

October 2009

Dear Palmer Public School Parent or Guardian:

Our school and school district are dedicated to providing all students with the educational foundation necessary to succeed in school and in life. To ensure your child's success, we set high standards that are reflected in what is taught in our classrooms. Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which was signed into law in 2002, specific criteria are measured so that the government can determine whether or not schools – particularly Title I funded schools – are making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). AYP is a measure based on results of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests.

As a district, our MCAS results have never been higher. Although we are proud of our most recent achievement test results, most notably our Grade 10 students where 95 percent passed English Language Arts (ELA), and the Science & Technology tests on their first attempt, with 75 percent achieving in the advanced or proficient category in ELA, Palmer High School (PHS) was placed in corrective action because it did not achieve AYP in MA neither in the aggregate nor in subgroups. We are equally proud of the accomplishments of Converse Middle School (CMS) where for the first time in seven years, the school made AYP in mathematics (MA) in both the aggregate and all sub-groups. Not to be outdone, Old Mill Pond (OMP) made AYP in ELA and in MA both in the aggregate and in sub-groups, a truly outstanding accomplishment. As a district the Palmer Public Schools made AYP in all categories and all subgroups and has an On Target improvement rating in both English Language Arts and MA.

The district must take at least one corrective action step to improve student performance at PHS. We have done many things to begin to address specific areas of instructional improvement, as follows:

1. Utilize Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) – Dr. Susan Farrell facilitated the analysis of the MCAS data via the PIM process so as to get to the root cause of why some in the low income subgroup are underperforming. A cadre of PHS teachers participated in the workshop. The result of this analysis was a revised MCAS School Improvement Plan that specifically addresses the deficiencies through measurable goals and improvement objectives using a SMART goals format.
2. Provide identified students with the one-on-one and small group instruction, both during the school day, after school, and, utilizing grant funds, for summer tutorials that will enable them to be better prepared to pass the MCAS upon re-test.
3. Assign identified students to the MCAS Prep courses.
4. Engaged all staff members in the Dr. Willard Daggett “Motivating the Unmotivated Student” professional development day, and will provide for supplemental Gold Star lessons for staff to implement with low income students.
5. Utilize the Collin Writing consultant, Bill Atwood, to train identified staff in differentiated instruction as it applied to math word problems.

Parents can get involved in addressing academic issues that led to PHS' identification by assuring that their children attend school daily and thoroughly and completely finish their homework. Upon learning of academic deficiencies whether through progress reports or report cards, parents can engage teachers as to the causes of low grades.

Because it takes two consecutive years of making AYP to be removed from the underperforming label, the district has worked with CMS in doing the following to assist in the areas of instructional improvement:

- Continuing to increase the time CMS spends on mathematics instruction - For Grades 5 and 6, there will be a 60% increase in the amount of time in math instruction from five 45-minute classes per week to eight. For Grade 7, there will be a 20% increase in the amount of time in math instruction from five to six periods per week for identified students.
- Continuing to utilize Performance Improvement Mapping (PIM) – Dr. Susan Farrell will facilitate the analysis of the MCAS data via the PIM process so as to get to the root cause of why some student subgroups are underperforming. A cadre of CMS teachers will participate in the workshop. The result of this analysis will be a revised Converse MCAS School Improvement Plan that specifically addresses the deficiencies through measurable goals and improvement objectives using a SMART goals format.
- Scheduling underperforming students into PLATO's math tutorial - Students who are not currently receiving supports and who are in the warning or the low needs improvement categories on the MCAS tests, and/or who fall below the 40th percentile in our standardized assessment instruments, STAR Reading and STAR Math, will be provided with additional time using PLATO software. PLATO is a self-pacing, internet and Massachusetts standards-based, math tutorial software program.
- Continuing grade-level and team-level common assessments - Common grade and team-level interim assessments will be administered at least quarterly to students to gauge their understanding of on-going instruction.
- Expanding professional development opportunities – Additional in-service opportunities in Everyday Math, and Collins Writing will be provided since emphasis will be placed on writing across the curriculum. The latter will be the focus of the New England League of Middle Schools (NELMS) professional development and a number of teachers will attend this training and act as trainers to their colleagues.
- Creating ELA and MA hierarchy spreadsheets - ELA and MA hierarchy spreadsheets will be used to monitor and insure delivery of support services to identified low income and/or sped students.
- Providing supplemental educational services - CMS will provide identified free/reduced lunch students, as limited by NCLB through our use of Title I funds, with the opportunity for additional after-school supplemental educational services.

The recently revised MCAS School Improvement Plans are required of all public schools in Massachusetts. They will be utilized to address each school's needs, including those identified as underperforming under NCLB. We continue to use all the resources available to us to help your student achieve, and we want to continue serving your child.

There are many measures of student success other than AYP. We encourage you to talk with our staff and administrators. We welcome your input as we help our students succeed now and in the future, and we thank you for your continued support.

Sincerely,

Dr. Gerald Fournier
Superintendent