the relationships between faculty and administrators are not strong.

Current Conditions:

102 faculty members (just about 100%) responded to a survey which provided the following data. These statements reflect the percentage of district faculty members who agreed or agreed strongly with each statement:

- 29% feel they have sufficient time to collaborate with peers about student learning and instruction.
- 36% feel their school deals effectively with, and appropriately supports, students who frequently misbehave.
- 40% feel they have sufficient opportunity to provide feedback to their school administrators.
- 47% feel their opinions and views are taken into consideration when important school decisions are made.
- 48% feel the district's Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) has set their school on a positive course and provides a clear focus for ongoing improvement.
- 58% feel they have the material resources they need to do an effective job.
- 59% feel their evaluator understands instruction well and provides useful feedback.
- 64% feel their school communicates consistent and clear expectations for learning and behavior.
- 65% feel valued by their administrators as a teaching professional.
- 68% feel the adult culture of their school can be characterized as trusting and respectful.
- 70% feel their school shares a common vision of what effective teaching looks like.
- 71% feel their school has a shared commitment to creating a culture where all students feel safe, respected, and supported.
- 78% enjoy working in their school.
- 78% feel their school actively welcomes parents and parental involvement.
- 82% feel they are able to continue to learn and grow in their profession.

A similar survey was given to non-teaching staff, of whom 44 replied. Each statement represents the percentage of staff who replied agree or strongly agree:

- 21% feel the district Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) has been meaningful to their work.
- 34% feel they have enough time to their job effectively.

- 42% feel they have sufficient time to collaborate with others with whom my work must be coordinated.
- 55% feel they have the resources they need to do their job effectively.
- 57% feel they are consulted about (or participate in the making) decisions that impact their work.
- 70% feel they are a part of a team that is able to learn new things and adapt to change effectively.
- 73% feel their work responsibilities are clear and achievable.
- 75% feel their supervisor communicates clearly and is a good listener.
- 88.4% feel they have a good working relationship with their supervisor.
- 93% feel they have good working relationships with their colleagues.
- 100% feel the work they do is important and meaningful.

Opportunities for Inquiry or Growth:

1. The district should explore opportunities for increased teacher collaboration time for the purposes of school improvement.
2. The district may wish to explore systemic ways to involve faculty more in decision making, provide feedback to administration, and improve lines of communication.
3. The district should examine the root causes of the perception that the district is not effective in dealing with student misbehavior.
4. Faculty report a stronger shared vision about effective instruction than their evaluators' understanding of it. Similarly, faculty report a stronger shared commitment to supporting students than the schools' ability to deal effectively with misbehavior. These data suggest two areas where there is agreement about what is important and desired but where specific plans for improvement are needed.

VII. Parents and Community

Theme: Rates of active parent involvement in school life are relatively low and the percentage of families who send their children to schools outside of the district is high.

Current Conditions:

1. Parent attendance at school open houses, parent-teacher conferences, principal coffee hours, superintendent forums, the special education parent advisory council, and on school councils is low.
2. 23% of students who reside in Gill or Montague attend charter schools or leave the district through the school choice program. The number of choice-out students has risen from 186 in 2011 to 193 in 2013, while the number attending charter schools has increased from 32 to 63 during this same period. In 2010 the district surveyed families of students who left the district to learn more about their reasons. 80% of the 78 respondents selected their top reason as “concerns about academic standards in Gill-Montague”. Students going out of district appear to be dispersed relatively equally across grade levels. In addition, over the last four years, 23% of Great Falls Middle School eighth graders have gone on to the regional technical vocational high school (17 of 87 in 2013).
3. Anecdotal evidence suggests parents perceive more could be done to create a stronger sense of community at the preschool and early elementary level and a that a greater sense of academic excellence and challenge is needed at the middle and high school levels.
4. A common theme heard across the community is that “there are lots of good teachers and good things going on in the district but people don’t hear about them.”

Opportunities for Inquiry or Growth:

1. The district needs to gain a deeper understanding of why parental involvement is low and investigate what demographically similar districts, that are more successful, do.
2. It is likely a combination of changes will need to occur to reverse the trend of students leaving the district. The district needs to gain a deeper understanding of the origins of parental perception of low academic standards and improve its communication of district accomplishments. More to the point, it needs to improve the quality of instruction and increase student achievement. Perhaps it will become necessary to offer more specialized programs as do the local technical high school and area charter schools.

VIII. Support Operations: Transportation, Food Service, Facilities, Human Resources, Business Office, and Technology

Theme: As a group, the district's support operations are performed by talented and hardworking staff who provide effective and efficient services.

Current Conditions:

1. The food service manager and his staff provide high quality meals, often with fresh local produce. The department continues to struggle to provide this level of quality and service at costs that can make the program self-sustaining, operating at a deficit of \$40,000 in FY12 and of \$69,000 in FY13.
2. A new five year transportation agreement has recently been signed with Kuzmeskus Bus Co. with a projected FY15 cost of \$496,410. This represents a 27% increase from FY14 transportation costs of \$391,945 (which was the last year of a former five year contract).
3. The district's information and communications technologies department is staffed by three talented and hard working professionals. They have created a highly efficient and cost effective technology infrastructure, including dependable Wi-Fi service across the district. Providing adequate funding to replace aging equipment and the need for additional staffing are ongoing challenges.
4. Business, finance, and human resource functions are provided by an office manager, two part time clerks, and a business consulting firm that works two days a week at the district. While the staff works hard to serve multiple functions, there is not a sufficient presence of professional level fiscal and human resource management and oversight present for a \$19 million organizations.

Opportunities for Inquiry or Growth:

1. A full-time director of business and operations may help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the district's business, financial, human resources, and support operations.
2. Finding ways to reduce the food service department's operating deficits is needed.
3. The feasibility of sharing additional technology support staff with another district could be explored.

IX. District Finances

Theme: As operational costs, particularly personnel, continue to grow faster than state aid and other revenue sources, the district is continuously faced with the dilemma of seeking larger local assessments or making budget cuts, primarily in staff.

Current Conditions:

1. The district's communities and their leaders are supportive of the district but express concern about the unsustainability of increased local assessments to support the schools.
2. The district lost \$1,487,342 in revenue to students choosing-out or attending charter schools in FY14. This amount has grown steadily each year, from \$1,295,462 in FY11.
3. From FY 2012 to FY 2014, the district's all funds budget increased only 0.3%; from \$19,011,464 to \$19,072,227. It's general fund budget, which does not include revenues from grants and revolving funds, increased from \$16,408,162 to \$16,968,368, or 3.4% over this same three year period.
4. The district has been able to retain small class sizes at the elementary level, and for the majority of classes at the middle and high school level. Average class sizes in 2012-13 were the following:

Gill Elementary	19.8
Montague Elementary	16.4
Great Falls Middle School	15.3
Turners Falls High School	11.0

5. The district employs a particularly large number of para-professionals. Below is the ratio of students with disabilities to para-professionals for districts most demographically and fiscally similar to Gill-Montague:

Webster:	10.7 to 1
Gardner:	10.5 to 1
State Avg.:	9.7 to 1
Easthampton:	8.4 to 1
Gill-Montague:	5.0 to 1

Opportunities for Inquiry or Growth:

1. Under the current fiscal conditions it is difficult to undertake new initiatives with the potential to draw in new or returning students if these initiatives involve significant expenditures of new revenues. Therefore, it may be necessary to redirect existing resources from other areas.
2. New sources of revenue such as grants should be explored.

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3. The district may wish to participate in political processes that advocate for changes in state funding formulas or that review the adverse impact of charter schools on district revenues.

X. Summary

The Gill-Montague Regional school district is moving in a positive direction. With a dedicated staff, innovative teachers, well equipped and maintained facilities, and small class sizes, the district is, in many ways, well positioned to build upon its successes. However, some significant challenges remain. The dozen points below focus upon these challenges and the work that may lie ahead.

1. A vision of where the district wishes to go needs to be articulated. The roots of such a vision may already be in place. The school committee's goals, the administrative team's learning principles, and the superintendent's core values appear to share these traits;
 - an aspiration that our schools promote the dignity and self-worth of all students;
 - that we teach students in ways that build upon their natural curiosity;
 - that student learning be demonstrated foremost through authentic and meaningful experiences;
 - and that while improved standardized test scores are important, these should be a byproduct of the learning we aspire to support, not an end in itself.
2. The district should undergo a strategic planning process that engages all stakeholders and results in a meaningful strategy which charts a course of measurable improvement over the next two to three years. Then, school improvement plans aligned to the district strategy may be developed.
3. The district needs to gain a fuller understanding of why past improvement initiatives have not born better results. Student achievement on standardized tests in math and ELA show a significant number district students are not reaching proficiency.
4. Although it is likely that the AIP was overly ambitious and lacked sufficient support to engender true and sustained changes in instructional practice, this knowledge does not tell us what will work. The district needs to inquire more deeply about the root causes of the obstacles to student learning in both ELA and mathematics.
5. Consideration should be given to the following specific initiatives to address academic success:
 - The district would benefit from having more highly developed curriculum maps that will bring consistency across classrooms and alignment between grade levels.
 - The selection of a research supported, and common core standards aligned, elementary literacy program.
 - A secondary level writing initiative in ELA, social studies, and science courses.
6. Persistent questions about the impact of social and emotional programs at all levels need to be addressed more thoroughly, including, perhaps, the exploration of the link between weak literacy skills and student behavior and engagement. These questions are closely linked to a common belief that the district is not successful enough in handling student misbehaviors or supporting students who struggle with meeting the behavioral expectations of school.

7. To better support struggling students, an important next step may be to develop a consistent, system-wide, approach to interventions outside of the general education classroom. A fully developed RTI system with sufficient staffing levels to provide literacy, math, and behavior interventions is needed.
8. The district needs to give serious consideration to how it can best provide training to its staff. The district needs to rigorously plan and prioritize its training needs, with an eye towards doing so in a way that will bring true and lasting improvement.
9. District and building administrators need to work with faculty to improve their relationships, their shared decision making and planning, their lines of communication, and their opportunities for staff feedback to administrators.
10. The district needs to gain a deeper understanding of why parental involvement is low and then work to improve this situation.
11. A combination of changes may be necessary to reverse the trend of students leaving the district. The district needs to gain a deeper understanding of why students go elsewhere. The district may need to improve its communication of district accomplishments. The quality of instruction, perhaps meaning the level of student engagement and cognitive challenge, may need improvement. And as the landscape of public education evolves, the district may need to consider whether it needs to offer more specialized programs, changes in its course offerings, or shifts in pedagogical emphasis.
12. Under the current fiscal conditions it is difficult to provide sufficient resources, adequate collaboration time, and sustained training, for multiple initiatives leading to substantially improved instructional practice. For this reason the district needs to target and support a small number of high leverage initiatives. If the district wishes to go further and adopt new programs and hire new staff, it appears likely that these moves will require the restructuring or redeployment of existing resources. In simpler language, painful reductions in some areas may be required to support necessary changes in others.

Appendix A

Chronology of DESE Involvement with GMRSD

2007-08 School Year: Supt. Kenneth Rocke

- June 2007: District declared “underperforming” by DESE
- January 2008: Turnaround Plan by GMRSD Superintendent
- School Committee votes to close Montague Center Elementary School starting fall 2008

2008-09 School Year: Supt. Kenneth Rocke

- District budget set by DESE Commissioner
- District works on DESE supported Turnaround Plan

2009-10 School Year: Supt. Carl Ladd

- District budget set by DESE Commissioner
- September 2009: DESE report to Board of Education on progress of Turnaround Initiative
- Early 2010: DESE relabels GMRSD a Level 4 District under new accountability system
- March 2010: Strategic Vision by Supt. Ladd adopted by School Committee

2010-11 School Year: Supt. Carl Ladd

- August 2010: Turnaround Plan Update by Supt.
- September 2010: “Year of Assessment” Plan by admin team
- September 2010: DESE review team visits district
- November 2010: DESE Commissioner approves district control of FY 11 budget
- January 2011: DESE report of September review findings
- March 2011: DESE recommendation to Board of Education to retain Level 4 Status and begin Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) process with quarterly DESE monitoring.

2011-12 School Year: Interim Supt. Nadine Ekstrom

- Summer 2011: District Accelerated Improvement Plan is written
- January and May 2012: AIP progress reports by DESE monitor

2012-13 School Year: Interim Supt. Mark Prince

- September 2012: DESE approval of updated AIP
- June 2013: DESE report of March-May monitoring period

2013-14 School Year: Supt. Michael Sullivan

- August 2013: DESE Commissioner approval of AIP operational plan
- August 2013: DESE Commissioner releases district from Level 4 Status