

**In this Issue:**

EQA Visit	1
Budget News	1
Co-Teaching	3
How Do Children Learn to Read?	4
MCAS and AYP	5
On The Horizon	7

January 2, 2008

District News

Groton-Dunstable Regional School District

EQA Visit School District

Dr. Alan D. Genovese, Superintendent

During the week of December 3, 2007 the Office of Educational Quality and Accountability (EQA) toured the district, interviewed staff, visited classrooms, reviewed numerous documents and examined financial practices in their efforts to assess the district's performance. The central questions of EQA were: To what extent is the critical analysis of student achievement data a driving force in the planning, design, and implementation of the school district's improvement process? Are

decisions data driven and student centered? Does the district focus on what is learned rather than what is taught?

In an effort to assess the above, EQA officials interviewed a variety of individuals and groups. Their schedule included: the superintendent, 6 administrators, 12 principals/district officials, 6 school committee members, 6 town officials, 6 representatives from the teachers association, 17 parents, 27 interviews with teachers and

(cont. pg. 2)

Budget News by *Timothy Sheehan*

FY 2007 Closeout. The district completed FY 2007 with a modest operating budget surplus of \$37,258.58 which becomes part of next year's Excess and Deficiency (E&D) contingency account. The district incurred significant unexpected expenses in special education and was forced to reduce spending in other areas in order to balance the budget. Schools and central office reduced, cut back, deferred or eliminated end of year purchases for programs planned for this year. Utility costs were relatively close to

budget, but considerably higher than FY 2006 and previous years.

FY 2008 Budget Update. The operating budget for FY 2008 represents a very modest 4.6% increase from the previous year. Because of the failed override, the district was forced to lay off personnel and to forgo new staff and programs that are needed to improve the education of our children. We have implemented a vast majority of planned

(cont. pg. 2)

EQA Visit (cont.)

meetings with curriculum leaders, financial staff, and other support staff. They also conducted 76 classroom teacher observations. In total, more than 33 hours were spent in classroom observations and forty teacher personnel files were randomly selected for inspection. Also, all administrator files were reviewed and inspected.

When school opened its doors in September, the Administrative Council began preparing for this comprehensive review. The superintendent met with principals and administrators every week to determine how district practices aligned with the six standards and 67 indicators that EQA established as key principles for districts to be successful. Prescott Principal Betty Lavin was selected to serve as the project leader and, working with Administrative Council members, she coordinated the efforts of numerous staff members, including curriculum leaders, teachers and support staff. This was a very time consuming process. A special thanks to the administrative council members for their dedication and effort above and beyond their normal duties.

The Groton-Dunstable Regional School District is

Budget News (cont.)

budget cuts that were presented to the public during hearings held last spring.

Facilities Update. Work is underway to repair the roof and supporting structure of the historic Union Building in Dunstable. Much of the work involves the main roof beams in the attic, but the contractor is also repairing and restoring the roof itself and the trim and flashing on the exterior of the building. This past spring the district installed a brand new roof on the Peter Twomey Youth Center and the building is now leak-free even during the most severe downpour. The district continues to monitor air quality at Prescott School and has funded a number of modest improvements to the ventilation supply and exhaust systems in this 1927 era building.

Financial Controls. The district has adopted a standard PC accounting program called

considered to be a high performing district as measured by MCAS results. When compared to school systems with similar demographics and socioeconomic wealth, students in Groton-Dunstable tend to perform better on several MCAS assessments. However, district officials are striving to achieve an even greater percentage of students scoring in the advanced and proficient categories. Principals and administrators established an improvement target of 3 % in these categories at all levels.

The findings contained in the EQA report will be used to increase student achievement. This information will also provide valuable data in developing a new 5-year strategic plan. District officials expect to receive this report sometime in February.

With the culmination of this visit, administrators and principals have now been able to refocus their efforts in the planning and preparation of next year's budget (FY 09). It is expected that the EQA technical report will contain findings that will need to be built into the FY 09 budget.

QuickBooks to manage student activity accounts and revolving funds. We are piloting this program at the high school where they are able to manage these accounts locally instead of relying solely on the district office for this information. Another example is that the athletic department will be able to track and manage their entire operation, including funds from the operating budget, user fees, gate receipts and fund-raising. The program is easy to use and provides excellent documentation and expense tracking. We expect to install the same software in all schools during the current fiscal year.

Cost-savings Initiatives. The district staff continues to explore and implement new ways of doing business to save money through improved efficiency. We purchase fuel oil,

(cont. pg. 3)

cafeteria food and some custodial supplies at favorable rates through a cooperative purchasing agreement with Merrimack Education Center. This year the district has contracted with Metro Media Energy for natural gas at a modest savings over rates from KeySpan. Initiatives are underway to restructure our photocopier contracts,

Co-Teaching by *Camilla Huston*

The *No Child Left Behind Act* and the reauthorization of federal special education legislation have resulted in school reformers setting higher standards and teachers being responsible for ensuring that all students meet these standards. Students with disabilities and other special needs are expected to achieve the same success as other learners, which places an increased emphasis on educating all students in general education settings. In addition, educators are finding an increasing number of students in their classrooms who are defined as at-risk learners. Co-teaching is one type of instructional methodology that is being implemented in the inclusive classroom to help meet the diverse challenges faced by today's classroom and special education teachers.

The term *inclusion* refers to a broad belief system or philosophy embracing the notion that all students should be welcomed members of a learning community, that all students are part of their classrooms even if their abilities differ. Although co-teaching is integral to the inclusive practices in many schools, it is not a requirement for inclusion to occur.

Co-teaching is a model of delivering instruction in the general education classroom where two educators or other certified staff plan lessons and teach a subject together to a class of special and regular education students. Co-teaching will support academic diversity in the regular classroom and provide all students with access to the state curriculum frameworks. In the co-teaching model teachers share instructional responsibility for a single group of students, primarily in a single classroom, for specific content objectives, with mutual ownership, pooled resources, and joint accountability, although each individual's level of participation may vary.

to lease laptop and desktop computers for student use, and to issue a Request for Proposals for regular education transportation for the next three years. We take very seriously our obligation to be "good stewards" of the taxpayers' money.

Co-teaching arrangements between special education teachers and general education teachers is a great strategy for effective inclusion of students with special needs. However, simply assigning two teachers to one classroom is not sufficient for ensuring effectiveness. Preparation, co-planning, and trust are necessary as well as professional development in effective methods for implementing a co-teaching model. The role of a teacher in a co-teaching model may include being the content expert, grading/evaluating student work and assuring that students progress in the curriculum and meet course requirements. Teachers ensure that special education students progress toward meeting their IEP goals and that necessary accommodations are in place.

Developing and implementing a co-teaching model involves many considerations including building a master schedule that provides for co-teaching and common planning time, professional development, preparation and planning for co-teaching, and developing a toolbox of strategies and accommodated/modified assignments and tests that will remain even after the special education teacher rotates to a new class.

(cont. pg. 4)

Co-Teaching (cont.)

Co-teaching can be a wonderful experience when planning and communication are in place from the beginning. Some critical steps for co-teachers are to establish rapport, identify their individual teaching styles and use them to create a cohesive classroom, discuss strengths and weaknesses, review and discuss Individualized Education Programs and regular education goals, formulate a plan of action and act as a unified team, and be willing to take risks and grow.

In a continuous effort to improve the variety of academic supports that are available to students, this year the Middle School has implemented co-teaching in all four grades. In grades five through eight there is one co-taught math class per grade. In grades seven and eight there is one co-taught ELA class per grade. These classes are co-taught by the regular

education math or ELA teacher and a special education teacher. This model allows the Middle School to offer students a setting that provides intensive, direct, in-class support. The High School offers co-taught classes in math and ELA at each grade level as well.

District administrators participated in a two day introduction/training program in August. Teachers will begin professional development programs in January. As the program develops, it will be assessed throughout the year and improvements will be made as deemed necessary. The administrators and teachers are excited about enhancing this model of collaboration between educators to help to provide inclusion services to students and to facilitate improved achievement levels for all students.

How Do Children Learn to Read? *by Kathleen McCarthy*

At some point in your education you learned to read. You may remember completing SRA cards, reading *Dick and Jane*, being called a Bluebird or an Owl, or listening intently while a teacher read *Charlotte's Web* to the class with visible emotion when Charlotte passed away.

This newsletter submission is the first in a series intended to help you understand how 21st century literacy skills are taught and learned in The Groton- Dunstable Regional School District. The scope of this article will be the rights of our students as defined by *The International Reading Association* (<http://www.reading.org>), and future newsletter submissions will focus on the different components of a *Balanced Approach to Literacy*, which include, but are not limited to: word study (which includes phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and spelling), guided, independent, and shared reading, and writers workshop. Future submissions may be found in individual school newsletters and on the district website.

In order to meet the challenges of teaching

literacy, schools need to build reading programs on a set of comprehensive principles that honor children's rights to excellent instruction. These include:

- Early reading instruction
- Reading instruction that builds skill and the desire to read increasingly complex materials
- Well-prepared teachers who keep their skills up to date
- A variety of books and other reading material in their classrooms, and in school and community libraries
- Assessment that identifies strengths as well as needs and involves students in making decisions about their own learning
- Supplemental instruction from professionals specifically prepared to teach reading
- Instruction that involves parents and communities in students' academic lives
- Instruction that makes meaningful use of first-language skills
- Equal access to instructional technology (cont. pg. 7)

School District's MCAS 2007 and AYP Results

by Dr. Susan Rübél

MCAS – STATE-MANDATED TESTING

The Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is the state-mandated, criterion-referenced series of tests that are given annually in various grades. These tests assess students' knowledge of content as outlined in the State Frameworks for each core content area. All students have to pass the English Language Arts and Mathematics tests in order to graduate. The class of 2010 will also need to pass one of the Science/Technology/Engineering tests in order to graduate, and the class of 2012 will also need to pass the US History MCAS. The MCAS program is also used to hold schools and districts accountable, on a yearly basis, for the progress they have made toward the objective of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Law that all students be proficient in Reading and Mathematics by 2014. The following summary highlights the performance of Groton-Dunstable students on the most recent administration of MCAS, in spring of 2007.

MCAS 2007

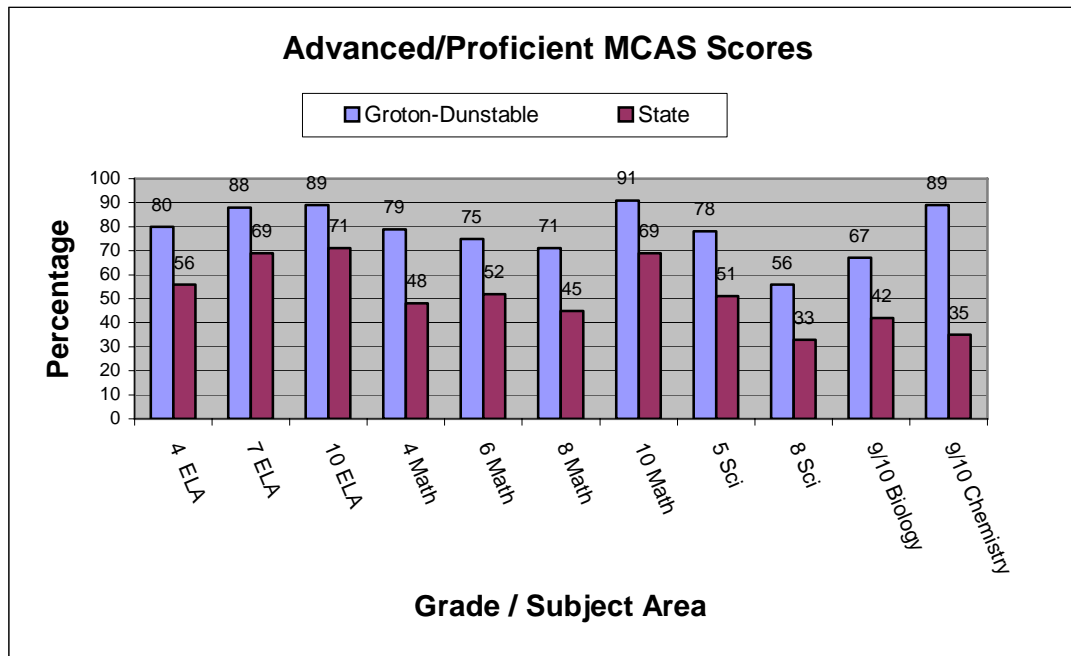
MCAS tests are administered in the core content areas of English Language Arts, Math, Science and Technology/Engineering, and History/Social Science. Grades 3 through 8 take MCAS tests in Reading/ELA and Math MCAS tests are administered to Grades 3-8 and 10. Science and/or Technology Engineering tests are administered to students in grades 5, 8 and 9 or 10. The class of 2010 students must pass one of the STE tests: Biology, Chemistry, Intro Physics, or Tech/Eng in grade 9 or 10. MCAS tests in History are given to Grades 5, 7 and 10, the class of 2012 must pass the US History test.

Groton-Dunstable students perform consistently better than the state average in both English Language Arts (ELA) and math.

For instance, the following graph indicates the comparison of Groton-Dunstable vs. the state (see graph pg. 6).

An examination of how Groton-Dunstable (GD) students perform in comparison to other GD students provides the district with information about subgroup populations as well as trends within instructional programs. For instance, the district's special education students lag behind general education students on MCAS performance. While there is some improvement in the percentage of special education students who score in the advanced or proficient performance levels, there is not a steady trend upward. Some of the interventions put in place to help these students succeed include providing an MCAS math course at the high school; having math and ELA certified teachers co-teaching with special education certified teachers so that special education students are taught by personnel who are certified in the given content area and who have expertise in special education modifications and strategies; providing students with after-school MCAS support; and closely monitoring these students using an "Individual Student Success Plan."

The district recognizes that part of the reason for students' success has to do with the socioeconomic status of Groton and Dunstable families and the rich background of experience with which students come to school. However, the district attributes the steady improvement in MCAS performance to the following additional factors: the focused efforts of faculty and administration on aligning curriculum with the state standards; raising the rigor of instructional programs and ensuring vertical coherence across the grade spans; providing students with regular practice answering MCAS-like open response and multi-step questions; and using assessment data more regularly to provide information about students' progress and how to adapt instruction to meet their needs. (cont. pg. 6)



NCLB AND THE MASSACHUSETTS ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM

As stated previously, one of NCLB’s requirements is that all states must commit to the goal of helping every child achieve proficiency in English language arts and mathematics by 2014. In Massachusetts, educators measure the progress our students make toward that goal of proficiency using an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) report. AYP is determined separately for the English language arts and mathematics MCAS tests by a combination of three out of four factors:

1. 95% or greater participation in MCAS or the MCAS-Alternate Assessment (for certain students with special needs); and
2. meeting or exceeding a performance target specified by the state; or
3. meeting or exceeding an improvement target specific to districts, schools and subgroups within schools (such as the special education subgroup); and
4. a 92% or higher attendance rate in grades 1-8 or 55% or higher graduation rate in high school.

Groton-Dunstable as a district has always had a performance rating of high or very high in both ELA and math and an improvement rating of “on target” or “above target.” However, our special education subgroup has not met the same performance targets or the expected improvement targets. For that reason, in 2004, 2005, and 2006 the special education subgroup did not make AYP in math at the middle school level (where most of the testing occurs). In 2007, our special education students did make sufficient progress toward AYP in math but for the first time did not make AYP in ELA in the 3-5 grade span. As mentioned earlier, the district is working hard to closely monitor students’ progress so that all students achieve at high levels across all core content areas.

How Do Children Learn to Read? (cont.)

There is no single method or single combination of methods that can successfully teach all children to read. Instead, each child must be helped to develop the skills and understandings he or she needs to become a reader. These include the following:

- A motivation to read
- Appropriate active strategies to construct meaning from text
- Sufficient background information and vocabulary to foster reading comprehension
- The ability to decode unfamiliar words
- The ability to read fluently
- An understanding of how speech sounds (phonemes) are connected to print

Because children learn differently, teachers must be familiar with a wide range of proven methods for helping children gain these skills. They also must have thorough knowledge of the children they teach, so they can provide the appropriate balance of methods needed for each child. Because

there is no clearly documented best, or only, way to teach reading, teachers and reading specialists who are familiar with a wide range of methodologies and who are closest to the children must be the ones to make the decisions about what reading methods and materials to use. Furthermore, these professionals must have the flexibility to modify those methods when they determine that particular children are not learning. Each child must be provided with an appropriate combination of methods.

Meeting our obligation to provide excellent reading instruction to every child means that schools, teachers, and communities must wholeheartedly support school and instructional reform efforts. If you would like to learn more about the district's reading efforts you may contact Ms. McCarthy at: kmccarthy@gdrsd.org.

On the Horizon by Dr. Alan Genovese

The first half of the school year proved to be a very productive one for the Administrative Team. New principals and administrators blended their talents, skills and ideas with present ones as conversations focused on how to improve student learning. Meeting the needs of students is a little more challenging this year given the financial constraints of the budget. A number of positions were eliminated, and in some cases other staff members have assumed additional responsibilities.

Unfortunately, there does not appear to be much financial relief on the way as town officials have indicated that even fewer dollars may be available for next year's budget and the state budget seems committed to reducing or significantly limiting Chapter 70 aid to this regional school district because of the wealth factor applied to the foundation formula. Basically, the state is saying that residents should be paying more to support public education in Groton and Dunstable.

In an effort to maintain reasonable class sizes administrators will continue its efforts to implement changes that will save taxpayers dollars. They will also continue to explore creative solutions that focus these limited dollars on teaching and learning. This will require the support and cooperation of all staff, parents and residents in both communities.

To this end, the Administrative Team will be revisiting the district's five-year strategic plan and will make appropriate modifications. The public and all stakeholders will be invited to participate in this process.

There will be focus groups of parents, teachers, support staff and community members in January, February and March to collect ideas on how the district can meet the needs of students in the coming years. The superintendent will be working with administrators to plan for these very valuable information-gathering meetings. It is hoped that stakeholders from all groups will participate in these discussions. Given the present challenges that face the district, including financial limitations, revisiting and retooling the existing strategic plan makes sense and is timely. Notification of these meetings will be through newsletters, announcements, and press releases. Please be looking for them so you can participate in the next five-year plan.

One valuable component of this strategic plan is to gather information on how best to communicate with the public. (cont. pg. 8)

**Groton-Dunstable
Regional School District**

73 Pepperell Rd
P. O. Box 729
Groton, MA 10450

Phone: 978.448.5505

Fax: 978.448.9402

E-Mail:
publiccomments@gdrsd.
org

*Together,
A Promise to Excel*

We're on the Web!

See us at:
www.gdrsd.org

If you have an article
you would like to see in
The District News
please feel free to send
your suggestions to
public comments on
our website, or in
writing to the district
office.

On the Horizon (cont.)

The school committee has begun this data collection initiative by developing a survey and distributing it in a variety of methods, including making it available on the district's website. The results will be shared at the January 12th televised school committee meeting. As information is gathered and synthesized for the strategic plan it will be shared through the best methods identified by the communication survey. Every effort will be made to reach out to the public and it is hoped that the public will reach in helping the district improve. "Together, a promise to excel" will soon be a reality.

Happy New Year!

On behalf of the entire Central Office staff, the school committee, the administrative team, teachers and all staff, we wish you the very best in the coming year. We will continue our efforts to provide a first class education for all students. This cannot be accomplished without the support and cooperation of parents and the community at large. As always, the New Year brings new challenges. However, this district and the communities of Groton and Dunstable have a history of embracing them and developing a plan to tackle each head on. This year, more than ever, will require all of us to work together to serve the best interest of students. We look forward to partnering with you as we face these new and exciting challenges. Happy New Year!



*From the Central Office team to you...
Happy New Year!!!*