

**New England Association of
Schools and Colleges**



Commission on Public Secondary Schools

**Report of the Visiting Committee for
Palmer High School**

Palmer, Massachusetts

March 8-11, 2009

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STATEMENT ON LIMITATIONS

THE DISTRIBUTION, USE, AND SCOPE OF THE VISITING COMMITTEE REPORT

The Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges located in Bedford, Massachusetts considers this visiting committee report of Palmer High School to be a privileged document submitted by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges to the principal of the school and by the principal to the state department of education. Distribution of the report within the school community is the responsibility of the school principal. The final visiting committee report must be released in its entirety within sixty days (60) of its completion to the superintendent, school board, public library or town office, and the appropriate news media.

The prime concern of the visiting committee has been to assess the quality of the educational program at Palmer High School in terms of the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. Neither the total report nor any of its subsections is to be considered an evaluation of any individual staff member but rather a professional appraisal of the school as it appeared to the visiting team.

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INTRODUCTION

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) is the oldest of the six regional accrediting agencies in the United States. Since its inception in 1885, the Association has awarded membership and accreditation to those educational institutions in the six-state New England region who seek voluntary affiliation.

The governing body of the Association is its Board of Trustees which supervises the work of six Commissions: the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE), the Commission on Independent Schools (CIS), the Commission on Public Secondary Schools (CPSS), the Commission on Technical and Career Institutions (CTCI), the Commission on Public Elementary and Middle Schools (CPEMS), and the Commission on American and International Schools Abroad (CAISA).

As the responsible agency for matters of the evaluation and accreditation of public secondary school member institutions, CPSS requires visiting committees to assess the degree to which the evaluated schools meet the qualitative Standards for Accreditation of the Commission. Those Standards are:

Teaching and Learning Standards

- Mission and Expectations for Student Learning
- Curriculum
- Instruction
- Assessment of Student Learning

Support of Teaching and Learning Standards

- Leadership and Organization
- School Resources for Learning
- Community Resources for Learning

The accreditation program for public schools involves a threefold process: the self-study conducted by the local professional staff, the on-site evaluation conducted by the Commission's visiting committee, and the follow-up program carried out by the school to implement the findings of its own self-study and the valid recommendations of the visiting committee and those identified by the Commission in the Follow-Up process. Continued accreditation requires that the school be reevaluated at least once every ten years and that it show continued progress addressing identified needs.

Preparation for the Evaluation Visit – The School Self-Study

A steering committee of the professional staff was appointed to supervise the myriad details inherent in the school's self-study. At Palmer High School, a committee of eight staff members supervised all aspects of the self-study. The steering committee assigned all teachers and administrators in the school to appropriate subcommittees to determine the quality of all programs, activities, and facilities available for young people. In addition to faculty members, the self-study committees included several parents.

The Self-Study of Palmer High School extended over a period of twenty months from May of 2006 to December of 2008.

Public schools evaluated by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools must complete appropriate materials to assess their adherence to the Standards for Accreditation and the quality of their educational offerings in light of the school's mission, learning expectations, and unique student population. In addition to using the Self-Study Guides developed by a representative group of New England educators and approved by the Commission, Palmer High School also used questionnaires developed by The Global Institute at Endicott College to reflect the concepts contained in the Standards for Accreditation. These materials provided discussion items for a comprehensive assessment of the school by the professional staff during the self-study.

It is important that the reader understand that every subcommittee appointed by the steering committee was required to present its report to the entire professional staff for approval. No single report developed in the self-study became part of the official self-study documents until it had been approved by the entire professional staff.

The Process Used by the Visiting Committee

A visiting committee of fifteen evaluators was assigned by the Commission on Public Secondary Schools to evaluate Palmer High School. The Committee members spent four days in Palmer, reviewed the self-study documents which had been prepared for their examination, met with administrators, teachers, other school and system personnel, students, and parents, shadowed students, visited classes, and interviewed teachers to determine the degree to which the school meets the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. Since the evaluators represented a variety of public schools, diverse points of view were brought to bear on the evaluation of Palmer High School.

The visiting team built its professional judgment on evidence collected from the following sources:

- review of the school's self-study material
- forty-four hours shadowing fifteen students for a half day
- a total of thirteen hours of classroom observation (in addition to time shadowing students)
- numerous informal observations in and around the school
- tours of the facility
- individual meetings with thirty teachers about their work, instructional approaches, and the assessment of student learning
- group meetings with students, parents, school and district administrators, and teachers
- the examination of student work including a selection of work collected by the school

Each conclusion in the report was agreed to by team consensus. Sources of evidence for each conclusion drawn by the visiting committee appear in parenthesis in the Standards sections of the report. The seven Standards for Accreditation reports include commendations and recommendations that in the team's judgment will be helpful to the school as it works to improve teaching and learning and to better

meet Commission Standards.

This report of the findings of the visiting committee will be forwarded to the Commission on Public Secondary Schools which will make a decision on the accreditation of Palmer High School.

Overview of Findings

Although the conclusions of the visiting committee on the school's adherence to the Commission's Standards for Accreditation appear in various sections of the report, the committee wishes to highlight some findings in the paragraphs that follow. These findings are not, however, intended to be an inclusive summary of the report.

The entire professional staff of Palmer High School was involved in the strong preparation for the accreditation visiting team. Administrators, teachers, staff members, students, and parents demonstrated warm hospitality and clearly expressed their enthusiasm for Palmer High School. The team felt truly welcomed; more importantly, the team felt that the school community understands the importance of the accreditation process. The visit is one part of an on-going cycle as the visiting team attempts to help the school meet the demanding accreditation standards laid out by NEASC.

People care deeply about Palmer High School. It has a notably dedicated and compassionate faculty whose members reach out to students in the classroom and beyond the school day. It has capable students who respect and value their teachers. Even during these difficult economic times, the Palmer community and parents are supportive of the school's mission. The school has leaders who are invested in the success of its students.

With all of these resources as a foundation, Palmer High School has the ability to become an even more effective professional learning community and to improve academic, social, and civic outcomes for all of its students. The considerable work that has preceded this accreditation visit is a positive sign that the school is enlisting a number of strategies to prepare students to be life-long learners in an increasingly complex and technologically-driven world.

Just as the world has changed rapidly, so have the responsibilities of educators. In the last 10 years alone, they have needed to learn how to navigate students through new methods of research, analysis, and communication. Students in this generation will be required to handle constant change, and the members of the Palmer High School faculty must become role models for them as lifelong learners in accepting some of the demanding changes that are called for in the NEASC standards. Teachers must learn to collaborate formally as a part of their professional responsibility. They must work together to articulate their learning expectations for students, write curricula that support and emphasize those expectations, share instructional approaches that reach all students, and use assessment data and student work as a means to improve both their practice and student outcomes. The visiting committee has observed some of the initial steps the school has taken to embrace this new model of pedagogy. At Palmer High School, the time has come for the school system to provide teachers with the time, resources, and training to do this transformative work of collaboration around teaching and learning. It is not possible to meet the demanding standards outlined by NEASC without the district making a sustained commitment to professional development.

Teaching and Learning at Palmer High School

In order to accomplish these overarching goals, the school must first have an articulated mission and set of expectations for students, and the Palmer High School faculty has properly placed emphasis on raising awareness of its mission in preparation for this visit. The emphases on learning as a life-long process and the recently coined motto of "PHS for Success" have provided some ideals for the school community to target. There are places, however, where the visiting team found policies that are inconsistent with the mission. The committee urges Palmer High School, as an inclusive institution, to examine its values about student learning, using current research to inform the faculty's collective beliefs

about how students learn best. Such a process is likely to put a sharper focus on the good foundational work that has been in place for several years related to the school-wide rubrics. In addition, the school should work to find measurable indicators for its social expectations – data points that will surely affirm a positive, safe, and respectful school climate.

The Palmer High School staff must complete the fine curriculum work it has begun across the disciplines to articulate the instructional strategies and resources that are used to teach to the Massachusetts benchmarks in each discipline. In addition, collective decisions around course maps and pacing as well as clear assessment expectations that specifically include the use of the agreed-upon rubrics would help the school community in producing effective curricula. The committee observed numerous examples of curricula that emphasized higher-order thinking and application of skills and knowledge, and the Palmer High School community must ensure that such rigorous expectations are in place for all students, including those receiving pull-out special education services. Furthermore, the district must pursue formal ways to articulate curriculum between the middle and the high school. Once again, a real commitment to professional development surrounding curriculum articulation and revision is a critical step toward respecting the faculty's collaborative efforts.

Students, parents, administrators, and teachers themselves all report satisfaction with the quality of instruction at Palmer High School, and the visiting committee found numerous instances of teachers working to personalize instruction, to engage students as active learners, and to involve all students in higher order thinking to promote depth of understanding. In addition, it is clear that Palmer High School teachers have committed to using technology as a regular part of their instructional repertoire. However, as a result of the lack of professional development related to instruction, Palmer High School's teachers have had limited exposure to current research on effective instructional strategies, including methods for differentiating instruction in order to meet the needs of all students in an inclusive classroom setting.

The work that was initiated several years ago to develop and implement school-wide rubrics for the academic expectations was an appropriate and necessary leadership decision that helped the school to begin to meet the need for the school's own assessment of student learning. The Palmer High School community must understand, however, that the use of those rubrics must be revisited until the academic expectations have become the driving force in the school's efforts to achieve its mission. The strong emphasis on one of the academic expectations has had the effect of minimizing the importance of the others, and the lack of consistency in implementing the rubrics with a high degree of individual teacher discretion to use them for different assignments prevents the school community from collecting significant assessment results and/or student work in order to inform the adjustment of instructional strategies or effective curriculum revision. There are some pockets of promising practice in departments where teachers are formally collaborating to score student work and discuss student needs, and there is some indication that those practices are being planned for other departments. Furthermore, Palmer High School has begun to communicate individual student progress in achieving the school-wide academic expectations to students and families through the rubric grades on report cards. Making the rubric scores more reliable as well as meaningful to students and parents is the next step for the Palmer High School community.

In all of the elements of teaching and learning, Palmer High School has made positive initial strides. For progress to continue over time, the school must commit to developing a true learning community where professional development of educators is prioritized.

Support of Teaching and Learning at Palmer High School

In support of teaching and learning at Palmer High School, administrators at the school have established a positive and responsive climate. The great pride that members of the community feel for Palmer High School can be seen everywhere. Student success is widely acknowledged and shared, and stakeholders believe that they have meaningful roles in decision-making. Teachers are given student loads that allow them to meet the individual needs of students. Student grouping patterns generally foster heterogeneity although the school must confront some significant challenges regarding the teaching of

special needs students in the least restrictive environment. The principal and assistant principal, who are respected by teachers, parents, and students, are capable of providing the leadership necessary to develop structures that will allow the professional staff to collaborate with and across departments in support of learning for all students.

Support services at the school are generally consistent with the school's mission and expectations for student learning. Health services are appropriately integrated into the school environment. The services of the school library media center are a valued part of the instructional program, with students and teachers citing the library as a place where they can effectively pursue research and inquiry projects, but the library media center should be fully staffed throughout the week. The ratio of guidance counselors to students is appropriate, although the department has struggled to break out of a mode where it primarily reacts to student needs as it seeks to develop a delivery system that provides a comprehensive guidance program that focuses on personal, career, and college counseling. Special education services at Palmer High School comply with local, state, and federal laws. However, concerns that must be addressed include the high number of out-of-district placements and the perception among regular education teachers that they are struggling to meet the needs of students who are included in the general curriculum. The professional staff at Palmer High School must work toward consensus about its procedures and even its philosophy about educating students with special needs.

In recent years, the town of Palmer has struggled to provide an adequate and dependable source of revenue for school programs. As a result, the high school has been required to cut a number of elective programs, cancel professional development days, and reduce important personnel, such as a K-12 curriculum coordinator and an adjustment counselor. Still, most teachers report that they have adequate technological support, materials, and supplies to deliver their curriculum. The physical plant and facilities support the educational program although there are concerns that the diminished maintenance budget, if not addressed over time, could lead to larger problems. There are current concerns about excessive heat on the fourth floor. As it has already done, the district should continue to ensure that questions about safety are answered. The school's efforts to reach out to parents and families as partners are appropriate and should be a source of continued emphasis. While Palmer clearly feels the burdens of our national financial downturn, the community is providing adequate resources to support the core educational program.

The Palmer High School faculty and staff have made progress in meeting the significantly demanding standards of NEASC accreditation, and the visiting committee urges them to celebrate those accomplishments. Palmer faces unquestionable challenges in difficult economic times. Members of this faculty consistently bring a positive approach to their work with students. This visit is part of an on-going process in search of excellence – one in which the Palmer High School community uses the demanding NEASC standards as a way to make things better for students and for the professional educators. If the school fulfills the recommendations in the final report, the result will be an improved school that continues to make strides to become a professional learning community and a mission-driven school.

School and Community Profile Palmer High School

Palmer High School opened in 1991 on fifty-six acres of pastoral land in the village of Thorndike, near “Four Corners” and the town administrative building and police station, the District Court of Eastern Hampden County, and Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical High School. The high school shares its educational campus with Old Mill Pond Elementary School.

The Town of Palmer, with a total land area of 32.14 square miles, is located in the easterly portion of Hampden County where the confluence of the Ware, Quaboag, and Swift Rivers form the headwaters of the Chicopee River. The current population is 12,750 with 5,402 housing units within those 32.14 square miles. Palmer is seventeen miles from Springfield, thirty-six miles from Worcester, and seventy-three miles from the metropolitan center of Boston. Because of its location, Palmer has always been an important transportation center with three active rail lines used predominantly for commercial shipping and the Massachusetts Turnpike for commercial and passenger traffic.

Palmer is comprised of four separate and distinct villages: Bondsville, Depot Village (a/k/a Palmer), Thorndike, and Three Rivers, each with a separate water district and village center, three of which have individual fire departments. All four villages are governed by a Town Council (comprised of nine council members) and are serviced by one police department and school system. Prior to 1991, each village had an elementary K-8 school, all of which closed with the opening of the new schools. The total population of the school district is 1,872 students. Old Mill Pond Elementary school houses 734 students, grades K-4; Converse Middle School, the renovated “old” high school, houses 466 students, grades 5-7; and Palmer High School presently houses 672 students, grades 8-12.

Within the last several years, the Town of Palmer has not moved forward economically. There have been several starts to projects, but due to funding and other issues outside of the control of the town, these projects have been shelved or abandoned. The Town of Palmer has lost numerous significant businesses, such as Tambrands, Pierson Industries, Jarvis East, Cascade Diamond, and Carristar. The majority of the population is employed in health services, education, manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade. The major employers in the community are Wing Memorial Hospital (600), Palmer Public Schools (340), Big Y Supermarket (150), and Northern Tree Service (110).

The Town of Palmer also provides a wide range of cultural and recreational activities and events from which students benefit. The Palmer Public Library (PPL) is a vital force in the community. The PPL provides weekly resources to elementary students, via a bookmobile; programming for preschoolers, elementary and middle school students; a summer reading program that involves approximately 1,000 children and young adults; adult programming; and cultural events. The PPL staff has worked closely with the high school on resource sharing, delivery and collection development, as well as joint programming and grants. The numerous recreational parks, conservation areas, and playing fields in the four villages of Palmer, as well as the many athletic programs provided for the youth and adults in the community, show the importance that citizens place on recreation and athletics.

The average median household income in Palmer is \$41,443 and families below the poverty level account for 5.7% of the population. The current unemployment rate is 5.36% slightly lower than the state average of 6.94%. The average cost of an existing home in the community is \$198,522. The 2006-07 per pupil expenditure at the high school was \$10,026, lower than the state average of \$11,211. Palmer School District ranks 186/391 in Massachusetts for its per pupil expenditure. In fiscal 2007, 26.1% of property taxes were allocated to the school district, 30.7% from state sources, 43.2% from the town’s operating budget. In addition, the final payment (due in 2011) of the 1988 twenty year bond for the construction of the current high school and elementary school campus has been set aside in a surplus reserve account and will have no financial impact on the school’s funding.

The School

Although there has been a 5.1% decrease in enrollment by NESDEC projections for 1996-2006, the current high school population of approximately 672 is expected to increase to an anticipated 703 in 2009. NESDEC further projects a possible 10.5% decrease in enrollment for the time period of 2006-2011. The high school age population has remained relatively stable and age appropriate and the ethnic and cultural compositions mirror that of the adult population. Approximately 90% of the 2007 graduates entered the school together as eighth graders five years earlier. This ongoing success attests to the fact that the school is meeting students' needs and that the enforcement of attendance regulations and the cooperation of parents who generally believe in the importance of education have been successful. The school dropout rate has averaged 0.3% over the past two years which is well below the state average of 3.3%. Statistics show that daily student attendance has averaged 96% for 2006-07 and 96.08% for 2005-06; faculty attendance has averaged 95.5% for the last two years. About 20% of students earn honor roll status on a consistent basis, and academic and athletic successes are recognized at award nights, National Honor Society induction ceremonies, and Senior Class Day.

Statistics for the Class of 2007 reveal that 36% of males and 52% of females entered four-year colleges, 41% of males and 40% of females entered two-year colleges, 9% of males and 0.0% of females entered the military, 12% of males and 2% of females entered the work force, and 2% of males and 6% of females reported other (most of whom have found employment). There have been zero expulsions in the past two years, zero in-school suspensions in the past two years (reinstated 2007-08 school year), and 505 out-of-school suspensions in the past two years. The number of students who failed one or more classes during the 2006-07 school year was 141 males and 92 females and for 2005-06 was 129 males and 80 females. The retentions for 2005-06 were seven 8th grade students and four 9th grade students and for 2006-07 fifteen 8th grade students, six 9th grade students, five 10th grade students, and three 11th grade students. Of the student body, 96.6% of students speak English as their first language, 0.6% of students are limited English proficient, and 2.8% do not use English as their first language. There is a 0.0% level of Title I participation. Palmer is a targeted assistance school district. Palmer High School is not eligible (targeted) for services because its free and reduced lunch count does not exceed the necessary percentage to qualify. The formula used to determine eligibility is set forth by the federal government. The high school age students in Palmer who attend non-public schools is 3.2% and those students who opt for school choice is 0.01%.

The ethnic, racial, and cultural composition of the student body is comprised as follows: 95.5% white, 0.1% Native American, 0.9% African American, 1.2% Asian, and 2.3% Hispanic. Of this student body, 1.4% for grades 8-12 is age inappropriate. This figure is due to issues of transience and mobility. Approximately 45 ninth grade students each year transfer to Pathfinder Regional Vocational High School. Of those 45, approximately 6 students return to Palmer High School in their sophomore, junior, or senior years. Palmer has seen an increase in foster home placements where students will come in from other school systems throughout the school year and need to be placed in appropriate classes. Based upon the prior school's curriculum and scheduling system (block v. period), problems with scheduling, classroom size, and age appropriateness result. Students are offered additional educational programs through a dual enrollment in two local community colleges; for 2005-06, two females were enrolled, and for 2006-07, three females were enrolled, accounting for some mobility in the school's student body.

There are 2 full-time administrators, 7 full-time student support staff, 14 full-time other professional staff, and 9 full-time non-professional staff (clerical, custodial, other). There are 53 teachers at Palmer High School creating a teacher/student ratio of 1:13. The percent of teachers licensed is 98.1% and the percent of teachers in core academic subject areas who are Highly Qualified is 97.8%. English, social studies, and math teachers carry an average load of 110 students with an average class size of 22 students; science teachers carry an average load of 120 students with an average class size of 24 students; foreign language, business, and technology teachers carry an average load of 90 students with an average class size of 18 students; art teachers carry an average load of 125 students with an average class size of 21 students; music teachers carry an average load of 118 students with an average class size of 23 students; health teachers carry an average load of 122 students with an average class size of 20 students; and physical education teachers carry an average load of 150 students with an average class size of 30

students. The instructional time per year is 996 hours for Palmer High School, 180 days for the students and teachers. The state requirement is 990 hours, 180 days for students and teachers.

The schedule at Palmer High School is a (approximately forty-five minute) seven-block, seven-day rotating schedule. Some provision for common planning time is available for most core academic subjects consisting of one block per day. All eighth grade team teachers are provided with one block per day of "team time."

All eighth graders are placed in teams concentrating on four core academic areas of English, mathematics, social studies and science. Students in grades nine through twelve may select from general, honors, and/or Advanced Placement classes. Sixteen percent of students are enrolled in honors classes and seven percent in Advanced Placement courses. Approximately 13.9% of students received special education services and 0.6% received bilingual/ESL courses during the 2006-07 school year. All students are required to take four years of English, social studies, mathematics, and science, one year of health, one year of physical education, and one year of humanities, with the remainder of students' programs filled from a variety of elective courses including world languages. All students are required to maintain a writing folder. In addition, all students are required to complete ten hours of community service prior to graduation. Students in need of additional services are provided with optional settings, such as the Life Skills program and the alternative education program.

Palmer High School offers a variety of co-curricular activities for its students including 17 athletic programs for boys and girls, jazz band, choirs, and 18 different clubs, including National Honor Society, Life Smarts, and student government opportunities. Over 52.4% of students every year participates in at least one of these activities. Additionally, Palmer High School hosts annually the Quabbin Valley Music Festival, which involves numerous music students from our own school community, but also many students from various surrounding school districts.

Palmer High School engages with local businesses through a number of initiatives including a Tech-Prep program, school-to-career activities sponsored by River East School-to-Career and job shadowing experiences, numerous food drives and fundraising events for local charities, blood drives and walks for hunger, and performances by music groups for local nursing homes and for the elderly.

Students are recognized for their accomplishments through a variety of means: superintendent's awards given monthly; student of the week awards given weekly; student spotlights given monthly through the school newspaper; annual recognition of National Honor Society inductees. In addition, local newspapers sponsor academic and athletic achievement awards, speech contests, and locally sponsored scholarships. Each spring, the school honors students from all departments of the school in a Class Day ceremony, recognizing individual achievement in academics, fine and performing arts, athletics, and community service.

A majority of Palmer High School students take the SAT, and scores compare favorably with state and local scores. The average SAT scores for the class of 2006 were 500 verbal and 520 math while the state averages were 515 verbal and 520 math, and the national averages were 505 verbal and 515 math. In addition, all students who take Advanced Placement courses have the option to take Advanced Placement tests, with 66% of test takers earning a score of three or better on the AP test.

Parents participate in the life of the school by serving on the school council, participating in sports and music booster organizations, volunteering at school events and for field trips, and attending a variety of school activities, including performances, athletic events, Music ala Mode, "Arts Are Academic, Academics Are Arts," Open House nights, and individual parent/teacher conferences. Based upon a self-study survey, 36.2% of parents participate in support groups and/or parent/teacher associations.

Town businesses and organizations promote and financially support numerous educational endeavors such as yearbook, athletics, school newspaper, and drama productions. In addition, they contribute significant funds for academic scholarships for graduating seniors. They also participate as partners in a variety of educational/classroom projects and programs.

School Improvement Planning

School improvement planning occurs in two ways. School Council is a school-wide group comprised of two teachers, three parents, three community members, and two students who meet monthly with the principal to develop a school improvement plan. Academic Council consists of faculty members (all department chairs), the principal, the vice principal and the directors of services (technology, art, music, guidance, and physical education) who meet within and across content areas to make modifications to the curriculum and instructional strategies.

In accordance with MGL Chapter 71, Section 38G, Palmer Public Schools established a formal induction/mentoring program in 2005-06 which provides teachers new to the profession with a collaborative support system which welcomes him/her to the district. The beginning teachers are guided in developing skills and knowledge necessary for a successful teaching experience that contributes positively to student learning. As of 2007-08 Palmer High School has a lead mentor and three mentors. The number of mentees is equivalent to the number of new hires who do not have two or more years of experience.

In addition, Palmer High School joined with the Anti-Defamation League in 2006 to promote its “World of Difference” program to all eighth grade students. Each year, twenty peer trainers with continual guidance from two advisors, deliver this ADL program. Via scheduled health classes, student-led discussion of issues of diversity and recognition of differences is offered once a month.

A review of SAT scores and the local assessment results have also prompted the school to target the following areas: reading comprehension and analysis and open-response answers. As of the 2007-08 school year, Palmer High School provided all sophomores and juniors the opportunity to participate in the PSAT exam at the school district’s expense. Furthermore, MCAS preparatory classes in math and English are now offered during the school day as well as a MCAS after-school program which provides extra-help to those students who have been identified as underperforming. The school has also implemented the STAR reading and STAR math standardized assessment tests to all grade 8-10 students.

Additionally, athletic progress reports and mandatory after-school study halls have been instituted to track the progress and efforts of all student athletes and to assist in maintaining athletic eligibility at Palmer High School.

Furthermore, the School-to-Career program at Palmer High School works hand-in-hand with River East School-to-Career to provide the students of the school with a variety of activities to explore career opportunities, exposure/exploration of careers through field trips, speakers, internships, job shadowing, and Career Day.

School improvement planning at Palmer High School is focused on the inclusion of a wide variety of stakeholders, as expressed in the school's mission statement and the collection of data regarding student achievement. The two groups involved in planning school improvement are regularly provided with assessment data from the school. Since the school's mission and expectations for learning are widely communicated and often referenced, the level of agreement among the stakeholders about the school's goals is high. While the school annually reviews the mission and expectations and has made changes in the expectations in the past, it currently finds the expectations appropriate for students based on identified targets for improved school performance.

In order to prepare for the panel presentation for the visiting committee, Palmer High School identified three priority areas of improvement. Financial restraints and budget shortfalls exacerbate each area of concern. The most critical challenges facing the school are:

- a. the limited elective choices offered to the student body. A greater variety would further motivate and inspire students.
- b. the accountability of all members of the school community from administrators, to staff, to students. Accountability creates a universal (or shared) responsibility to uphold a professional work environment dedicated to providing a quality education.
- c. the continual decrease in professional development time offered to the faculty and staff to plan curriculum properly. The decrease overwhelms all members of the school community with numerous responsibilities and a lack of time to fully meet those responsibilities.

PALMER HIGH SCHOOL MISSION STATEMENT

Palmer High School is committed to offering students a well-rounded curriculum designed to promote learning as a lifelong process. As an inclusive institution, Palmer High School encourages a focus on purpose, honor, and scholarship as students attempt to discover their abilities and to reach their greatest potentialities through participation in a variety of academic, artistic, co-curricular, athletic, and community activities.

The Palmer High School Community will:

- provide a learning environment which is physically safe and intellectually open
- allocate time and resources for the professional development of faculty and staff
- update the contents, methodologies, and technologies of the curriculum on a regular basis
- foster an appreciation for the arts and humanities
- celebrate the achievements of the school community
- guide its students toward an appropriate post-secondary career or institute
- nurture effective communication between students, faculty and staff members, administrators, parents, and the community
- utilize clearly stated methods to assess student performance
- model the school's academic and social expectations

ACADEMIC EXPECTATIONS

The students of Palmer High School will apply academic skills to:

- acquire, process, and use information effectively and efficiently for a variety of purposes
- communicate ideas in written, oral, and artistic expression
- demonstrate problem-solving skills
- work collaboratively and effectively as a team member in a diverse group

SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

The students of Palmer High School will:

1. demonstrate respect for self, others, and the environment
 - appreciate, with heightened understanding, individual and cultural differences
 - participate through active sharing and cooperation
 - properly use and maintain property and equipment
 - interact respectfully
 - act with integrity and honesty
 - establish a positive identity (self-esteem, sense of purpose, personal power, and positive view of personal future)
 - use non-violent conflict resolution skills
2. strive for social, emotional, and physical health
 - engage in personal fitness programs
 - demonstrate aspects of healthy life styles
 - develop positive relationships

3. articulate realistic and timely goals for personal and academic growth

- accept responsibility for personal decisions and actions
- exercise self-discipline
- show a commitment to learning
- manage time constructively

4. serve the school and community

- establish purposeful community and school partnerships
- engage in community service-learning activities

COMMISSION ON PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS

TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARDS

MISSION AND EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

CURRICULUM

INSTRUCTION

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARD

1

MISSION AND EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

The school's mission statement describes the essence of what the school as a community of learners is seeking to achieve. The expectations for student learning are based on and drawn from the school's mission statement. These expectations are the fundamental goals by which the school continually assesses the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Every component of the school community must focus on enabling all students to achieve the school's expectations for student learning.

1. The mission statement and expectations for student learning shall be developed by the school community and approved and supported by the professional staff, the school board, and any other school-wide governing organization.
2. The school's mission statement shall represent the school community's fundamental values and beliefs about student learning.
3. The school shall define school-wide academic, civic, and social learning expectations that:
 - are measurable;
 - reflect the school's mission.
4. For each academic expectation in the mission, the school shall have a targeted level of successful achievement identified in a rubric.
5. The school shall have indicators by which it assesses the school's progress in achieving school-wide civic and social expectations.
6. The mission statement and the school's expectations for student learning shall guide the procedures, policies, and decisions of the school and shall be evident in the culture of the school.
7. The school shall review regularly the mission statement and expectations for student learning using a variety of data to ensure that they reflect student needs, community expectations, the district mission, and state and national standards.

Conclusions

Palmer High School first developed and implemented its mission statement and expectations for student learning in 1999. In 2003, a committee composed of teachers, students, parents, and a member of the community began to revise this document. Final faculty approval of the mission and expectations for student learning took place during a faculty meeting on January 11, 2005, and the document was approved by the Palmer School Committee on February 15, 2005. A final adjustment to the previously approved mission, a motto “PHS for Success” was approved by the faculty in early 2009 and by the school committee early in March 2009. Administrators and staff members appear to have accepted and currently support the mission and expectations of the school; however, the student body has not yet gained an understanding of the meaning of the mission statement. To a request to define the mission, there were only a few students who could discuss its meaning in any depth. Students are familiar with the school motto but are unable to explain the mission statement itself. Palmer High School is exploring ways to make the mission statement more visible in the school. The principal has begun weekly “Mission Mondays” presentations by reading all or parts of the mission statement to the school during first period. The assistant principal also quotes the social expectations in connection with various social concerns in the school; classroom teachers have posted copies of the mission and expectations in their respective rooms; and murals depicting the school’s motto have been painted on hallway walls. Consistent, serious efforts to fully define, integrate, and assess the effectiveness of the mission statement and expectations for student learning will make the mission an integral part of the culture of the school. (panel presentation, self-study, students)

The Palmer High School Mission Statement represents the school community’s fundamental values and beliefs about learning in some ways but not in others. A majority of faculty and staff has embraced the values and beliefs expressed in the mission statement and in the academic, social, and civic expectations. Teachers speak with pride of “promoting learning as a lifelong process, and promoting honor, purpose, and scholarship.” Students have many varied opportunities to expand their academic knowledge base and to participate in various civic and social activities. However, the fact that the Endicott Survey shows that only 64.3% of the staff reports familiarity with the mission statement suggests that more effort is needed to ensure that veteran teachers, new teachers, and, most importantly, students are “on the same page” with regard to the goals and assessment of student learning. There is also some expressed tension concerning a lack of inclusiveness in the school, specifically surrounding special education, that may cast doubt on the fact that Palmer High School is an “inclusive community.” Consistent, clear application of the ideals stated in the mission statement will dispel confusion about the value of the mission statement itself. (self-study, teachers, Endicott Survey)

Palmer High School has listed and defined school-wide academic and social learning expectations. There are no separate civic expectations currently listed in the mission statement even though some “civic” expectations are found in the list of social expectations. Academic expectations are measured by use of rubrics and reflect the school’s mission statement. Students generally know what they are expected to do and know; what they are going to be tested on; and what rubrics will be used to judge their responses. In each course, students at Palmer High School are assessed on two of the four academic expectations. Assessment information is placed on the second term report cards for each semester course and on the third quarter report card for full-year courses. Students are graded using appropriate rubrics, but targeted levels of achievement are not consistently communicated and applied, lessening the importance of the rubric score to both parents and students. There are no published, identified indicators with targeted levels of achievement given to assess student progress in reaching social and civic expectations. The mission and expectations for student learning committee has begun investigating new ways of assessing learning in both social and civic expectations. They must also develop targeted levels of achievement in both categories. Because staff members, students, and parents have not been provided with clear indicators for the completion and mastery of the expectations, it is difficult to assess whether or not the school is achieving its mission. (classroom observations, self-study, student work)

Each academic expectation in the mission has a corresponding rubric but a targeted level of successful achievement that is widely understood has not been designated. A number of years ago, the

school developed four rubrics to assess success on their four academic expectations, and it was decided that all students would receive two rubric grades in each course they take during the five years at Palmer High School. These rubric grades were to be posted on students' report cards. Palmer High School has completed their rubrics and developed a protocol for reporting grades to inform parents of the rubrics in the courses. In addition, each teacher in Palmer High School must currently assess student progress on the academic expectation to communicate ideas in written, oral, and artistic expression. Teachers may choose and assess one other academic expectation. An administrative decision was made that the assessment of the academic expectation on communication must be based only on the written communication portion of the expectation in order to implement a program of writing across the curriculum and to improve MCAS open-response and long composition scores. Therefore, with the exception of that part of that academic expectation, there is little or no direction as to which courses should assess which expectations. While this policy demonstrates Palmer High School's commitment to writing across the curriculum, the entire concept of the mission and expectations must be consistently practiced and assessed by all teachers and all students to have value.

Some departments do use rubric assessment results along with MCAS results to improve curriculum and instruction. Some teachers have been trained in holistic (blind) scoring techniques so that these departments have been leading the way in establishing consistent scoring protocols where students can be assured that a score in one teacher's writing assignment means the same thing in another teacher's class. With the exceptions of one or two departments, however, this is not being done in any depth across other departments. Examination of student work shows that in some courses, writing assignments are given solely to complete the assessment requirement and are totally disconnected from the purpose of the assessment, yet in other courses, some teachers are demonstrating the connection of good writing to other core subjects. Palmer High School has made significant improvements in their writing program with the implementation of the John Collins Writing Method and the faculty's diligence in requiring writing in every class. The absence of an understood level of successful completion and the inconsistency of grading using the writing rubric threaten to slow down the effective implementation of school-wide rubrics at Palmer High School. (teachers, self-study, student work)

At this time, the school does not track student success in achieving social and civic expectations. Members of the school community are seeking ways to develop these indicators. Palmer High School lists several social and civic standards for student achievement, but it does not attempt to assess all students on each standard each year. Civic and social expectations are measurable by examining discipline reports and statistics, and the school has identified other areas where statistics could be gathered. Administrators, members of the mission committee, and other faculty and staff members have begun to compile a list of events, classes, publications, and clubs and activities where data could be collected and analyzed. At this time, there is no formal plan to analyze this data. Mission committee members express frustration with the difficulty of quantifying some of the more intangible social expectations. The lack of data impedes the school's ability to assess whether its students have reached their "greatest potentialities through participation in a variety of academic, co-curricular, athletic, and community activities." (self-study, teachers, classroom observation)

The Palmer High School Mission and Expectations for Student Learning have not been used consistently to provide guidance in the development of procedures and policies and decisions in the school. While a few examples can be found and verified, especially in the development and reporting of academic expectations and in the popularity of the school's motto, "PHS for Success," the mission statement has not been consistently used to guide policies across the teaching and learning standards in the same way it has been used to guide policies for the support standards. For instance, professional development opportunities in the areas of teaching in an inclusive classroom and use of differentiated instruction are not being provided. The school's self-study indicates that social expectations have helped guide policy changes in areas such as discipline and absenteeism, but there are no real examples to corroborate this. In addition, the school committee and the school council express only a limited knowledge of the importance and function of the mission statement and expectations for student learning. While the school has begun to take steps to give power to the mission and expectations for student learning, a great deal more must be done. Teachers and students must see the connections between the

school's mission and the development of school programs, and school administrators and guiding personnel must publicly voice mission principles in decision-making. (school committee, the school council, teachers, students)

At this time, there is no comprehensive process for the review of the mission statement and expectations of student learning. The school is not using a variety of data to insure that they reflect students' needs, community expectations, the district mission, and state and national standards. Palmer High School's mission and expectations have been reviewed twice since the last NEASC evaluation ten years ago. While the high school faculty took an early step forward by publishing rubric grades to parents on report cards, it has not followed through with the next step by collecting data to judge the success and failures of these expectations and to inform curriculum and instruction revision. Palmer High School has not agreed on a stated formal targeted level of proficiency to determine success and cannot use this data to evaluate the school's or its students' success. Palmer High School must begin to collect and analyze student achievement data. A comprehensive process for review of the mission and expectations must include representatives of all stakeholders and work on an established regular timeline to become more meaningful. (self-study, teachers, administrators)

Commendations

1. The close connection of the school's expectations for student learning with the mission statement
2. The development of rubrics for the academic expectations
3. The placement of rubric grades on report cards to illustrate the use of rubrics as a standard measurement of student achievement.
4. The adoption of a number of strategies to raise awareness of the mission

Recommendations

1. Familiarize the entire community with the school's values and beliefs about student learning in the mission and expectations
2. Distinguish civic expectations as a separate element and identify formal indicators for measuring achievement in meeting social and civic expectations
3. Utilize the mission statement to guide the procedures, policies, and decisions of the school
4. Identify the targeted level of successful achievement in all school-wide rubrics
5. Implement a system to document rubric scores for each student in each course to use that data to improve instruction and guide curriculum development.
6. Provide professional development for all teachers in using the school-wide rubrics for each academic expectation in all subjects
7. Establish a regular review process to examine the mission statement and expectations for student learning using a variety of data to ensure that they reflect student needs, community expectations, the district mission, and state and national standards

TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARD

2

CURRICULUM

The curriculum, which includes coursework, co-curricular activities, and other school-approved educational experiences, is the school's formal plan to fulfill its mission statement and expectations for student learning. The curriculum links the school's beliefs, its expectations for student learning, and its instructional practices. The strength of that link is dependent upon the professional staff's commitment to and involvement in a comprehensive, ongoing review of the curriculum.

1. Each curriculum area shall identify those school-wide academic expectations for which it is responsible.
2. The curriculum shall be aligned with the school-wide academic expectations and shall ensure that all students have sufficient opportunity to practice and achieve each of those expectations.
3. The written curriculum shall:
 - prescribe content;
 - integrate relevant school-wide learning expectations;
 - identify course-specific learning goals;
 - suggest instructional strategies;
 - suggest assessment techniques including the use of school-wide rubrics.
4. The curriculum shall engage all students in inquiry, problem-solving, and higher order thinking as well as provide opportunities for the authentic application of knowledge and skills.
5. The curriculum shall:
 - be appropriately integrated;
 - emphasize depth of understanding over breadth of coverage.
6. The school shall provide opportunities for all students to extend learning beyond the normal course offerings and the school campus.
7. There shall be effective curricular coordination and articulation between and among all academic areas within the school as well as with sending schools in the district.
8. Instructional materials, technology, equipment, supplies, facilities, staffing levels, and the resources of the library/media center shall be sufficient to allow for the implementation of the curriculum.
9. The professional staff shall be actively involved in the ongoing development, evaluation, and revision of the curriculum based on assessments of student performance in achieving the school's academic expectations and course-specific learning goals.
10. The school shall commit sufficient time, financial resources, and personnel to the development, evaluation, and revision of curriculum.
11. Professional development activities shall support the development and implementation of the curriculum.

Conclusions

Each curriculum area has been given the same (writing) school-wide academic expectation for which it is responsible. All courses formally report results on the writing expectation annually to the parents as part of a school-wide emphasis on writing across the curriculum. All courses are required to report the results on any additional expectation selected at the discretion of the teacher. This process has limitations; teachers express frustration that they are unable to report results on the oral and artistic expression expectations that are also part of the communication expectation. Also, with the current system, any one or two of the four expectations might never get reported for a particular student. Curriculum guides do not specify which school-wide academic expectations other than writing are the responsibility of each department to instruct and assess. Thus, curriculum areas do not have responsibility for school-wide expectations since most expectations are not part of any written curriculum. (classroom observation, panel presentation, teacher meetings, student work, teacher interviews)

While the curriculum references the state frameworks, alignment with the school-wide academic expectations is not **specific**. The curriculum contains classroom activities that provide good opportunities to practice and achieve each of the school-wide academic expectations, but it is left up to the implementer of the curriculum document to point out the links between classroom activities and specific academic expectations. The reporting of expectations scores shows a connection between course content and the expectations, but there is no formal documentation of individual student progress toward meeting the expectations over their high school career. Parents do not understand the connection between the rubric grade and the academic expectation. Without clearly delineated curricular references to the four academic expectations, the school cannot ensure that all students, regardless of their teacher or schedule, have sufficient opportunities to practice and achieve each of the four academic expectations. (department leaders, teachers, parents, written curriculum, self-study)

The use of a standard format to produce curriculum documents has allowed the prescription of content, course-specific learning goals, and suggested instructional strategies; the format does not include a variety of assessment techniques. The superintendent provided the standard format along with a model document; he values curriculum and views it as a contract between student and teacher. Most curriculum areas have finished completing these curriculum templates, and the remaining few are ongoing. Following the required format, teachers did not reference course textbooks in the written curriculum. The school-wide rubrics are a separate set of documents and are not linked to the written curriculum for each course. Viewed in the light of a complete curriculum that prescribes content, integrates relevant school-wide learning expectations, identifies current course-specific learning goals, suggests varied instructional strategies, and suggests varied assessment techniques, the current curriculum format is too restrictive to allow teachers to include sufficient information, especially appropriate methods of assessment, to ensure commonality and consistency within a course. (central office, written curriculum, teachers, department leaders)

Student work reflects the many challenges provided for students across the curriculum with an emphasis on inquiry and problem-solving. There are numerous examples of curricula that emphasize higher-order thinking and application of skills and knowledge. Student work provides examples of authentic application of knowledge and skills through class activities and projects such as SATL video production and computer repair and instruction for the local community, robotics design projects, annual English research projects, The Paw Print newspaper, and the yearbook. The program of studies delineates three challenge levels. There are questions about whether the Palmer High School community ensures that inquiry, problem-solving, and higher-order thinking skills are in place for all students, including those in pull-out special education classes. The state frameworks are the foundation for the curriculum in the core academic courses; this ensures that these courses include opportunities to apply knowledge and skills in creative and authentic ways. Graduation requirements for the class of 2010 reflect an increase from three to four credits in social studies, science, and math and a two-credit increase in the total number of credits required. Thus, the faculty has made efforts to ensure that students will leave school with substantial exposure to higher-order thinking and practice in applying skills in an authentic context. (written curriculum, teachers, classroom observations, program of studies, department leaders)

Some academic teachers report that they face pressure to cover content in order to ensure student success on the statewide tests while others feel that they do have the opportunity to cover concepts in depth at the same time. The curriculum emphasizes depth of understanding through opportunities for advanced study in specialized core area electives. The revised graduation requirements and cuts in the elective areas have led to the creation of new elective courses in the academic departments. For instance, the science department offers ornithology, forensics, honors human anatomy and physiology, vertebrates, and genetics. Writing across the curriculum is a major school-wide focus. There are opportunities for interdisciplinary learning; the technology engineering classes integrate physics concepts; World History II uses a thematic approach to structure learning experiences; and students utilize technology throughout the curriculum in student-centered inquiry-based projects. Students are more engaged in their learning and retain more when they have a broad context in their learning activities which results in lifelong learners, a key value stated in the school's mission statement. (teachers, program of studies, self-study, department leaders)

The school provides opportunities for students to extend learning beyond normal course offerings and the school campus. Students are required to complete ten hours of community service; the program of studies lists examples both within and outside the school. The Palmer Affiliated Library System offers students access to over 50 databases of information in a variety of subjects, which students may access from home. Music students participate in an annual trip to New York City during which they see a Broadway show. Students have an opportunity to work and volunteer through activities in the community such as a semi-annual blood bank, work-based internships, and the annual drama production. A diverse set of extracurricular activities caters to a variety of student interests. Palmer High School's community connections and activities provide a range of meaningful, self-directed learning opportunities for a large number of students. (program of studies, self-study, teachers)

There is very little curriculum coordination and articulation between the middle and high school. While curriculum documents are in place for each grade level, there is no connection between grades 7 and 8. Curriculum coordination K-12 stalled with the loss of the district curriculum coordinator a few years ago, and there is no current formal communication between the middle school and high school regarding curriculum. The superintendent, elementary and middle school administrators, and teachers at both schools all spoke of an inability to keep up with K-12 alignment and articulation. Although eighth grade teachers have common planning time, this is not available to other 9-12 faculty members. When there is limited articulation of the curriculum, it prevents the district from ensuring that students are properly challenged and meeting the expectations for student learning. (self-study, teachers, administrators, central office)

Teachers have adequate materials, technology, equipment, and supplies to implement the curriculum. The library/media center is a source of pride in the school and is a well-utilized resource. In general, teachers express satisfaction with the materials and equipment that they are provided to deliver the curriculum although there are some instances where limited funding has put a strain on full delivery of programs. The computer labs have up-to-date equipment, but teachers and students are concerned about the limited access to these labs to implement the curriculum as a result of their heavy use. Teachers also describe a need for more in-focus projectors in classrooms. The foreign language department was limited to one class set when it updated its Spanish textbooks, denying the use of the textbook for homework. The science department delayed textbook replacements in order to purchase laptops for the department. Teaching loads are reasonable both in terms of class size and number of preparations. There is an inequity in the number of teaching periods assigned to physical education, technology education, health, and art teachers. Teachers are concerned about the influx of inclusion students, stretching the school's two inclusion teachers. The science teachers who teach in the rooms next to the greenhouse are impaired in their ability to implement their curriculum during the fall and spring when the temperature and humidity climb to uncomfortable levels. They have the option of relocating to another part of the building, but it is impractical to bring all of the required instructional equipment with them. The librarian can only instruct classes when a clerk is available to handle routine tasks. The current resources of Palmer High School do adequately allow the students to experience the diverse curriculum. (self-study, teachers,

student shadowing, department leaders)

The professional staff has recently been involved in the ongoing development, evaluation, and revision of the curriculum; however, assessment of student work using the school rubrics is not used as a basis for curriculum renewal. Teachers are actively involved in the process of curriculum development, evaluation, and revision, but they are being asked to do so during the regular school day, interfering with classroom instruction. The curriculum renewal timeline outlines the four-year cycle for curriculum renewal and management. Two designated areas are selected each year to go through the renewal process, but because the superintendent has only recently established this cycle, not all curriculum areas have undergone review. Revision of the curriculum is based on MCAS data -- for instance, the implementation of writing across the curriculum -- but not on assessments of the students' performance in achieving the school's academic expectations. Because data relating to rubric grades is not used to inform change, there is a danger that the curriculum loses its connection with the school's mission and academic expectations. (self-study, teachers, department leaders, building leaders)

The school rarely commits time outside of the school day, financial resources, or personnel to the development, evaluation, and revision of curriculum. The school annually surveys the faculty regarding professional development needs, and as a result, decided to schedule a workshop on motivating the unmotivated student for September 25th, 2009. The teachers' contract allows the administration to schedule up to two professional development days each year for which teachers must receive additional remuneration. This year, one day was funded while the second was cancelled. The school committee eliminated early release days for professional development several years ago. As a result, professional development time is limited to monthly faculty and department meetings, in-school release time, and the teacher's own time. The opportunity for collaboration is sporadic and haphazard. With teachers working in isolation at inconsistent times, the curriculum development process has slowed and fragmented. (teachers, department leaders, self-study, central office, building leaders)

Professional development activities that specifically relate to and support curriculum development are needed for the improvement of learning. While some of the staff development activities provided by the district have proved helpful in areas of instruction, the faculty has received limited training in curriculum design. Palmer teachers would like more time for staff development offerings that relate to specific subject areas and instructional techniques that are relevant to secondary students. There was some evidence that recent budget constraints have prevented faculty members' attendance at workshops or conferences outside the district that would provide the opportunity for the teachers and administrators to compensate for what they see as shortfalls in the district's professional development program. Lack of professional development time and limited training in curriculum design has slowed the development and implementation of curriculum. (self-study, teachers, department leaders)

Commendations

1. The emphasis on the academic expectation related to writing across the curriculum
2. The standard curriculum format that has been implemented which identifies benchmarks, instructional strategies, and resources
3. Curricula in most disciplines that engage students in higher order thinking and authentic application of knowledge
4. New elective offerings that promote appropriately integrated curriculum and depth of understanding
5. Opportunities outside the school day through which students can extend their learning
6. The provision of appropriate technology, equipment, and supplies to support the implementation of the current curriculum

Recommendations

1. Ensure that each department has identified all of the school-wide expectations for which they have assumed responsibility and ensure that the various departments understand that assuming the responsibility for the expectations includes assessing progress in them through the use of school-wide rubrics.
2. Align all curriculum documents with the specific academic expectations for learning that have been assigned to each curricular area to ensure that all students have sufficient opportunity to practice and achieve each of those expectations.
3. Modify the standard curriculum format to allow the inclusion of assessment strategies and the integration of relevant school-wide learning expectations
4. Develop a plan to ensure that curriculum across all areas is integrated and emphasizes depth of understanding over breadth of coverage
5. Ensure that the curriculum for all courses, including pull-out special education classes, promotes higher order thinking
6. Develop and implement a plan to promote effective curricular coordination between the middle and high school in all disciplines
7. Use the results from the school-wide rubrics and other assessment data to evaluate and revise curriculum
8. Commit resources to the development, evaluation, and revision of curriculum so that teachers can collaborate with colleagues without sacrificing classroom instruction time
9. Provide professional development training in curriculum design, assessment techniques, and use of achievement data to improve instruction

3 INSTRUCTION

The quality of instruction in a school is the single most important factor affecting the quality of student learning, the achievement of expectations for student learning, the delivery of the curriculum, and the assessment of student progress. Instructional practices must be grounded in the school's mission and expectations for student learning, supported by research in best practice, and refined and improved based on identified student needs. Teachers are expected to be reflective about their instructional strategies and to collaborate with their colleagues about instruction and student learning.

1. Instructional strategies shall be consistent with the school's mission statement and expectations for student learning.

2. Instructional strategies shall:

- personalize instruction;
- make connections across disciplines;
- engage students as active learners;
- engage students as self-directed learners;
- involve all students in higher order thinking to promote depth of understanding;
- provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge or skills;
- promote student self-assessment and self-reflection.

3. Teachers shall use feedback from a variety of sources including other teachers, students, supervisors, and parents as a means of improving instruction.

4. Teachers shall be expert in their content area, knowledgeable about current research on effective instructional approaches, and reflective about their own practices.

5. Discussion of instructional strategies shall be a significant part of the professional culture of the school.

6. Technology shall be integrated into and supportive of teaching and learning.

7. The school's professional development program shall be guided by identified instructional needs and shall provide opportunities for teachers to develop and improve their instructional strategies.

8. Teacher supervision and evaluation processes shall be used to improve instruction for the purposes of enhancing student learning and meeting student needs.

Conclusions

Some Palmer High School teachers use instructional strategies that support the school's mission statement and expectations for student learning. Student self-reflection is an integral part of many assignments, guiding students to understand and appreciate the benefits of learning as an ongoing, lifelong process. The use of school-wide rubrics in some classes imparts a sense of community and common purpose to the work that students are called upon to produce. Through the open-ended nature of assignments given in many courses, students are offered the opportunity to discover their abilities and reach their greatest potential. In many of the classrooms observed, students were active and engaged learners. Personalized instruction demonstrated mutual respect between student and teacher. The consistent use of a wide variety of instructional strategies supports the school's mission statement; students are therefore more likely to fulfill the school's academic expectations. (program of studies, self-study, observation, students)

Many teachers personalize instruction, make connections across disciplines, engage students as active and self-reflective learners, involve students in higher order thinking skills to promote depth of understanding, and provide opportunities to apply knowledge of skills, to self-assess and to self-reflect. Some teachers personalize instruction by making assignment criteria more prescriptive for students who need it or by providing extensive modeling of open-ended assignments so that students are clear on expectations. Teachers often give one-on-one assistance in the class and post times when they are available for additional help outside of class. In a chorus class, students sang solos, group parts, and/or with the entire chorus. Self- and peer-edit or critique activities integrated into assignments engage students as reflective learners and provide students an opportunity to apply knowledge of skills. Interdisciplinary projects such as history presentations of The Great Gatsby-era prior to reading the novel, archeology analysis in English mythology, and African-American music in chorus from the Civil War era all engaged students as active and self-directed learners since choices of presentation needed to be made. The assignments in which students created their own rubrics, developed a roller coaster theme park, role-played as a historical decision-maker based on primary sources, analyzed artifacts, designed the boys' locker room, or developed the half-time program for a football game, all engaged students in higher order thinking skills and provided opportunities for students to apply their knowledge and skills. These are only a few of numerous examples of effective instructional activities observed. There were some classrooms in which students were allowed to disengage or held to low standards, but most teachers integrate effective instructional strategies, creating classroom environments that have a positive impact on the quality of student learning. (observations, teachers, student work, self-study)

Some teachers maximize opportunities for feedback and readily improve instruction by implementing new instructional strategies. Teachers often solicit informal feedback from students or observe student responses and adjust instruction as necessary. Some teachers use more formal student feedback such as class evaluations or students' self-grading and then consulting with teachers. Teachers' communication with parents provides feedback as well and, at times, has resulted in changed instructional strategies. Department chairs observe non-professional status teachers annually which also results in feedback. Teachers have many other obligations during department meetings so the use of the time there for discussing instructional strategies is limited. Some teachers who actively seek and utilize feedback improve their instructional strategies, but limited time for collaboration impedes the likelihood of this practice becoming universal. (classroom observation, teachers, shadowing of students)

Personal passion and professionalism motivate faculty members to be expert in their content areas, knowledgeable about current research on effective instructional approaches, and reflective about their own practices. Teachers regularly read, attend some workshops, and collaborate informally. Monthly departmental meetings and daily eighth grade common planning time, although used for other obligations as well, are also used on occasion for discussion and reflection. The faculty has started to reinstate the individual professional development plans. The district has not provided any professional development related to current research on effective instructional strategies even though requests have been made through the annual survey on professional development needs. In particular, teachers have not been trained in current research on differentiated instruction except through voluntary after-school opportunities. Teachers need scheduled professional collaborative time to stay current on effective

instructional approaches to make instruction and inclusion efforts as effective as they can be. (teachers, classroom observations, self-study)

The Palmer High School faculty occasionally discusses instructional strategies at monthly department and faculty meetings and during eighth grade team meetings, and teachers report that they discuss different teaching strategies with colleagues informally. Inclusion and resource room teachers confer with the regular classroom teachers regarding their students' instructional needs in English, reading, and mathematics. However, the faculty reports that formal opportunities for collaboration with other teachers are limited by budgetary deficiencies. Teachers need open, frequent, and meaningful discussion of the means by which instruction is delivered to support a professional culture that supports the mission. (teachers, self-study, department heads)

Teachers have made a notable effort to use technology to support instruction and improve students' learning. The Manhattan course management program (for eighth grade), MassOne, and GradeQuick are available to assist teachers in managing the day-to-day details of classroom activity. Seventy-seven percent of faculty members reports integrating technology to support instructional practice while 55% acknowledges assigning work requiring students to use technology to apply and/or increase knowledge and to foster or broaden students' computer literacy. PowerPoint presentations, the use of computer-based laboratory probeware to gather data generated during science laboratory exercises, LCD projectors, WebQuests, and the creation of video presentations and brochures are among the many examples of technology-based work evident throughout the school. Because technology is an integral part of teaching and learning at Palmer High School, students are able to build important skills for lifelong learning. (self-study, teachers, shadow, student work)

Palmer High School's professional development program has not provided opportunity for teachers to develop and improve their instructional strategies because of lack of funding. The cumbersome process for teachers to be reimbursed has compromised the contract agreement for teachers to have \$300 per year to spend on professional development. Teachers frequently pay for their own attendance to conferences, and the school pays for the substitute. Teachers attend free professional development offerings from the state, or, of late, they volunteer to provide professional development for their peers. In the recent past, the administration has offered some professional development opportunities such as training for the implementation of specific curriculum programs (i.e., John Collins). The administration's annual survey given to identify professional development needs has resulted in plans for programs that have been later cancelled because of budget constraints or programs that, according to 70.4% of teachers in the Endicott Survey, don't meet their professional needs. Based on the last professional development survey, a program has been scheduled for the fall 2009 on the topic of motivating the unmotivated student. Teachers need committed professional development to develop and improve their instructional strategies so that all students learn more effectively. (self-study, teachers, school leaders)

The teacher supervision and evaluation process provides opportunities to improve instruction by enhancing student learning and meeting student needs, but it is not consistently practiced. As mentioned in the self-study, Educational Testing Services' Pathwise checklist provides the structure for administrators to discuss improved instruction, yet some teachers stated that they are not familiar with the protocol. Administrators comment that the evaluation tool is effective but very time-consuming. Teachers do believe that they benefit from department chair observations and conversations, but department supervisors no longer have evaluative authority. Therefore, the building principal and assistant principal are responsible for the formal evaluation of the entire professional staff. Because the current evaluation system is overly bureaucratic, teachers do not always receive timely and focused feedback to improve instruction in their classrooms. (school leadership, teachers, self-study)

Commendations

1. Use of instructional strategies that are consistent with the school's mission and expectations

2. The efforts of teachers to personalize instruction and engage students as active learners
3. The responsiveness of most Palmer High School teachers in using feedback from students, parents, and supervisors as a means of improving instruction
4. The dedication of many faculty members in pursuing their own professional development related to their content and instruction
5. The integration of technology in the instructional choices of Palmer High School teachers

Recommendations

1. Create collaborative opportunities in which teachers formally share effective instructional strategies
2. Provide professional development on best practices related to inclusion of special needs students in general education classes
3. Develop and implement a professional development program that emphasizes current research on effective instructional approaches, with an emphasis on differentiated instruction
4. Commit resources to ongoing professional development that is guided by the instructional needs identified through assessment of student work
5. Reexamine the evaluation process to address concerns that it is overly bureaucratic

4

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT LEARNING

Assessment is an integral part of the teaching and learning process. Its purpose is to inform students regarding their learning progress and teachers regarding ways to adjust the curriculum and instruction to respond effectively to the learning needs of students. Further, it communicates to the school community the progress of students in achieving the school's expectations for student learning and course-specific learning goals. Assessment results must be continually discussed to improve curriculum and instruction.

1. The school shall have a process to assess school-wide and individual student progress in achieving the academic expectations in the mission based on school-wide rubrics.
2. The school's professional staff shall use data to assess the success of the school in achieving its civic and social expectations.
3. For each learning activity, teachers shall clarify to students the relevant school-wide academic expectations and course-specific learning goals that will be assessed.
4. Teachers shall base classroom assessment of student learning on school-wide and course-specific rubrics.
5. Teachers shall use varied assessment strategies to determine student knowledge, skills, and competencies and to assess student growth over time.
6. Teachers shall meet collaboratively to discuss and share student work and the results of student assessments for the purposes of revising the curriculum and improving instructional strategies.
7. The school's professional development program shall provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate in developing a broad range of student assessment strategies.
8. The school's professional staff shall communicate:
 - individual student progress in achieving school-wide academic expectations to students and their families;
 - the school's progress achieving all school-wide expectations to the school community.

Conclusions

Palmer High School has a process to assess school-wide and individual student progress in achieving the academic expectations in the mission based on school-wide rubrics, but these rubrics are not widely used except one, “Communicate ideas in written expression.” The process must be implemented, and agreed upon levels of achievement must be determined, accompanied by exemplars that can be applied to all subjects. In 2004, there was a school-wide effort to institute rubrics to assess the academic expectations in the mission statement. Staff, students, and families are aware of the use of school-wide rubrics in evaluating student work (with each teacher reporting on “written communication” and one other indicator). However, students across all grades, some faculty members, and many parents question the importance of a “rubric” grade since it is not tied to graduation expectations. Teachers want to use appropriate rubrics and assess work meaningfully. For example, art teachers are unable to use the second rubric standard for evaluating artistic expression because of the mandate to report on writing. Although Palmer High School students engage in problem-solving every day, the only school-wide rubric to assess this is for math computation. Some faculty members expressed the need to revise the rubrics and reexamine the use of the school-wide rubrics in order to make the academic expectations more meaningful. Since students, teachers, and parents do not clearly understand the role of the rubric grade, the school must reevaluate its system in order to tie mission-based expectations to classroom performance. (teachers, students, parents, self-study, classroom observations)

The administration and supporting professional staff do not collect data to determine student success in meeting the school’s stated civic and social expectations. Currently, students are active in extracurricular programs that have ties to these expectations, but there is no data collection and analysis regarding these programs’ effectiveness. The school has not identified measurable indicators of successful accomplishment of its school-wide civic and social expectations beyond community service. There is a graduation requirement for ten hours of community service that does align with social/civic expectations. While the community profile references a variety of indicator data (i.e. dropout rates, disciplinary actions, etc.) the school’s professional staff is not yet tracking these indicators in connection with the civic and social expectations. Palmer High School must begin data collection and analysis in order to assess its various efforts to move the student body toward meeting the school-wide social and civic expectations. (self-study, teachers, central office)

Teachers at Palmer High School inform students of the relevant school-wide academic expectations and course-specific learning goals that will be assessed. Use of rubrics and clear direction accompany the great majority of assessments observed. Students consistently indicate that they are aware of the goals and expectations for specific lessons. Some students were able explain how the use of rubrics helped them to achieve a higher level of understanding in the analysis of their work. In addition, teachers make an effort to inform students of the relevant school-wide academic expectations and course-specific goals. In providing clear expectations, teachers facilitate an environment that allows students to have focus and purpose in their efforts. (classroom observations, self-study, student shadowing, student work, teacher and student interviews, meeting with teacher and students, parents)

Teachers at Palmer High School consistently base classroom assessment of student learning on course-specific rubrics, and they meet the school requirement of using school-wide rubrics at least twice per year; however, the current process of using and reporting on school-wide rubrics limits the meaningfulness of some assessments. Student work shows that there is a greater comfort level among teachers in using their own rubrics, often tailored from the school-wide rubrics, than they do using the intact school-wide rubrics. In the Endicott Survey, 68% of teachers polled agree with the statement: “I evaluate student learning based on school-wide learning goals.” Moreover, 96% agree with the statement: “I evaluate learning regarding clear, course-specific learning goals.” A number of faculty members expressed frustration about the consistency of grading using the school-wide rubric. This frustration was echoed in several different meetings. For example, world language teachers found it difficult for their students to achieve proficient scores, while English teachers felt the rubric was not rigorous enough so that they subsequently included the MCAS rubric for their personal use on writing assessments. The student work submitted for review revealed some of these difficulties while observations of classroom

assignments shows use of course-specific, focused and directed rubrics for the task at hand. Palmer High School teachers are consistently using individually designed and some departmental rubrics to guide their assessment of student work, but the inconsistent use of school-wide rubrics prevents the faculty from shared conversations about the student performance on the academic expectations. (self-study, classroom observations, Endicott Survey, teachers, students, parents)

Palmer High School teachers use varied assessment strategies to determine student knowledge, skills, and competencies, but they are less proficient in assessing student growth over time. Examples of assessment tools include traditional tests, quizzes and essays, labs, technology-based skill development, PowerPoint presentations, group posters, portfolios, research projects, and oral presentations. Review of submitted student work reveals that a majority of papers has little written feedback from teachers, even though students and teachers report that written feedback on student work is common practice at Palmer High School. Beyond MCAS reflective practice and English department writing portfolios, there is little documentation of assessment of student growth over time despite the fact that rubric grades have been a part of report cards for several years. Although Palmer teachers consistently use varied assessment practices, the school must devise effective systems to measure student growth over time. (teacher observation, teacher interview, self-study, student shadowing, students)

Although teachers in several departments have made efforts to meet informally to discuss and share student work, more formalized collaboration is necessary to assess departmental needs for revision of curriculum and improvement of instructional strategies. Teachers are collaborating to score student work and discuss student needs in the English department and the 8th grade teams, and those practices are in the planning stages for other departments. Most teachers identified only informal collaborative practices related to assessment of student work. While 79% polled in the Endicott Survey said they meet with colleagues to discuss and share student work in order to improve their classes, these meetings are inconsistent. Teachers need consistent collaborative time in and among departments to discuss student work to make curriculum revisions and modify instruction based on student performance. Adoption of a system of dedicated collaborative time along with a recognized protocol for examination of student work and assessment results would improve teaching and learning in the school. (self-study, teachers, Endicott Survey)

The school's professional development program needs to be expanded to provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate in developing a broad range of student assessment strategies. Review of the past three years of district offered professional development activities shows the offerings to be inadequate in providing teachers with the training needed for effective assessment. The teachers' contract mandates up to two professional development days each year for which teachers must receive additional remuneration. This year, one day was funded while the second was cancelled. The school committee eliminated early release days for professional development several years ago. As a result, professional development time is limited to monthly faculty and department meetings, in-school release time, and the teacher's own time. The opportunity for collaboration is sporadic and haphazard. Teachers have not been part of a systematic effort to provide school-wide or department-wide approaches to gathering and examining student performance data garnered by a broad range of assessment strategies. Thus, while some teachers have independently developed successful assessment strategies, the absence of a predictable professional development plan that answers teachers' needs has hindered all aspects of teaching and learning expectations for student learning. (central office documents, self-study, teachers)

Palmer High School's professional staff communicates student progress in achieving school-wide academic expectations to students and their families but needs to do so in a more consistent, effective manner. The school also needs to develop a more effective and thorough process of reporting to the community the school's progress in achieving all school-wide expectations. At the beginning of each course, teachers distribute course syllabi that include grading policies and class expectations and procedures. Teachers provide this information to parents at open house events. The primary methods for reporting student progress are report cards, including rubric grades once per year, and a recently instituted midterm progress report. Across all constituents in the school, however, the meaning of the "rubric grade" on the report card was questioned. When the process of reporting rubric grades was instituted four

years ago, the school community believed that it would be an effective way to report individual student progress on the academic expectations. As the process was implemented, poor communication about the purpose of the rubric grade and the inconsistent application of assessments used to determine that score produced a system that students, parents, and even most teachers regard as artificial. With respect to more traditional reporting of grades, parents interviewed are supportive of school efforts to communicate progress and the willingness of teachers to respond promptly to e-mail inquiries. There is both parent and faculty criticism of the limited information provided by the progress reports, but the constituents praise the recently instituted practice of reporting for all students regardless of levels of achievement. Parents feel that more information other than “pass”, “in danger of failing”, and “failing” should be provided by the school. Palmer High School does not have a way to calibrate data to measure student success in meeting the school’s stated civic and social expectations. Therefore, the school is unable to collect and report on all school-wide expectations to the community. Without proper communication of the progress in achieving these school-wide expectations, it is difficult to assess whether or not they are being met. (self-study, parents, students, faculty members)

Commendations

1. The development and use of school-wide rubrics
2. Consistent practice among teachers in explaining the relevant school-wide academic expectations and course-specific learning goals
3. The widespread expectation that classroom assessment of student learning will be based on rubrics, both course-specific and school-wide
4. The use of varied assessment strategies to determine student knowledge, skills, and competencies
5. The attempt to report student performance on the academic expectations through the report card
6. The recent efforts to communicate more regularly and consistently with parents about student performance

Recommendations

1. Ensure consistency in the use of school-wide rubric
2. Collect and assess school-wide social and civic expectation progress
3. Implement a plan to use the rubric reporting data to assess student growth over time
4. Create formal opportunities for collaboration that will allow teachers to consistently assess departmental needs for revision of curriculum and improvement of instructional strategies based on assessment data
5. Provide a professional development program for teachers to collaborate in developing a broad range of student assessment strategies
6. Develop and implement a more effective and thorough process of reporting to the school community the school’s progress in achieving all school-wide expectations

SUPPORT STANDARDS

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

SCHOOL RESOURCES FOR LEARNING

COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR LEARNING

SUPPORT STANDARD

5

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATION

The way in which a school organizes learning for students, fosters leadership, and engages its members has a profound effect on teaching and learning. The professional culture of the school must be characterized by thoughtful, reflective, and constructive discourse about decision-making and practices which supports student learning and well-being.

1. The school board and superintendent shall ensure that the principal has sufficient autonomy and decision-making authority to lead the school in achieving the mission and expectations for student learning.
2. The principal shall provide leadership in the school community by creating and maintaining a shared vision, direction, and focus for student learning.
3. Teachers as well as administrators other than the principal shall provide leadership essential to the improvement of the school.
4. The organization of the school and its educational programs shall promote the school's mission and expectations for student learning.
5. Student grouping patterns shall reflect the diversity of the student body, foster heterogeneity, reflect current research and best practices, and support the achievement of the school's mission and expectations for student learning.
6. The schedule shall be driven by the school's mission and expectations for student learning and shall support the effective implementation of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
7. Meaningful roles in the decision-making process shall be accorded to students, parents, and all members of the school staff to promote an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership.
8. Each teacher shall have a student load that enables the teacher to meet the learning needs of individual students.
9. There shall be a formal, ongoing program through which each student has an adult member of the school community in addition to the school guidance counselor who personalizes each student's educational experience, knows the student well, and assists the student in achieving the school-wide expectations for student learning.
10. The professional staff shall collaborate within and across departments in support of learning for all students.
11. All school staff shall be involved in promoting the well-being and learning of students.
12. Student success shall be regularly acknowledged, celebrated, and displayed.
13. The climate of the school shall be safe, positive, respectful, and supportive, resulting in a sense of pride and ownership.
14. The school board shall support the implementation of the school's mission and expectations for student learning.

Conclusions

The principal of Palmer High School has sufficient autonomy and decision-making authority to lead the school in achieving its mission. The principal prepares budget recommendations, prepares the school's improvement plan, and, along with the assistant principal, is responsible for teacher evaluations. In policy as well as in action, the school committee and superintendent look to the principal for decisions regarding policy and procedure at the high school. The superintendent and the school committee commonly support the principal's proposals except in situations where budgetary constraints prevent them from doing so. Palmer High School's staff acknowledges the principal's autonomy. The principal's autonomy provides the school with the freedom of action necessary to lead the school toward achieving the school's mission and expectations for student learning. (self-study, Endicott Survey, teachers, school leadership committee meeting, school leadership team)

The principal of Palmer High School has successfully maintained the progress the school has made towards a shared vision, common direction, and focus for student learning. The Palmer High School staff has worked for several years to develop a shared vision that is an emerging part of the Palmer culture. The principal and assistant principal have instituted programs such as "Mission Mondays" and the school's motto "PHS purpose, honor, and scholarship... PHS for success" in order to create pupil familiarity with the school's mission. The principal's visibility at school events is evidence of her dedication to bringing the school's mission into the lives of her students. The principal uses monthly academic council meetings to keep abreast of issues and concerns related to the daily implementation of the school's vision, although reductions in staff have meant that some disciplines have lost representation on this council. The community and the school see the principal as an effective educational leader. The principal's leadership maintains a shared vision and common direction although the school needs sustained commitment to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. (school leadership committee meeting, Endicott Survey, parents, students)

Teachers have adequate opportunities to provide leadership essential to the improvement of the school through participation in the school's handbook committee, attendance policy committee, crisis team, discipline committee, professional development committee, and the school council. Department leaders play an active role on the academic council. The assistant principal is viewed by the faculty as a key participant in the leadership of the high school. The participation of many individuals in the leadership of Palmer High School maintains a sense of ownership and pride. (Endicott Survey, staff members, leadership committee meeting, self-study)

The organization of Palmer High School and its educational programs generally promote the school's mission and expectations. The team structure present in the eighth grade effectively meets the needs of students as they transition to the high school. Academic departments provide content leadership and instructional support. The lack of department chairs in guidance and special education prevents these departments from realizing the best level of student support. According to the mission, Palmer High School encourages its students to reach their greatest potential. While the guidance and special education departments strive for this goal, they have not developed a clear vision that guides their decision-making process. Despite a recent reduction of offerings, the program of studies satisfactorily supports student progress towards the school's mission and expectations. To realize the full potential of all students, however, Palmer High School needs to refine its vision of inclusiveness. The lack of leadership and structure in special education and guidance limits the implementation of the school's mission and expectations and service to students. (self-study, classroom observation, parents, teachers, school leadership team meeting)

For some students, the grouping patterns at Palmer High School do not support the achievement of the school's mission and expectations. Grouping patterns do not always foster heterogeneity or reflect current research and best practices. Honors level classes tend to have fewer students than standard level classes, and there is not a shared vision about inclusion practices at Palmer High School. Parents express concerns about the differences in expectations and rigor between various levels of classes. As a result, some students may not reach their greatest potential in a variety of academic activities and may, in fact,

be subject to inequity of opportunity. (self-study, guidance meeting, parents, enrollment/class size data)

The school's mission has driven the creation of a rotating schedule to create more opportunities for students and to allow students to pursue co-curricular activities. A schedule with an afternoon rotation was created to allow students to participate in off-site programs. Both teachers and students express satisfaction with the variety provided by the rotating schedule. This schedule allows students to participate in school-to-career partnerships and dual enrollment opportunities. Palmer High School's schedule provides the structure to allow students to explore varied career opportunities, but few students are utilizing this opportunity. (self-study, principal, panel presentation, students, teacher, leadership committee meeting)

Students, parents, and members of the school staff are afforded meaningful roles in the decision-making process. The school committee maintains a student advisory committee. The school improvement plan includes a requirement for parent involvement in the decision-making process. Parents and students serve on the school council. When the school committee considered moving eighth grade from the high school to the middle school, a relocation committee that included parents, students, bus drivers, nurses, and cafeteria staff was formed. A wide variety of committees and the receptiveness of the principal have strengthened an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership at Palmer High School. (self-study, students, parents, school leadership committee meeting)

Each teacher at Palmer High School has a student load that enables the teacher to meet the learning needs of individual students. The current student/teacher ratio is 1:13. The average class size is approximately 22 students. The collective bargaining agreement between the Palmer Teacher's Association and the Palmer School Committee contains specific language with regard to class size and teacher load. As delineated in the contract, some teachers teach six classes. Even though class size has increased over the past few years, the manageable class sizes at Palmer High School allow teachers to personalize instruction. (self-study, enrollment/class size data, teacher meetings, student shadowing, teacher interviews)

There is no ongoing or formal program through which each student has an adult member of the school community in addition to the school guidance counselor who personalizes their instruction. Guidance counselors assist students with the selection of courses. Students are assigned to specific homerooms for grades nine through twelve. Homeroom periods generally take place once per month and have an administrative focus such as distributing progress reports. There is not a clear personalization of the education experience for many students at Palmer High School. The absence of a formal program for personalizing education experiences limits the school's ability to realize its mission and expectations for all students. (self-study, guidance department, school leadership team, teachers, students, Endicott Survey)

Professional staff members collaborate informally within departments; however, interdepartmental collaboration is very limited. Collaboration across departments takes place most readily at the eighth grade level where team teachers are given a team planning period. Monthly department meetings are used informally for collaboration on curriculum. Because there is little structured time for formal collaboration, opportunities to support the learning of all students through effective communication amongst faculty members are not fully realized. (self-study, teachers, leadership committee, department leader, teacher interviews)

All of Palmer High School's staff members are involved in promoting the well-being and learning of students. Palmer High School's teachers make substantial individual efforts to connect with and support students. The guidance staff and the National Honor Society advisor have organized informal peer tutorials for struggling students. Staff members in the main office and in maintenance allow students to serve detentions by assisting staff members with projects at the school. The nursing staff contacts students with excessive absences and provides support to students allowing them to return to their classes as soon as possible. The school's resource officer visits classrooms to make presentations. The efforts of non-teaching staff members at Palmer High School contribute significantly to enhancing students' sense

of pride, ownership, and acceptance. (self-study, support staff, students)

Palmer High School regularly celebrates and acknowledges student success. The school prominently displays awards for academic, athletic, and artistic achievement in its lobby. Students of the week and month are displayed on the school's entrance sign, and the local newspaper acknowledges these students. Student artwork and music is published and celebrated with the community at the school's annual "Arts are Academic" event. Palmer High School also maintains a prominently displayed honor roll. Students are publicly recognized through the school's Seeds of Selflessness Award and PHS Senior Awards Night. Palmer High School's extensive celebrations of student success provide students with a sense of recognition, belonging, and pride in their school and themselves. (self-study, panel presentation, students, local newspaper)

The majority of students, parents, and staff members feel that the climate of Palmer High School is safe, positive, respectful, and supportive. The majority of students at the high school feel that their teachers respect and care about them. The school has engaged in the Anti-Defamation League's peer trainer program, partnering trained peers with eighth grade students to celebrate diversity and develop tolerance. The school uses a senior exit survey to monitor student perceptions of school climate. The results of this survey inform the school's policy decisions. The school's discipline and attendance policies are consistent with the school's mission. The students of Palmer High School express great respect and appreciation for the hard work and support of their teachers. Palmer High School's positive and supportive environment contributes significantly to each student's sense of pride as well as the achievement of the school's mission and expectations for student learning. (self-study, students, teachers, student shadowing, panel presentation, Endicott Survey)

The school committee generally supports the implementation of the school's mission and expectations for student learning. The policies enacted by the school board are consistent with the school's mission and expectations for student learning. However, level funding of Palmer High School in recent years has impacted course offerings. While the school committee's budget proposals have been supportive of the high school's mission and expectations, the town council has reduced that budget. Although difficult economic decisions have been made in recent years, the school committee's consistent support has allowed Palmer High School to pursue its mission and expectations for student learning. (self-study, school committee, teachers, students)

Commendations

1. The principal's overall autonomy to make decisions
2. The active role of teachers and the assistant principal in leadership and school improvement
3. Multiple opportunities for students to participate in off-site programs
4. Meaningful roles afforded to parents, students, and staff members in the decision-making process
5. The principal's and assistant principal's visibility in the community
6. The strong involvement of non-instructional staff in promoting the well-being and learning of students
7. The frequent celebration and public acknowledgement of student success
8. The safe, respectful, and supportive environment of the school
9. The positive and supportive connections that exist between teachers and students

10. The design of a schedule that supports the curriculum by allowing some students to participate in off-site programs

Recommendations

1. Establish a shared academic vision and common expectations surrounding curriculum, instruction, and assessment
2. Provide leadership in guidance and special education
3. Examine and correct any disparities in expectations, rigor, and opportunities for students in various levels of classes, including special education students
4. Increase the visibility and awareness of off-site programs
5. Develop a formal program through which each student has an adult member of the school community, in addition to the school guidance counselor, who personalizes educational experiences
6. Develop and implement formal opportunities for departmental and interdepartmental collaboration

SUPPORT STANDARD

6

SCHOOL RESOURCES FOR LEARNING

Student learning and well-being are dependent upon adequate and appropriate support programs and services. The school is responsible for providing an effective range of integrated resources to enhance and improve student learning and well-being and to support the school's mission and expectations.

All Student Support Services

1. The school's student support services shall be consistent with the school's mission and expectations for student learning.
2. The school shall allocate resources, programs, and services so that all students have an equal opportunity to achieve the school's expectations for student learning.
3. Student support personnel shall enhance student learning by interacting and working cooperatively with professional and other staff and by utilizing community resources to address the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of students.
4. All student support services shall be regularly evaluated and revised to support improved student learning.
5. There shall be a system for effective and ongoing communication with students, parents/guardians, and school personnel, designed to keep them informed about the types of available student support services and identified student needs.
6. Student records, including health and immunization records, shall be maintained in a confidential and secure manner consistent with federal and state law.

7. There shall be sufficient certified/licensed personnel and support staff to provide effective counseling, health, special education, and library media services.

Guidance Services

8. The school shall provide a full range of comprehensive guidance services, including:
 - individual and group meetings with counseling personnel;
 - personal, career, and college counseling;
 - student course selection assistance;
 - collaborative outreach to community and area mental health agencies and social service providers;
 - appropriate support in the delivery of special education services for students.

Health Services

9. The school's health services shall provide:
 - preventive health services and direct intervention services;
 - appropriate referrals;
 - mandated services;
 - emergency response mechanisms;
 - ongoing student health assessments.

SUPPORT STANDARD

6

SCHOOL RESOURCES FOR LEARNING

Library Information Services

10. The library/information services program and materials shall be fully integrated into the school's curriculum and instructional program.
11. Library/information services personnel shall be knowledgeable about the curriculum and support its implementation.
12. A wide range of materials, technologies, and other library/information services that are responsive to the school's student population shall be available to students and faculty and utilized to improve teaching and learning.
13. Students, faculty, and support staff shall have regular and frequent access to library/information services, facilities, and programs as an integral part of their educational experience before, during, and after the school day.
14. The library/information services program shall foster independent inquiry by enabling students and faculty to use various school and community information resources and technologies.
15. Policies shall be in place for the selection and removal of information resources and the use of technologies and the Internet.

Special Education Services

16. The school shall provide special education services related to the identification, monitoring, and referral of students in accordance with local, state, and federal laws.

Conclusions

The school's student support services are generally, but not always, consistent with the school's mission and expectations for student learning. While their responsibilities to students and their families vary, the library/media, health, guidance and special education services all focus on student achievement of academic and social expectations. However, there are limitations across the spectrum of services. (teachers, support staff, panel presentation)

Palmer High School offers resources, services, and programs aimed at providing all students the opportunity to meet the school's expectations for learning; however, there are significant discrepancies in the level of service provided in different departments. The guidance department provides a variety of services to all students. These include career planning, course selection and conflict resolution. The health services department manages a comprehensive school health program. The library media center supports the academic program of the school with resources aligned with projects, research, and lesson plans of teachers across the curriculum at all levels. Special education department services are provided by two resource teachers, two inclusion teachers, one life skills teacher, and ten paraprofessionals. Students with special needs have theoretical access to the entire curriculum, including honors courses, although there is significant tension among faculty members about inclusion practices. In addition, there are significant numbers of students who are taught in self-contained classes, and more are placed out of district. There is an alternative program for students who are unable to succeed in the traditional classroom staffed by a licensed professional and a paraprofessional. The school also provides programs to address social issues including date rape, smoking, substance abuse, and diversity. In general, the programs, resources, and services provide adequate support for most students; however, not all students with individual educational plans, including out-of-district placements, are able to meet the school's academic expectations because of delivery services in special education that do not appear to be consistent with the school mission. (staff, self-study, teachers, students)

There are many community resources available to enhance learning and address the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of students. Psychological assessment and treatment are available at Wing Memorial Hospital's Griswold Center and from South Bay Mental Health Services. Emergency services are provided by Wing and the Mt. Tom Crisis Center at Holyoke. Mental health referrals go to The Valley Human Services of Ware or a counselor in West Brookfield. There is a Domestic Violence Task Force in Palmer for family abuse cases. Tapestry Health GYN Services of Springfield provides pregnancy and sexual health services. The PHS Crisis Team is available with support personnel and grief counselors in the case of a death in the school community. The school has a partnership with the Palmer District Court, and a member of the Palmer Police Department works as a part-time school resource officer. The library media center maintains a working relationship with the Palmer Public Library and the Western Mass Regional Library System to augment resources. The nurse works with teachers and administrators to provide nursing services for field trips. She also trains staff members and addresses critical health issues while maintaining confidentiality. Special education teachers work with regular education teachers to ensure that each student's IEP is implemented. Guidance, health, library, and special education services enhance student learning by working with professional and support staff members. By using community resources, student support personnel address the academic, social, emotional, and physical needs of all students. (self-study, staff, teachers)

Student support services are evaluated at the personnel level, and various models are employed to review services; however, there is no ongoing system to evaluate services at the program level to support improved student learning. The district head nurse evaluates the nurse every two years, and special education faculty members are evaluated by the high school's administrative team. The librarian surveys the faculty to reflect and improve on services for students and resources. A MASCA evaluation team has just completed an evaluation of guidance services. Other surveys give the student support services mixed reviews. In general, the support faculty is viewed as caring and striving to meet student needs. There are widely divergent methods for determining service effectiveness, and it is not clear how these evaluations are shared with school administrators and faculty members or used to revise and improve student learning. Thus, the student support services are challenged to respond to identified needs and to improve

their services. (surveys, Program Review of Counseling Programs and Services, support staff, self-study)

There are several systems in place for ongoing communication with students, parents/guardians, and school personnel. They are designed to keep constituents informed about the types of student services available and identify student needs. They receive mixed reviews. ConnectEd and teacher e-mails are a direct way for families and school personnel to communicate. The school distributes interim progress reports and report cards for each marking period. However, families have voiced a desire for the progress reports to be more informative beyond a pass/fail remark. The school maintains a website that provides basic information including a daily calendar and the archived student newspaper The Paw Prints but could be developed to be more informative. There has been a history of a homework posting on the web in eighth grade (Manhattan Online Learning Program), and some parents would like to see this continued at the high school level. The Director of Special Education has provided a flow chart indicating how students would be identified and assessed for special education services and 504 plans if there are concerns. How this process is executed is not clear. Parents have indicated that more communication regarding their students' progress is needed, and additional information about school/career planning is needed. Because of a lack of consistent communication, students and families lack information to make important decisions related to student support services. (parents, support staff, self-study)

Student records, including health and immunization records, are maintained in a confidential and secure manner consistent with federal and state law. The health service uses a software program as well as keeping hard copies in a locked metal box. The special education department keeps permanent records secure in a district office with current IEP records updated and kept on a web-based eSpecial education database. Summaries that are shared with appropriate faculty members are collected and shredded yearly. The guidance department maintains cumulative records in locked files and releases them to students upon graduation. Library/media circulation records are kept electronically and are secured by passwords. Student documents are kept confidential and a system is in place to expunge them when appropriate. (staff, observation, self-study)

In general, Palmer High School employs certified/licensed personnel to provide effective health, special education, and library/media services; however, counseling services are compromised by the lack of personnel to offer social/emotional counseling. Library/media has requested an additional part-time assistant to allow greater time to integrate with the curriculum, but budgetary constraints have not allowed additional support. The nurse has recently been augmented with a part-time assistant nurse, and the guidance counselor to student ratio is 1 to 242. Special education faculty members meet state-mandated guidelines with 5 full-time teachers and 10 paraprofessionals. The areas of need reside in guidance and special education services where adjustment-counseling services are not available to students with emotional concerns as a result of the elimination of an adjustment counselor position several years ago. The two inclusion teachers are responsible for 72 students and appear to be stretched very thin in an effort to provide the needed services, while the life skills teacher struggles to incorporate students age 13-22 in an appropriate academic and life skills setting. This understaffing has some impact on the delivery of support services. The consequences of a lack of personnel to address student adjustment issues hinder the provision of proactive counseling and special education services. (self-study, teachers, survey information)

The school does provide a range of guidance services; however, it lacks a cohesive guidance program to assist students in meeting the expectations expressed in the mission statement. The guidance services were recently evaluated (January 2009) and are planning to move toward the MA Model. The department has a staff of three full-time guidance counselors to serve the eighth through twelfth grades. One guidance counselor works exclusively with the eighth grade to maintain consistency with the "team" approach. The remaining two guidance counselors work with the 9-12 grade students. The staff to student ratio is less than 1:250; however, this has not resulted in development of a program that meets the students' needs. There is some attempt to provide post-secondary planning. Eighth grade students are introduced to My Road software from the College Board and the PSAT, and Accuplacer tests are available to students. Students are introduced to River East School-to-Career and Pathway to Success as

instruments to research their interests and future plans. Palmer High School sponsors a career day where local business people donate three hours to interact with students about careers. College admissions representatives visit sporadically, and the school offers a night for information about financial planning put on by the Massachusetts Educational Finance Authority (MEFA). There is no coordinated program to guide students and parents through the planning process for post-secondary training or education, however. The guidance counselors report that they are reactive rather than proactive in their work with the students. Counselors self-report that much of their time is spent counseling students who have social/emotional issues that are not addressed elsewhere. A school adjustment counselor position was eliminated several years ago and has not been replaced. Efforts to engage outside community mental health agencies have not met the emotional needs of students as reported by many staff members. Outreach to community and area mental health services and social service agencies are limited. A part-time school resource officer is located at the high school, and a probation officer visits his cases during the school day. A sketch of a guidance curriculum exists that would be taught by guidance faculty members in the classroom, but it has not been implemented. There is no program coordinator/director who might be able to create a plan to move the guidance services forward. Counseling and post high school planning needs of the students are not currently being met in a coordinated or comprehensive manner. The recent evaluation and subsequent recommendations provide some hope that things will improve, but not all students are currently being served with effective guidance services. (MASCA evaluation, January 2009, support staff, students, parents, self-study material)

The school provides preventive services, direct intervention services, appropriate referral services, mandated services, emergency response mechanisms, and ongoing student health assessments at a commendable level. The school has one full-time nurse and a health secretary; recently a part-time nurse has been added to the service. In addition to responding to emergencies and the everyday medical issues that arise, the school provides school physicals, immunizations, health screenings, and a mobile dentist. The nurse has provided training for faculty members on medical issues and on the use of epi-pens when needed. The nurse is housed in a suite of offices that provides space for students to be seen and treated. The Endicott Survey reports that parents are pleased with the health services provided by the school. Health services are delivered in a planned and well-organized manner with sufficient staffing so that students and families are well served. (self-study, support staff, students, survey report)

The library/information service program and materials at Palmer High School are integrated into the school's curriculum and instructional program. The majority of staff members believe that the PHS Library Media Center is integrated into the school's curriculum. According to the Endicott Survey, 68% of the staff consults the librarian when revising curriculum, and 71% believes that their formal curriculum includes library/information services. Teachers can request that new materials be added to the collection in a variety of ways: through department chairs, direct communication with the librarian, and an annual request form. There is a K-12 library information literacy curriculum, and the librarian works closely with the English department to implement a skills program for grades 8 – 12. With many competing responsibilities, the librarian, who is also audio-visual director, is not able to allocate as much time as she would like to collaborating with teachers or keeping the school community informed about new resources. (self-study, staff, teachers, Endicott Survey)

Library media center personnel at Palmer High School are knowledgeable about the curriculum and support its implementation. The faculty almost unanimously agrees that the library media center staff is knowledgeable about the curriculum and involved with its implementation. The librarian helps teachers and students access the large collection of electronic databases, sets up research units on the network drive, locates resources to align with curriculum, teaches information skills in grades 8 – 12, co-teaches part of the research process, is a resource in providing opportunities for developing higher level thinking skills, and engages students in critical thinking as they search for appropriate resources. She reviews the curriculum frameworks as they apply to information literacy and is a member of the academic council. However, the lack of library support personnel compromises her ability to be fully supportive of the school curriculum. (Endicott Survey, staff members, librarian, teachers, self-study)

The PHS Library Media Center contains a wide range of materials, technologies, and other

library/information services that are responsive to the needs of the school's student population and are readily available to faculty members for the improvement of teaching and learning. The Endicott Survey indicates that 82% of students and 89% of faculty members believe that the resources they need are available. The broad collection includes up-to-date materials (average age of book collection, 1999) both print and electronic. There are 12 desktop computers and 16 wireless laptops available to students. There is a collection of 55 on-line databases acquired through the PALS consortium that was developed by the librarians from the Palmer Public Library, the Pathfinder Library, and the Palmer High School Library Media Center that students can access from home as well as at school. There is a large collection of audio-visual materials including audio books, cassettes, DVDs, CDs, Kits, VHS tapes, and slides. There are print and non-print materials to serve the needs of minorities, special education students, and 8th grade students as well as those of students in grades 9 – 12. In addition, students can acquire materials from other libraries through C/W MARS, a resources sharing network. This broad range of library materials, technologies, and information services fully supports the curriculum and the needs of students and staff. (observation, self-study, students, teachers, Endicott Survey)

Students, faculty members, and support staff members of Palmer High School are able to access library/information services, facilities, and programs before school and during the school day. The library media center is open from 7:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Teachers can schedule the library for class research assignments and can send small groups with a pass. Individual students can also visit the library with a pass. Staff cuts have meant that the library is usually not available after school. Therefore, students who need to use resources are not always able to use the library after the initial class visit. However, the ability to access the database collection from home and the availability of the Palmer Public Library fill part of the void for students. (self-study, staff members)

The library/information services program fosters independent inquiry by offering students and faculty members a formal sequence of research and literacy skills. The curriculum is taught to students beginning with 8th grade orientation and continuing with a 9th grade introduction to formal methods of information retrieval, organization, and the research process. Students learn how to use and evaluate print and electronic resources. Instruction focuses on inquiry and problem solving with the aim of helping students become independent thinkers, learners, and users of information. Application of these skills is continued at all grades and across the curriculum. The librarian has rubrics regarding research that are used for some of the projects. Circulation and usage records indicate that the instructional program is an accessible and critical part of the overall library program across grades and disciplines. This instructional program offers opportunities for independent inquiry and therefore enables students and faculty members to use a variety of information resources and technologies. (self-study, teachers, students)

There is a complete set of library media policies in place for the selection and removal of information resources and the use of technologies and the Internet. The library media center adheres to a formal selection policy for all materials, a weeding policy, and a policy for handling challenged materials. In the survey, 89 % of the students agreed that they were familiar with the PHS Acceptable Use Policy that is included in the student handbook and know that they are expected to adhere to it. In addition, LanSchool, a security software program that can be used as a teaching tool is a check on student computer behavior. These policies provide access to up-to-date information while offering Internet protection. (policy manual, staff, Endicott Survey, self-study)

Palmer High School provides special education services related to the identification, monitoring, and referral of students in accordance with local, state, and federal law, but the school has not developed an infrastructure to provide a unified vision of special education services or adequate support to the faculty to implement these services. Palmer High School has five full-time licensed special education faculty members and 10 paraprofessionals to serve a population that reflects 17-18% of the total student enrollment. Various members of the community have voiced concerns over the criteria for identifying special needs students and the high number of students who are placed out-of-district. The Palmer High School model for delivery of special education services includes resource classes in English and math, inclusion faculty for other classes, and an academic support class for identified students. The inclusion model used successfully at the middle school has been imported to the high school with mixed results.

Inclusion faculty members are required to support students in classes on a fluctuating basis, and general education faculty members have not been given sufficient training and support in all cases to make the needed modifications to include special education students successfully. In addition, there is limited administrative support (no department supervisor) to provide a voice at the department level or to direct the ongoing development of a model of service delivery that adequately meets the needs of the special education students. The efforts of the school to provide appropriate services are impacted by a budget that funds numerous out-of-district placements, which account for 48% of the entire special education budget. The position of assistant director of special education was eliminated three years ago as well as an adjustment counselor, and the alternative education program was reduced significantly. The loss of these supports has had a negative impact on the high school's ability to provide services. Less than half the faculty is satisfied with the special education services. Special education faculty members are spread thin, and the school has not given general education faculty members adequate support to adapt to the inclusion model that the school has implemented. (Endicott Survey, school support staff, teachers, central office staff)

Commendations

1. The consistency of most student support services with the school's mission and expectations
2. Multiple partnerships with community agencies to address the social, emotional, and physical needs to students
3. Proper maintenance of student records in a confidential and secure manner
4. Provision of appropriate preventive and direct intervention health services
5. The extensive effort of the librarian to work cooperatively with staff and utilize community resources
6. The integration of library information services into the school's curriculum and instructional program
7. The extensive collection of databases to support student research
8. The effective partnership with other community libraries

Recommendations

1. Develop a comprehensive system through which student support services are regularly evaluated and revised to improve student learning
2. Enhance the communication mechanisms available to students and parents about student support services
3. Ensure that a comprehensive guidance program is implemented, including sufficient services to meet the social/emotional needs of students
4. Provide sufficient staffing to cover the library media center during the school day and after school
5. Provide more structured leadership for support services in guidance and special education
6. Conduct and report on a comprehensive review of special education services in order to ensure that students are being instructed in the least restrictive environment

7. Provide professional development for both general and special education faculty members on effective strategies for including students with disabilities

SUPPORT STANDARD

7

COMMUNITY RESOURCES FOR LEARNING

Active community and parent participation, facilities which support school programs and services, and dependable and adequate funding are necessary for the school to achieve its mission and expectations for student learning.

1. The school shall engage parents and families as partners in each student's education and shall encourage their participation in school programs and parent support groups.
2. The school shall foster productive business/community/higher education partnerships that support student learning.
3. The school site and plant shall support and enhance all aspects of the educational program and the support services for student learning.
4. The physical plant and facilities shall meet all applicable federal and state laws and shall be in compliance with local fire, health, and safety regulations.
5. Equipment shall be adequate, properly maintained, catalogued, and replaced when appropriate.
6. A planned and adequately funded program of building and site management shall ensure the appropriate maintenance, repair, and cleanliness of the school plant.
7. There shall be ongoing planning to address future programs, enrollment changes, staffing, facility, and technology needs as well as capital improvements.
8. The community and the district's governing body shall ensure an adequate and dependable source of revenue to provide and maintain appropriate school programs, personnel, services, facilities, equipment, technological support, materials, and supplies for student learning.
9. Faculty and building administrators shall have active involvement in the budgetary process, including its development and implementation.

Conclusions

Palmer High School engages parents as partners in their students' education and encourages parent participation and support. Palmer High School invites parents to numerous events, including but not limited to an open house at the beginning of the school year and one formal parent/teacher conference night in the first semester. They also host 8th grade team meetings and special education meetings that allow parents to meet the teachers and discuss the educational progress of their children. Through the Palmer High School website, e-mail, newsletter, telephone conversations, progress reports, and the Manhattan Online Learning Platform (8th grade only) as well as ConnectEd, teachers update students and parents regarding academics and behavioral concerns. Palmer High School invites students and their families as well as community members to attend numerous programs such as PHS Arts are Academic Night, band and chorus concerts, student and faculty productions, and band performances in the community. The PHS Band Booster Club and the PHS Parents United Boosters (PUB) Club strongly support these student activities. The efforts made by teachers and administrators create a working partnership between families and the school. (self-study, parents, school leadership team)

The school fosters some business and community partnerships but struggles with higher education partnerships. Students have the opportunity to utilize such programs as 'Pathways to Success' and 'River East School-to-Career' programs to connect classroom learning and the world of work, but a very small number of students actually participates in them. The Tech Prep partnership with Springfield Technical Community College has dissolved, and the school in general lacks meaningful relationships with higher education institutions. The Junior Rotary Club called INTERACT and the National Honor Society perform community service and assist with students obtaining their 10-hour community service graduation requirement. The school's library partners with the Palmer Public Library, Pathfinder Regional Technical High School, and other Palmer School District libraries in a consortium to provide unlimited access to online subscription databases for the schools and community. On select occasions, citizens share their skills and expertise by donating time and resources. For example, a community member helps construct sets for the drama productions. For the past two years, the school has also held an annual career day where over thirty business and professional leaders donate three hours of their time to speak to students about various career paths, but after the event, there is no sustained connection between the school and these important individuals. The existing business and community opportunities do enhance the educational experiences for Palmer students, but without expanding business and community partnerships as well as establishing meaningful relationships with higher education institutions, students are not acquiring further educational opportunities. (panel presentation, teachers, self-study, department leaders)

The school site and plant support and enhance many aspects of the educational program and support services for student learning. The building was opened in 1991 and is well maintained. There have been continual improvements to the plant. A fluorescent light upgrade was completed to provide better and more efficient lighting, and a tile floor was installed in the band room to provide better acoustics. A handicapped ramp was installed to allow wheelchair access to the auditorium from the outside. Consequently, all areas of the school are handicapped accessible. The capacity of the auditorium accommodates the entire student body. However, with grades 8-12 in the building, classroom space is at a premium. Workrooms and offices have been sacrificed to accommodate reading classrooms, and there are insufficient areas to administer individualized tests. With only two outside telephone lines, communication between parents and teachers is limited because of the time wasted obtaining an open line. The administrative offices do not offer sufficient privacy, and there is only one conference room for the entire school. However, on the whole, the present facility does support the school's educational program and support services. (facility tour, teachers, self-study, parents)

The physical plant and facilities are in compliance with local fire, health, and safety regulations. Documentation of all certificates and safety reports are maintained by the facilities director and are in compliance in all areas. The school is equipped with a computerized energy monitoring system that is accessible from other district schools as well as the facilities director's personal computer. Because

fourth floor classrooms are overheated during hot weather, 3M reflective film has been applied to windows, and exhaust and ceiling fans have been installed. It is still necessary to move some classes to lower floors during these particular periods, however. Air quality has been a concern, but repeated tests confirm that the indoor air is safe. During the school day, the boilers run on natural gas instead of oil to ensure that students and faculty members are not breathing hydrocarbons. Diligent compliance with local and state safety regulations ensures a safe learning environment for students and staff members. (facility tour, central office administrators, self-study, teachers)

The equipment is generally adequate, properly maintained, catalogued, and replaced when appropriate. The faculty and student furniture is adequately maintained and replaced when necessary. The technology is up-to-date in classrooms, the library, and the auditorium, and teachers express confidence in the librarian/audio-visual director to maintain or replace audio-visual equipment. The district has sufficient technical support with one technology director as well as one technician to maintain and repair all computer equipment. Reports by various departments attest that teaching supplies are adequate when the budget allows, and teachers generally feel their needs are met. The overall availability and condition of equipment enhances the educational environment. (teachers, students, self-study, facility tour)

Palmer High School has a planned program of building and site management, but it is not always adequately funded. A preventive maintenance budget overseen by the facilities director is in place. Given the allotted resources, the building is well maintained. The given budget for maintenance needed to keep the building running is insufficient, but cost-saving measures have been taken such as the installation of Rentar Fuel Catalysts to the boilers resulting in a fuel savings of 18%. The facilities director strongly expressed a need for an additional custodian to assist in maintenance and cleaning. A cleaning schedule is in place, performed by the school custodial staff and an outside agency named Pride Cleaners. Students and faculty members have expressed confidence in the safety and cleanliness of the facility. The sense of a safe environment and the cleanliness of the building and site contribute to the pride Palmer students, teachers, and administrators have in their school. (classroom observations, facilities tour, students, parents)

The school administration in conjunction with central office personnel has designed long-range plans to address future programs, enrollment changes, staffing, facility, and technology needs as well as capital improvements, but these plans are not always fully implemented. The school uses Rediker Hosted Services to track student enrollment, grades, attendance, and scheduling. The office manager and special education personnel also track this information. The Palmer School District utilizes the New England School Development Council (NESDEC) to assess the fluctuations in school enrollment. Staff members are welcome to develop new curriculum for future programs. After approval from their department head, a potential course is presented to the academic council to be reviewed and, if recommended, forwarded to the school committee for approval. An oversight committee comprised of various faculty, administration and central office personnel is convened to address capital improvements and prioritize needs of the school district. However, during restrictive budgetary times, the school does not have sufficient funds to address such things as a new communications system and replacement of the roof membrane. Palmer High School must ensure both that a strategic plan is in place to address these needs and that it be implemented if the educational process is to be supported. (school leadership team, central office personnel, self-study, teachers)

The community and the district's governing body ensure a dependable if somewhat limited source of revenue to provide and maintain school programs, personnel, services, facilities, equipment, technological support, materials, and supplies for student learning. The community supports the education budget by approving the town budget annually. However, the budget has been level-funded for the past several years and was frozen in October of 2008, eliminating the purchase of textbooks and supplies and professional development opportunities. In terms of facilities, the school's pool is open only during the swim team season because of high maintenance costs. Outside sports facilities are in need of repair as well. Such strategies as charging a \$50 fee per sport, per student have helped somewhat to offset costs in athletics but not completely. The faculty and school committee note the need for clarification and

reform in such school services as special education and guidance in order to work more efficiently and effectively with students, parents, and faculty members. An educational foundation is being created to try to improve financial supports through local businesses and assist in supporting school programs. Insufficient or inequitable allocation of funding and resources have adversely affected student learning in some educational programs and services. (self-study, teachers, central office personnel, school committee)

Faculty and building administrators are actively involved in the budgetary process, including both its development and implementation. All parties work collectively to develop a budget based on need. Teachers submit a list of needs to their department heads who, in turn, submit requests for materials and supplies to the principal. She then submits a budget to the superintendent's office for review and consideration. The principal most often makes final downward adjustments to the budget, seeking information from department heads before final approval. The recent freeze of the budget early in the school year hindered the faculty from participating in this process. (teachers, self-study, school leadership team, department leaders)

Commendations

1. The efforts of Palmer High School to involve parents in students' educational programs
2. A physical plant that meets all compliance standards and generally supports the educational program
3. The facilities director's diligent maintenance of the physical plant with limited resources
4. The infusion of updated technology at Palmer High School
5. The inclusion of all stakeholders in the budgetary process

Recommendations

1. Encourage better student participation in existing partnerships with local businesses and seek out additional community opportunities for students
2. Implement and foster more partnerships with higher education institutions
3. Provide adequate conference facilities and appropriate space for individual testing
4. Install a full-service telephone network throughout the school
5. Monitor the expressed concerns on the upper floors of the building, including those related to heat
6. Provide consistent and reliable funding for ongoing facility repairs and maintenance of equipment
7. Replace the existing roof membrane

FOLLOW-UP RESPONSIBILITIES

This comprehensive evaluation report reflects the findings of the school's self-study and those of the visiting committee. It provides a blueprint for the faculty, administration, and other officials to use to improve the quality of programs and services for the students in Palmer High School. The faculty, school board, and superintendent should be apprised by the building administration yearly of progress made addressing visiting committee recommendations.

Since it is in the best interest of the students that the citizens of the district become aware of the strengths and limitations of the school and suggested recommendations for improvement, the Commission requires that the evaluation report be made public in accordance with the Commission's Policy on Distribution, Use, and Scope of the Visiting Committee Report.

A school's initial/continued accreditation is based on satisfactory progress implementing valid recommendations of the visiting committee and others identified by the Commission as it monitors the school's progress and changes which occur at the school throughout the decennial cycle. To monitor the school's progress in the Follow-Up Program, the Commission requires that the principal of Palmer High School submit routine Two- and Five-Year Progress Reports documenting the current status of all evaluation report recommendations, with particular detail provided for any recommendation which may have been rejected or those items on which no action has been taken. In addition, responses must be detailed on all recommendations highlighted by the Commission in its notification letters to the school. School officials are expected to have completed or be in the final stages of completion of all valid visiting committee recommendations by the time the Five-Year Progress Report is submitted. The Commission may request additional Special Progress Reports if one or more of the Standards are not being met in a satisfactory manner or if additional information is needed on matters relating to evaluation report recommendations or substantive changes in the school.

To ensure that it has current information about the school, the Commission has an established Policy on Substantive Change requiring that principals of member schools report to the Commission within sixty days (60) of occurrence any substantive change which negatively impacts the school's adherence to the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. The report of substantive change must describe the change itself and detail any impact which the change has had on the school's ability to meet CPSS Standards. The Commission's Substantive Change Policy is included in the Appendix on page 52. All other substantive changes should be included in the Two- and Five-Year Progress Reports and/or the Annual Report which is required of each member school to ensure that the Commission office has current statistical data on the school.

The Commission urges school officials to establish a formal follow-up program at once to review and implement all findings of the self-study and valid recommendations identified in the evaluation report. An outline of the Follow-Up Program is available in the Commission's *Accreditation Handbook* which was given to the school at the onset of the self-study. Additional direction regarding suggested procedures and reporting requirements is provided at Follow-Up Seminars offered by Commission staff following the on-site visit.

NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS & COLLEGES

Commission on Public Secondary Schools

SUBSTANTIVE CHANGE POLICY

Principals of member schools must report to the Commission within sixty (60) days of occurrence any substantive change in the school which has a *negative impact* on the school's ability to meet any of the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. The report of a substantive change must describe the change itself as well as detail the impact on the school's ability to meet the Standards. The following are potential areas where there might be negative substantive changes which must be reported:

- elimination of fine arts, practical arts, and student activities
- diminished upkeep and maintenance of facilities
- significantly decreased funding
- cuts in the level of administrative and supervisory staffing
- cuts in the number of teachers and/or guidance counselors
- grade level responsibilities of the principal
- cuts in the number of support staff
- decreases in student services
- cuts in the educational media staffing
- increases in student enrollment that cannot be accommodated
- takeover by the state
- inordinate user fees
- changes in the student population that warrant program or staffing modification(s) that cannot be accommodated, e.g., the number of special needs students or vocational students or students with limited English proficiency

**Palmer High School Visiting Team
March 8 – 11, 2009**

James Crompton	Simsbury High School	Simsbury	CT
John Drottar	Milton High School	Milton	MA
John Garofalo	Silver Lake Regional High School	Kingston	MA
Frank Guertin	Quabbin Regional High School	Barre	MA
Kevin Hartmann	Drury High School	North Adams	MA
Donna Lacasse	Rockport Community High School	Rockport	MA
Jo Ann Lancaster	Monument Mt. Regional High School	Great Barrington	MA
Peter Niemeyer	Mt. Greylock Regional High School	Williamstown	MA
Richard Renauld	Monson High School	Monson	MA
Marie Shack	Wilmington High School	Wilmington	MA
Michael Shore (Asst. Chair)	Sanborn Regional Middle School	Newton	NH
Mary Springer	West Boylston Middle High School	West Boylston	MA
Neil Sullivan (Chair)	Simsbury High School	Simsbury	CT
Bonnie Tumelty	Somerville High School	Somerville	MA
Sue Zendzian	South High Community School	Worcester	MA