Public Education Leadership Project
at Harvard University

A JOINT INITIATIVE OF
THE HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
AND HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

PEL-061
REV: SEPTEMBER 10, 2009

STACEY CHILDRESS
ANDREW GOLDIN

The Turn-Around at Highland Elementary School

In May 2009, Ray Myrtle, principal of Highland Elementary School (Highland), wrapped up a long conversation with his latest group of visitors and rose from his chair. He only had a few minutes until recess began, where he was a consistent, visible presence. On the way out, one guest pointed to the couch, where a big blue ribbon sat on a pillow. "Is that it?" she asked. "Yes," Myrtle said with a shrug. "I guess I haven't figured out exactly what to do with it yet."

Since Maryland had recognized Highland as one of only six blue ribbon elementary schools in the state for the 2007-2008 school year, Myrtle and his staff had become accustomed to a constant stream of visitors with similar questions. Had the student or teacher composition changed since Myrtle arrived in 2005? The student demographics were largely unchanged over the past five years (Exhibit 1). Eleven of 35 classroom teachers remained in their positions and several others had been promoted into various leadership roles at the school; overall, approximately half of the original faculty and support staff remained. The new staff members who joined Highland had similar educational backgrounds and levels of experience as those whom they replaced.

Visitors next wanted to analyze the academic results (Exhibits 2a and 2b). In 2004, Highland had been sanctioned by the Maryland Department of Education for failure to meet minimum standards and was in danger of being taken over by the state. The blue ribbon award for 2008 was a symbol of how far the school had come. While its rapid rate of improvement inspired much of the external interest in Highland, Myrtle focused on his students' absolute performance. Maryland offered two paths to the blue ribbon: 1) absolute performance in the top 10% of all schools or 2) fastest improvement among schools with at least 40% of students qualifying for free and reduced price meals (FARMS). As a high poverty school, Highland had been nominated in the second category in 2007. Myrtle politely refused. His central office supervisor explained Myrtle's desire to be judged by the absolute standard, saying "He expects his students to achieve at the same levels as students at the lowest poverty, highest performing schools in the county. Ray doesn't do second tier."

From 2007 to 2008, the percentage of students scoring at the highest level ("advanced") on the state reading test grew from 20% to 55%, catapulting Highland into the top 10% of Maryland schools and to another blue ribbon nomination, this time in the category Myrtle preferred for his students. When the results at Highland couldn't be explained away by things such as shifting demographics or a lower bar, visitors inevitably pressed Myrtle and his team for their secret. What had they done to propel so many low-income students with limited English skills to the highest levels of achievement?

Senior Lecturer Stacey Childress and Andrew Goldin, MBA 2009, prepared this case. PELP cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

The Leadership Transition

In August 2004, after three years in "school improvement" status and consistent failure to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP), Highland was placed in "corrective action" status by the state of Maryland. If the school failed to reach AYP in the coming year, the state could take over the operation of the school. The district leadership team saw this as unacceptable, and the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) central office took an increased role in the school's management. The principal remained in place, but central office administrators were at the school daily and involved in nearly every decision.

They immediately replaced a dual-language program they deemed ineffective with Reading First, a program widely prescribed for low-performing schools and supported by state and federal grants. They also created an Achievement Steering Committee (ASC) comprised of central office staff, the school's principal and teacher leaders and community members. The ASC was responsible for meeting regularly to analyze performance data to ensure the school made progress against its school improvement plan. The ASC identified and rectified a mismatch between Highland's spotty implementation of the MCPS required curriculum and the set of topics that were assessed on the MSA. They also introduced diagnostic assessments so that teachers could monitor student progress throughout the year and worked with Highland staff to break down diagnostic data by demographic groups to manage progress against the next year's AYP requirements.

After the first year in corrective action, Highland improved just enough to meet AYP for 2005. However, in absolute terms the school's performance remained very low. Recognizing how much work remained, superintendent Jerry Weast sought a new leader who could not simply keep the school above water, but dramatically improve student outcomes. Highland would have to meet AYP again in 2006 in order to exit corrective action and avoid a state takeover. After struggling to find a new leader, Weast and his team zeroed in on Ray Myrtle, a retired principal who had spent the majority of his career at one of the district's highest performing, most affluent elementary schools, and began wooing him to take on Highland (see Exhibit 3 for data about Myrtle's previous school). Weast explained his pursuit of Myrtle, saying:

> I simply couldn't take no for an answer. The kids at Highland needed Ray's expertise and skill because no one knows how to teach reading better than Ray. We told Ray that this would be the crowning achievement of a fantastic career. He had already taken one school to the top of the achievement mountain and we knew that he could do it again with a school in a very challenging situation.

Elaborating on the "crowning achievement" phrase, MCPS chief performance officer Steve Bedford, who had known Myrtle for years, put it this way: "In MCPS, you earn your stripes being a successful principal, but you earn medals by being a successful principal of a high poverty school."

Myrtle described the attraction of coming out of retirement into a challenging assignment:

> After spending my career working in what would be considered "high-end" schools in MCPS and then in Europe, I supervised some student projects for George Washington University's education school and became deeply involved with a team working in a high-poverty school. To my surprise, I didn't want to leave when the project was over. I came to believe everything I thought I knew about teaching could work with students in poverty with some adaptation. The opportunity to work at Highland was a chance to prove it was true.

After agreeing to officially take over as principal beginning in July 2005, Myrtle arranged with the outgoing principal to spend most of May and June observing conditions in the school. He spent hours

quietly observing classrooms, walking the halls, attending teacher meetings and patrolling recess He found more than 20 broken windows around the building, but no corresponding work orders had been submitted to have them repaired. Students routinely ran through the hallways and fights were commonplace. Teacher personnel files lacked any evidence of classroom observation and feedback. Based on what he saw and its mismatch with what he believed were necessary conditions for a high performing school, Myrtle decided that multiple changes would have to be made simultaneously once he assumed the helm.

Myrtle decided to work closely with Scott Steffan, a staff development teacher at Highland, as a partner in the reform work ahead. He had confidence in Steffan's abilities and knew that teachers in the school respected him as a colleague. They worked with teachers to overhaul Highland's approach to literacy and mathematics, implement systems for using data to diagnose and respond to students' learning needs, and transform the culture into one that would support accelerated student learning.

Focusing on Teaching and Learning

Because of the urgency of the situation, Myrtle and Steffan engaged Highland teachers in an aggressive restructuring of the way they taught literacy and mathematics as well as the school's approach to special needs students. They also heightened teacher accountability for implementing specific classroom practices and for the progress of their students.

Implementing a New Literacy Approach

Highland had received a grant to implement Reading First during its time in corrective action, and state auditors visited the school regularly to verify its implementation. A central office administrator described Myrtle as "anti-Reading First but a true literacy expert." Indeed, Myrtle was critical of both the Reading First curriculum and how it was implemented. His opinion was that the reading anthology ("basal") that served as the basis for the program was "ninety percent fiction and one hundred percent boring," full of fairy tales and fiction selections that did not engage students. Myrtle saw a correlation between lack of student interest, misbehavior, and low reading scores. Believing it was a principal's prerogative to make decisions in the best interest of his students, he decided to implement a new approach to literacy, yet kept some elements of the Reading First implementation so that when state auditors visited, Highland would be in compliance. Though the central office never formally approved, Myrtle's supervisor acknowledged that he was aware of the changes but chose to "look the other way" because he trusted Myrtle's judgment on literacy.

Myrtle infused the literacy curriculum with non-fiction texts. His own interest in non-fiction began as an elementary school student. When a teacher introduced his class to the planets, Myrtle was motivated to find all the books in the local library about the solar system. Throughout his career he witnessed students fascinated by opportunities to learn more about the world around them (Exhibit 4). He believed that increased engagement led to the increased motivation required for students to be willing to practice constantly. The format and organization of non-fiction texts also exposed students to various text features that encouraged more strategic reading of any material. Good instruction of non-fiction reading strategies helped students learn how to use pictures, titles, captions and glossaries to engage with difficult texts. Myrtle explained this approach:

> Students can read at a challenging level if they are provided with lots of support in the process. If you increase access to, and time with informational texts, and intentionally teach the comprehension skills and vocabulary students need in order to read these materials, they can really make some spectacular gains.

Non-fiction texts also provided students with background information about subjects they might not have access to otherwise. Unlike the more affluent students with whom Myrtle had worked for the majority of his career, Highland families had extremely limited resources. Along with language barriers and few books at home, parents in the community worked multiple jobs and often lived in shared, cramped quarters. Many students left school in the afternoon to join parents who worked night jobs, some of them sleeping on office furniture and floors in buildings that their parents cleaned overnight. Non-fiction texts, according to Myrtle, exposed these students to previously unknown topics and places. These texts also introduced students to vocabulary that could enrich their writing and speech and prepare them for the difficult and content-focused texts that appeared on standardized tests and in high school courses. He also helped his teachers incorporate elements of the MCPS Gifted and Talented curricula into their lessons. The children enjoyed the richer content, which stretched them and thereby increased their motivation and engagement.

Myrtle was critical of the whole group instruction that was integral to the Reading First curriculum, in which the entire class received instruction from the teacher at the same time. He preferred small group, targeted instruction based on individual students' needs. He knew, however, that making such a change would be difficult. Beyond the sub-par curriculum, Myrtle's initial observations at Highland uncovered other obstacles. For example, many teachers at Highland struggled with student behavior, and disruptions in the classroom would make it more difficult to shift away from whole group instruction, which at least allowed them to engage with the entire class at once rather than spreading behavior challenges across multiple groups.

Myrtle anticipated that teachers would be apprehensive about approaches in which they might have less control over students. Yet, he believed that a transition to small group instruction was essential. The high percentage of students requiring English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services demonstrated the limitations of a common lesson for a class of students with diverse needs. Myrtle was sure nothing was accomplished by having "students who couldn't speak English with their noses in voluminous basals." He and Steffan decided to simultaneously implement the literacy changes and a new behavior management system (described on page 9).

As one of his first steps, Myrtle hired a consultant to train teachers in the new school-wide literacy model – away from the whole group delivery to differentiated instruction. He made it clear that he expected every teacher to adopt the new approach. He explained this decision, saying "Everyone had their own way of doing things. They had their own file cabinets of materials. But there was plenty of evidence that this inconsistency was not working for children. I don't think in a low-performing school you have the luxury of having a lot of mavericks out there doing their own thing."

Given the low reading levels and a student mobility rate approaching 30%, he believed seamless articulation of content and instruction from one grade to the next was critical. The consultant, a former principal, focused on a common set of strategies and systems so that students could expect the same format for literacy instruction as they moved from grade to grade. This would allow skills to build over time. Developing teachers' skills in small group instruction was a critical component of this new approach. Over time, reading groups of four to five students ("guided reading groups") became the primary vehicle for reading instruction. Myrtle worked with teachers to develop a common format for the 120 minute literacy block (Exhibit 5). This schedule not only prioritized guided reading and preserved time for writing instruction, it also clarified expectations of what should happen on a daily basis. For most of each period, teachers worked with guided groups. When a student's group was not meeting with the teacher, students would read independently or complete prepared phonics activities. Myrtle made frequent visits to each classroom in part to ensure the literacy expectations were being met.

Content was sequenced so that students could achieve success even if they entered Highland after kindergarten. For example, by covering each literary genre in each grade's curriculum, students entering in an upper grade were less likely to have missed the one opportunity to learn a specific lesson in one of the lower grades. Recognizing the limited opportunities students had to read outside of school, Myrtle also instituted an expectation that all students spent time reading independently every day, thirty minutes for grades three through five. The school provided each student with an individual reading journal in which they exchanged letters with their teachers about what they read.

Writing had not been a formal part of the literacy program at Highland, even though students were required to write brief constructed responses (BCRs) on the MSA. Myrtle recognized that teachers needed professional development and a common procedure in order to teach writing well and prepare students adequately for the test. Practice writing prompts similar to BCRs were embedded into the curriculum and teachers received training on scoring student responses. Teachers provided students with written feedback on practice BCRs in both literacy and mathematics, and students revised each assignment (Exhibit 6). Teacher teams developed multiple writing prompts that were aligned with the scope and sequence of the curriculum and the cycle in which students wrote, received feedback and revised their work was repeated throughout the year. Students also used a checklist to review their BCRs before submitting them to their teachers (Exhibit 7).

Teachers developed a rigorous writing program that went beyond MSA requirements. They adjusted the MCPS writing program for their students because they had never received instruction in the curriculum's foundation lessons. A literacy coach developed detailed writing assignments for students as part of the literacy period with a focus on organizing writing (e.g. pre-writing activities) and author's purpose (e.g. persuasive writing). As part of the program, teachers developed common rubrics to use across classrooms to evaluate student writing.

Strengthening Mathematics Instruction

Unlike the Reading First program, Myrtle believed that the MCPS curriculum for mathematics would work well for Highland students. However, similar to his observations about literacy instruction, teachers were "doing their own thing," and math scores were very low. In response, he worked with teachers to develop a common format for 90 minute math blocks (Exhibit 8). Math units were organized around the concepts embedded in the indicators on formative assessments so that these tools could be used to more effectively differentiate instruction based on each student's needs.

A mathematics specialist worked with individual teachers and grade level teams to improve their content knowledge and instructional approaches, as well as to plan lessons and analyze data. As in literacy, grade level teams examined data collectively and redesigned plans as necessary. These teams discussed the daily informal formative assessments administered during the math blocks at least once a week and made adjustments to weekly plans. Based on this analysis, at the end of each unit the grade level teams reviewed student work and formative assessments and created plans for re-teaching certain material, differentiating future lessons to fill identified gaps and collecting lessons learned for future planning and assessment (Exhibit 9).

Building an Inclusion Model

Highland had long used a "pull-out" model for special education students and ESOL learners, which removed students with special needs from their classrooms for long periods of the day so they could receive targeted instruction. During the corrective action year, the school implemented an inclusion approach in which specially trained teachers "pushed-in" to classrooms to support these students. Some teachers hoped Myrtle would abandoned this when he arrived, but instead he strengthened the implementation. Worried that when removed from the classroom students were less

prepared to reach grade-level standards, Myrtle mandated that additional services for students with special needs could not serve as a replacement for the established curriculum. "They're being tested mainstream," Myrtle explained, "so they need to be instructed that way."

While the staff responded favorably to the idea of sometimes having two teachers in a classroom, Myrtle recognized that these teams would need additional support in order to ensure that the special education and ESOL teachers were utilized effectively. The school schedule allowed special education and ESOL teachers to be available when grade level teams met to plan curriculum and review data. In conversations with classroom teachers, these specialists could design specific in-class interventions that special needs students required in order to best learn the mainstream curriculum. While students who entered Highland with little or no English language skills often required direct instruction in syntax, the school sought to minimize the amount of time any student spent away from instruction in the core curriculum.

Introducing Staff Accountability for Teaching and Learning

Myrtle noticed in his observation period before becoming principal that though there were a number of great teachers at Highland, "the faculty members who were bad were so bad that it was obvious, and the legend about who the good teachers were was in some cases totally wrong."

After Myrtle took over, he worked with one early career teacher who was struggling mightily but did not embrace the new approach or the enhanced support. He continued to work with her, but also counseled that it was okay for her to try something else – no dishonor in leaving teaching. She did. Once the guided reading groups were implemented, the extra effort required to do it well – extra planning time to create activities, frequent informal formative assessments to construct effective student groupings – was more than some teachers evidently wanted to give, and they left on their own. Many teachers welcomed Myrtle's classroom visits, which included asking questions when he saw practices that were inconsistent with the new approach. But he recalled that "just regularly showing up in classrooms in the early days prompted some people to leave." He elaborated:

> One teacher who eventually left did not want me in his classroom and could not believe I continued to show up and question him. I let him know that it was a drag to have to do it. His defense was that though his students weren't performing well he was kind to them. It's true, he was very nice. But whatever learning was going on was happening in spite of his kindness. In fact for these kids, it's not kindness to be nice to them in the absence of rigorous instruction because they have been underserved for so long that they don't have a moment to waste.

Before Myrtle's arrival, a common practice was to send misbehaving students to the office at the first sign of trouble rather than attempting to get them back on track. At the beginning of the school day, when students were transitioning from their sometimes unstructured home environments into classrooms, teachers sent out so many students that the office would be packed. Myrtle made two changes – first, rather than launching immediately into instruction to start the day, the staff was expected to first engage students in classroom activities that helped them transition from their outside environments into the school's more structured culture. Second, he required teachers to keep misbehaving students in their classrooms and to call him or Steffan to come to them. As Myrtle described it, "three teachers left over this one adjustment."

Reflecting on why some teachers had been willing to stay in a low-performing, chaotic environment but left rather than support his attempts to improve it, Myrtle observed that for some, high poverty schools are seen as places where "as long as you keep kids busy, parents don't complain and central office doesn't pay much attention. That was not okay anymore at Highland."

He was surprised that when two of his underperforming teachers left and joined other schools, the hiring principals did not call for Myrtle's assessment of them. By 2009, 11 of the original 35 teachers remained in classrooms and some had taken other roles at the school. Though the replacement staff had similar educational backgrounds and years of experience as those who left, they knew what they were signing up for when they joined Highland. A central office administrator pointed to this change in accountability as one of the school's key success factors, saying,

> A principal from another district who had been at a high poverty school for some time recently visited Highland and asked Ray to tell him what to do to turn around his school. Ray asked, "Do you have any bad teachers?" The visitor answered yes. Ray replied, "Get rid of them and come back to see me, then I'll tell you how we did it." His underlying point was, you've been there a long time and have not been willing to hold underperforming teachers accountable. If you get serious about that, then I might believe you are serious about the rest of the hard work it takes to dramatically improve a school.

Using Data for Better Diagnosis and Instruction

Though the Achievement Steering Committee was a mechanism by which the district could monitor progress during Highland's time in corrective action, Myrtle increased the amount and usefulness of data collected and built on the systems that had been developed for teachers to analyze, share and use data to plan and adjust daily instruction.

Data collection and analysis became the driving force behind the literacy program – both with respect to guided reading groups and whole-class instruction. Guided reading groups were formed based on individual students' reading levels as assessed by formal running records, which were administered by classroom teachers throughout the school year using a product called mCLASS. Based on these results, teachers grouped students by skill level and introduced carefully selected texts and targeted strategies to pinpoint students' needs. Myrtle also required that every teacher perform an informal running record with at least one student during each guided reading group. This allowed teachers to track students' progress weekly to determine if the material presented in guided groups led to student progress and to make group adjustments if necessary. Frequent assessments led to grouping that ensured each student received differentiated instruction every day.

Data monitoring of individual students also revealed a wide-range of student readiness. Myrtle wanted to connect constant data analysis with specific intervention strategies that teachers could use once a student's level was accurately assessed. Based on MCPS benchmarks, Highland developed clear targets for minimum text reading levels at each grade, but also encouraged teachers to exceed them because most students could if given the right supports. In the same way that data informed how teachers divided students into guided reading groups, Myrtle sought a systematic approach to targeting students performing below grade level.

The literacy team developed multiple pathways along which a student could progress in order to reach the targets. Each spring this team, consisting of classroom teachers, intervention specialists, and the literacy coaches, met to determine which students required additional targeted instruction ("intervention"). In order to determine which interventions were likely to be effective, the team analyzed data from multiple reading tests, including an automated version of Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skill (DIBELS) delivered through mCLASS. Once a student was assigned to an intervention program, the team assessed which pathway fit his or her needs according to a decision tree (Exhibit 10). The assessments and the decision-trees allowed the team to determine whether students required phonics or comprehension intervention. Initial data informed which pathway a

student must follow in order to reach the benchmark, proven curricula provided the targeted instruction necessary and regular assessments indicated a student's progress toward the goal.

Although it was significantly shortened, whole class instruction remained the delivery mechanism for the required MCPS literacy curriculum. Here too data analysis informed instructional decisions. Lessons typically ended with brief formative assessments. Teachers used student responses on these assessments to gauge mastery of objectives and to make adjustments to future lessons.

Preparing Students for State Tests

Most of the diagnostic assessments at Highland were used for improving daily instruction, but teachers also used data strategically to prepare students for the state tests. Teachers that taught at the same grade level ("grade level team") worked together to develop MSA practice tests in reading and mathematics and delivered them once in the fall and again in February. Because they had confidence that their approach to literacy and math included higher standards than were assessed on the MSA, the only direct "test-prep" at Highland happened in the few weeks leading up to the test in March.

The practice tests were designed so that each question corresponded to a particular standard in the voluntary state curriculum, upon which the MSA was based. Scores on these practice tests were reported to the grade level teams, indicating what percentage of students mastered each standard. Based on item analysis, standards were divided into categories so that teachers could prioritize teaching to close holes in student understanding (Exhibit 11). Standards that few students mastered were made the first priority and grade level teams design targeted lessons to re-teach the material. They also developed warm-up problems that students could practice when formal re-teaching was not a possibility due to time constraints.

Staff at Highland also recognized that students needed to know more than the content standards in order to perform well on assessments. To address test taking skills across the school, teachers developed an Effective Effort rubric (Exhibit 12). The rubric alerted students to the behaviors that would allow them to be most successful on the state tests.

Special needs students' individual education plans mandated accommodations on state tests, ranging from extra time to oral dictation. These students had to be separated from their classmates during the tests. As a result, many students could not take the test in a familiar room or with their classroom teacher. To ease potential discomfort, all practice tests were administered according to formal test-taking conditions. Even before the first practice test, students and their proctors had lunches together in the classroom in which they would take the exam in order to increase their familiarity with each other and the room.

Establishing a Culture that Supports Learning

At Highland, changes in school culture occurred in three distinct ways – a new approach to managing student behavior, increased communication and collaboration among staff, and clear expectations for students, teachers, and parents.

Student Behavior

During his weeks of observation before becoming principal, Myrtle spent hours each day in classrooms supporting teachers struggling with classroom management. "Once I stood up on a desk," Myrtle remembered, "to try to get some order and books were flying all around me." Many classrooms were as chaotic as the hallways, where students ran around corners at high speeds and

fights broke out on a regular basis. There was a constant stream of students sent to the main office. During initial meetings with each grade level team, Myrtle heard teachers express their frustration with the inconsistent behavior expectations and lack of support from the previous administration.

Myrtle posited that many of the behavior problems could be explained by "assignments that were deadly boring." He believed that early decisions (increasing non-fiction texts and differentiating instruction so that material was accessible to all students) would improve student behavior. Myrtle monitored teachers' implementation of new curricula and instructional techniques by visiting classrooms regularly, often multiple times a day. He followed up the visits with emails to teachers in which he reviewed what he saw and asked questions about instructional decisions.

When teachers complained that fights at recess made teaching in the afternoons impossible, Myrtle began monitoring recess himself. "Ray's presence at recess made a big impression," explained one member of the staff. "He could deal with issues right there in the yard. Doing something that wasn't very principal-like built a lot of collateral with the staff." Teachers also appreciated that Steffan was in the lunchroom every day.

In fact, Steffan, who had been promoted to assistant principal after Myrtle's first year, was charged with overseeing school-wide student behavior. He worked with the staff to select and implement an established program known as Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) (Exhibit 13). Steffan and a team of teachers worked over the summer to develop clear expectations for behavior across the school and a system of positive reinforcements. By its third year, PBIS had contributed to a 96% reduction in suspensions and an 84% reduction in office referrals.

Staff Collaboration

Teachers at Highland became comfortable with constant, unannounced classroom visits, publically discussing how their students were achieving, and explaining to their colleagues how data informed each instructional decision.

Grade level teams became the central organizing structure at the school. Myrtle reworked the schedule to ensure that classroom teachers at each grade level had a common planning period each day and mandated that at least two of these periods per week be used for formal grade-team meetings. ESOL and special education teachers often attended to help prepare accommodations for students they pushed-in to work with.

Grade level teams used common planning time in various ways. They collectively determined daily objectives for both the reading and math blocks, created relevant formative assessments and reviewed effective methods for presenting and reviewing material. This not only resulted in consistency across classrooms but also allowed for constant reflection about the success of various instructional techniques, activities and materials. Weekly planning guides developed by the grade level teams were saved on the school's intranet allowing for administrators and content leaders to monitor a grade's progress and evaluate how closely each member followed the plan. Grade level team meetings were also a forum for professional development and interaction with the school's leadership team. Math and literacy coaches often attended to review data, introduce new techniques, and help brainstorm the most effective ways of presenting difficult material.

In addition to communicating with each other their planning and data, teachers developed systems to communicate about individual students and their progress. Each quarter, classroom teachers met formally with the intervention teachers who worked with students in their class. During these sessions ("data dialogues") they reviewed students' specific progress. In between data dialogues, intervention teachers emailed biweekly updates ("communication logs") to classroom

teachers updating them as to the progress of each student (Exhibit 14). Documentation from both data dialogues and communication logs were used when the literacy team made recommendations about whether a student would benefit from entry into or exit from intervention services.

As new teachers came into Highland, Steffan took responsibility for ensuring that they transitioned into the school's collaborative, data-driven culture and that they had all of the support and professional development they needed to successfully deliver the academic program. While the classroom management skills new teachers learned in their schools of education ran the gamut, their literacy instruction skills were quite low. In addition to support from literacy coaches, first- and second-year teachers had frequent formal meetings and informal interactions with Steffan to build their skills and better understand the school's instructional approach and culture.

Expectations

Myrtle expected students at Highland to far exceed state standards and perform the same or better than the more affluent students he had taught earlier in his career. He was frankly puzzled by questions from outsiders about why he was focused on all students achieving at the "advanced" level rather than on the combined percentage of students scoring proficient and advanced, as required for AYP. "Why wouldn't you be focused," he explained, "on advanced rather than proficient? Highland students start out with some disadvantages, so why not give them the advantage of arriving at middle school at the advanced level? They are absolutely capable of it, so why not create a program that helps them reach that mark?"

Before 2008, the MCPS goal for kindergartners was that they read at "text level three" before entering first grade. Myrtle had higher aspirations for his students, saying, "We've always aimed higher for our students, shooting for text level six or eight. This sends them to first grade as readers and puts them on track for the advanced level on the third grade MSA." In fact in 2008, MCPS changed its district-wide goal for kindergartners to text level six, citing data that suggested a strong correlation between reading at level six before first grade and scoring advanced in the third grade.

With the goal of "advanced" in mind, teachers attempted to develop systems based on the needs of their student population. Students had limited access to print materials outside of school, so teachers began literacy instruction on the first day of kindergarten and ensured that all students read independently during the school day. Students had limited access to quiet space at home and often accompanied parents to various jobs until late in the evening. As a result, Myrtle discouraged teachers from using homework to push lessons forward with younger students. Instead they developed "homework as a habit" that would serve students well when they were older and gave assignments focused on practicing skills already developed in class.

Myrtle expected teachers to follow the new systems their colleagues developed. While he acknowledged that staff needed consistent support and an environment in which risk taking was safe, he refused to negotiate on any system or teacher behavior correlated to student performance. He described his approach, saying, "When something new gets introduced it makes people insecure. Some people want to keep doing their own thing and resist. That's perfectly okay. But they need to go somewhere else where that's a perfectly okay thing to do. That's not here."

Parent attendance at "back-to-school" night was around 20% before Myrtle arrived, and teachers identified this as a major problem. Families often trickled in late, pushing the start of the program back. The need for translation of all announcements into Spanish limited the amount of information that could be shared using this format. "In order to get families in," Myrtle believed, "you have to meet their needs." The school focused on personal contact and school visits that worked with parents' schedules. In 2005, through intensive outreach by teachers, attendance at back to school night was

80%. At the event, parents were asked to sign up on the spot for conferences to review the first report cards that would come weeks later. Nevertheless, ongoing parent engagement was a difficult challenge due to work schedules and cultural differences. As one staff member explained, "Where most of our families come from, it's not good to be asked to the school. The best indication that your child is doing fine is if you never hear from his teacher."

In order to make the school a more integral part of families' lives, Highland began offering programs for families including ESOL instruction, math lessons, meetings to explain the testing program, and for parents with students in the early grades, opportunities to practice the alphabet and bring home materials to share with their children. While some families took advantage of these offerings, so far the majority did not. Many families remained wary of engaging too deeply; in fact, while the official poverty rate at Highland was just under 80%, a number of school staff and central office administrators estimated that the number would be well over 90% if every family that qualified would fill out the paper work.

Looking Ahead

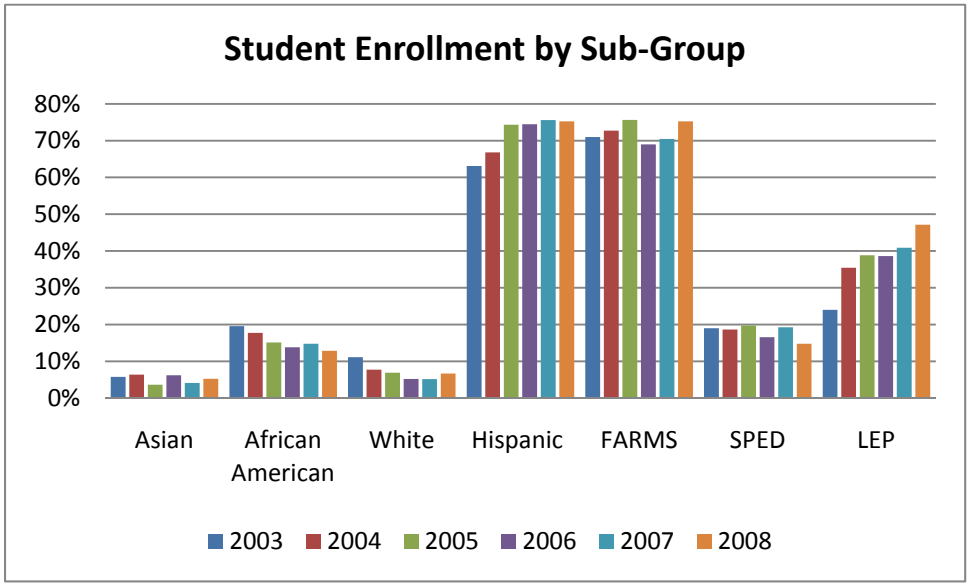
The state blue ribbon award recognized the performance levels in the fourth year of the turn-around and qualified Highland for consideration for a national blue ribbon. Myrtle described Highland's four year journey, saying:

> Years one and two were about putting the new approaches and systems in place, building the capacity of the people who wanted to succeed, and weeding out the people who were never going to be on board. Year three we stabilized, the background noise went way down, the team began to flourish, and there was less need to chase people down to ensure they were on board. By year four, teachers basically took over the school and run everything now through their grade level teams with support from the coaches, Scott, and me.

By the spring of 2009, the United States economy was in the midst of what appeared to be a deep recession. Myrtle and his team anticipated that the economic uncertainly would increase the stress in the lives of Highland families and lead to a higher mobility rate. Similarly, as the state budget shrank, there were ramifications for the school. Highland was already forced to contend with decreased per pupil funding from the district and a 61% cut in its Reading First grant.

For now, however, Myrtle made his way outside to recess, a familiar daily routine. As he closed the door to his office, he laughed to himself at the visitor's reaction to the blue ribbon folded neatly on his office couch. Maybe it was time to find it a better spot.

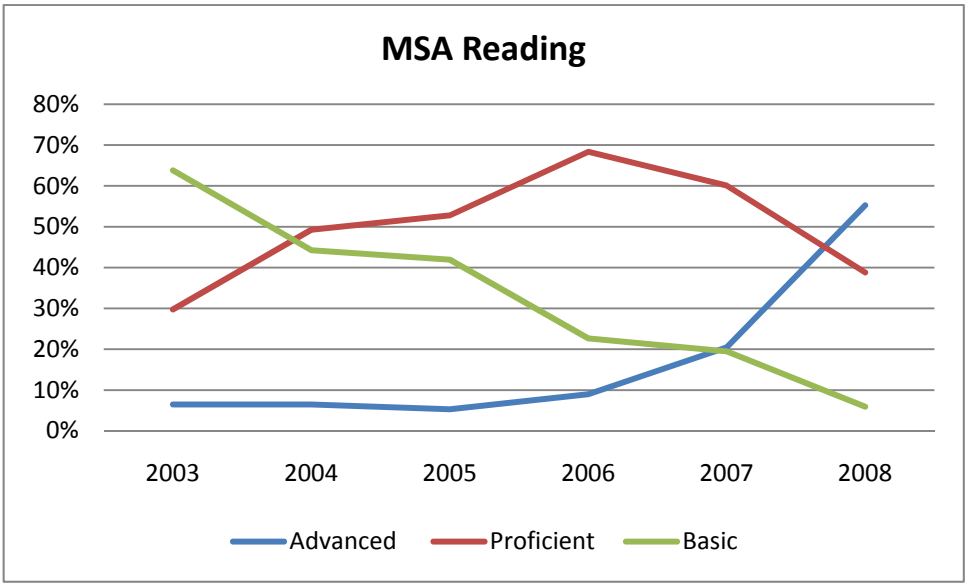
Exhibit 1: Highland Elementary School Demographics

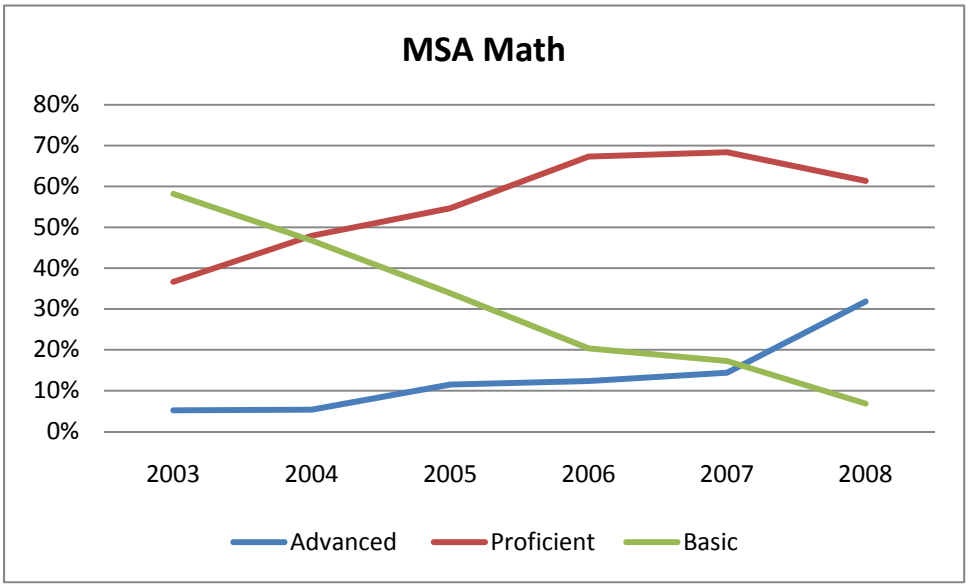


Note: FARMS is an acronym for free and reduced price meals and is a proxy for poverty, SPED is shorthand for students with a special education designation, and LEP stands for limited English proficiency.

Source: Maryland Department of Education and case writer analysis

Exhibit 2a: Highland Elementary School MSA Data, Combined for All Tested Grades

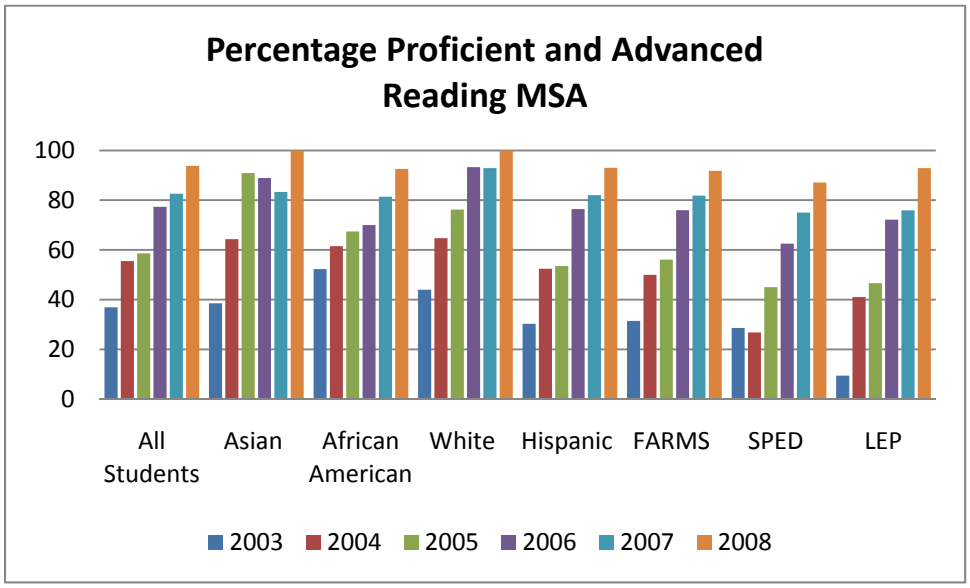


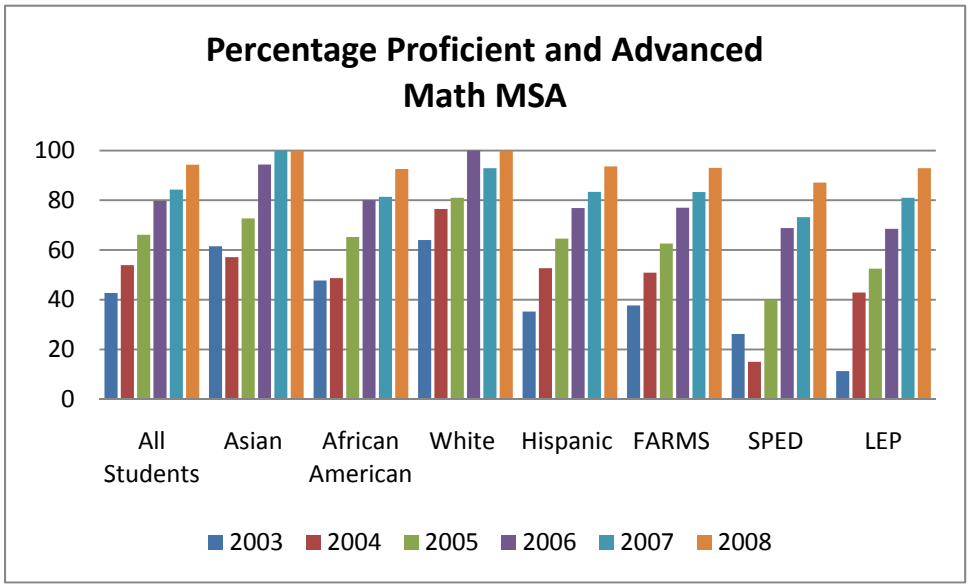


Note: 2003 includes grades three and five, 2004 – 2008 includes grades three, four, and five

Source: Maryland Department of Education and case writer analysis

Exhibit 2b: Highland MSA Data by Sub-Group, All Tested Grades Combined

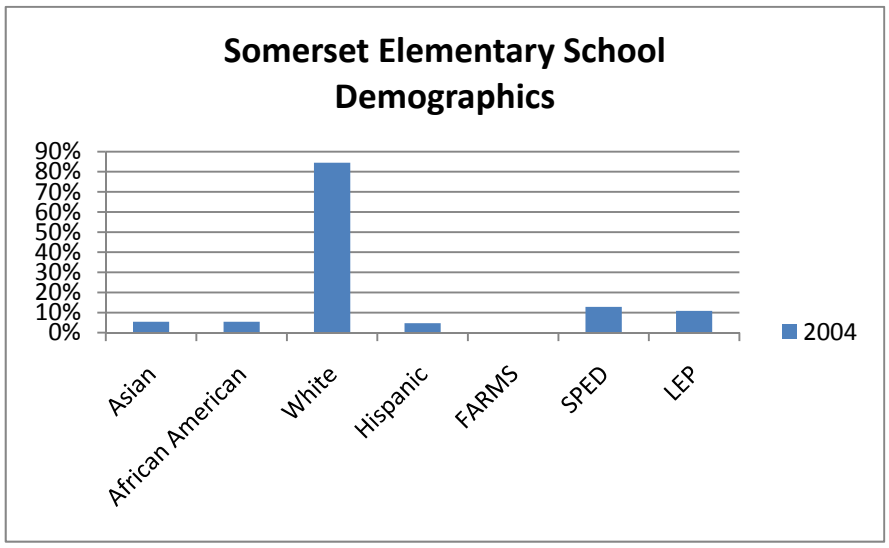




Note: 2003 includes grades three and five, 2004 – 2008 includes grades three, four, and five. FARMS is an acronym for free and reduced price meals and is a proxy for poverty, SPED is shorthand for students with a special education designation, and LEP stands for limited English proficiency.

Source: Maryland Department of Education and case writer analysis

Exhibit 3: Data for Ray Myrtle's Former School



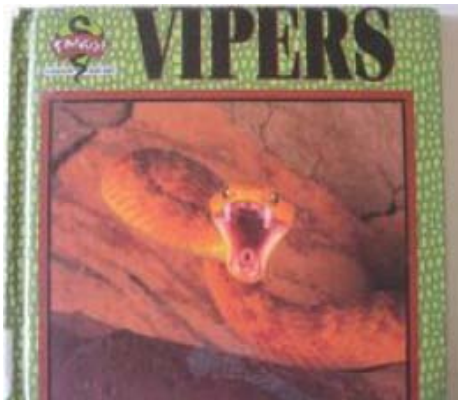
Note: FARMS is an acronym for free and reduced price meals and is a proxy for poverty, SPED is shorthand for students with a special education designation, and LEP stands for limited English proficiency.

Somerset MSA Performance, 2004

Subject	Advanced	Proficient	Basic
Math	45%	47%	8%
Reading	49%	42%	9%

Source: Maryland Department of Education and case writer analysis

Exhibit 4: Sample Non-Fiction Titles Used at Highland Elementary



Source: Cover art from the Library Thing website, http://www.librarything.com/work/970848/covers/, downloaded July 3, 2009

Exhibit 5: Common Format for 120 Minute Literacy Block

Reading & Language Arts Master Schedule
Spanier '08-'09

Grade Level: ___				Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.
Reading/Language Arts Block 120 min.	Reading 90 min.	Whole Group 20 min.	Reading	9:50 - 10:05	→	→	→	→
			Word Work	10:05 - 10:15	→	→	→	→
		Small Group 60 – 75 min.	BGL 15 min.	11:00 – 11:15	11:00 – 11:15	11:00 – 11:15	11:00 – 11:15	11:00 – 11:15
			OGL 15 min.	10:30 – 10:45	10:30 – 10:45	10:30 – 10:45	10:30 – 10:45	10:30 – 10:45
			AGL 15 min.	10:15 -10:30	10:15 -10:30	10:15 -10:30	10:15 -10:30	10:15 -10:30
			O/BGL 15 min.	10:45 – 11:00	10:45 – 11:00	10:45 – 11:00	10:45 – 11:00	10:45 – 11:00
	Writing 30 min.	• Whole Group • Small Group • Handwriting • Individual		9:00 – 9:50	→	→	→	→

Note: "Spanier" refers to the Highland teacher who used this schedule as a guide

Source: Highland Elementary School

Exhibit 6: Brief Constructed Response Exercises with Teacher Notes and Student Revisions

Character Trait BCR

Identify a character trait for the main character of the story. Use details from the text to support your answer.

Janie's character trait is mean. I know this because when Janie was siting down with her dad, she said we cant aford any clothe all the kid's can aford nice clothe and can afod tlpt up cloths.

(1) Do you have 2 text details? I only see one.

RE-WRITE (2) Date_____

Identify a character trait for the main character of the story. Use details from the text to support your answer.

The main character Janie Ida is mean. ✓ I know this because In the story she said why are we so pour and everb body in the class is richer than us!" Also Janie said I have torn up clothe.

Does this show she is mean or poor?

Much better writing in complete sentences!

Source: Highland Elementary School

Exhibit 7: Student Checklist for Brief Constructed Response

Student Checklist
Responding to a Brief constructed Response

Date					
1. Did I read the question?					
2. Did I understand what the question was asking me to do? Did I highlight or underline key words?					
3. Did I restate the question in my own words?					
4. Did I revisit the text to locate support for the answer?					
5. Did I pre-write or organize the information in a graphic organizer?					
6. Did I answer the question completely and include support from the text?					
7. Did I check my answer?					

Source: Highland Elementary School

Exhibit 8: Common Format for 90 Minute Mathematics Block

90 Minute Math Block
Grade 5

90 Math Block Sections	Time in Minutes	Description
Calendar Math OR Math Minutes OR MSA Prep	15	• Math Minutes are a review of concepts learned and an introduction of topics to come. • Math minutes are an excellent review of 4th & 5th grade concepts for MSA. • Math minutes give students background knowledge of concepts to be taught in the future. • During this time I walk around and check to see that students have completed their homework. • During MSA prep time the students may be working on a BCR or on Selected Response practice
Warm-up	5	• This is usually an anticipatory set that I use to get students thinking about what they will be learning today. • To "spark" background knowledge.
Lesson On some days instead of a lesson: Quizzes and Formal Formative Assessments are given during this time.	15-20	• Direct instruction on a new concept usually with some form of notes or • Discovery lesson where students use a manipulative or problem solving strategy to discover a concept (about 30 minutes) or • Review of past concept usually with review problems • All students are exposed to all lessons (Full Inclusion) Formative Assessments: At the end of the lesson I frequently give a quick formative assessment to see who needs additional help. The formative assessment may be in the form of a few questions on an index card or I simply walk around during lesson to see who will need more help. I often give a few examples for the students to complete and I can assess who will need more help. I write the students names down on a post-it note and then pull them into a small group.
Independent Practice and Small groups On some days: Quizzes and Forma Formative Assessments are given during this time.	30-40	Independent Practice • Students work independently or with partners on the concept taught during the lesson. • During this time I often walk around on makes a list of the students that are having difficulty with the concept. This is an informal formative assessment. or • Students will work on concepts taught on a previous day. • While students are working independently I call small groups Small Groups • Size 4-8 students • Groups are based on need (review or acceleration) or • Groups are pulled by table group to teach or review a concept to the whole class in a small group setting.

What does small group time look like?

Classroom Teacher	Special Education/ESOL Teacher
• Works with all students in the class • Review 5th grade concepts • Teach whole class lesson in a small group setting • Accelerated lessons • Some accommodation	• Works with all students in the class • Review 5th grade concepts • Teach whole class lesson in a small group setting • Basic skill review • All accommodations

Does every day look like this schedule? NO!
We try are best to keep to the schedule, but like all things in teaching we need to be flexible and go with the flow. Some days all the students need to review a concept, so we may re-teach the concept whole class. The whole class lesson may be going so well that we keep going with the lesson and shorten small group time.

Source: Highland Elementary School

Exhibit 9: Notes from Mathematics End of Unit Data Dialogue (page 1)

Math Data Dialogue Notes

Grade: 3 Unit: 1 Date

What does this data tell us? (grade level indicators, challenge indicators, SPED, ESOL, GT)

Estimate sums and differences of numbers < 1,000

- 37% of all students had minimal understanding of this on grade level indicator
- Only 20% of all 3rd grade students had complete understanding

Gather, organize, and display data using appropriate scales

- 58% of all students had complete understanding of this on grade level indicator.

Student 1 (in EMT process)
Student 2 : (will EMT)
Student 3 ,Student 4 (in EMT process)
Student 5
Student 6
Stude (will be switching him to Dickinson's math class)

- were minimal or developing in most indicators.
- All of these students are ESOL students, except Student 3 who was exited last year.

Student 1
Student 2
Student 3
Student 4
Student 5
Student 6
Most of Hambrecht's math class

- were complete in most indicators

What questions do we have?

What are we doing for the students who are struggling with learning the indicators?

What are we doing for the students who are ready and can be challenged with above grade level indicators?

What's the plan for improving student achievement with the estimating sums and differences of numbers < 1,000 indicator?

Continued on page 22

Exhibit 9, continued: Notes from Mathematics End of Unit Data Dialogue (page 2)

Natalie is concerned about a few of her students – she questions whether they are really ready to be in her high class, specifically Student 1 (in EMT process).

Students' study skills are weak – they rush through their work, and don't read directions carefully. What strategies can we use to teach students good study skills?

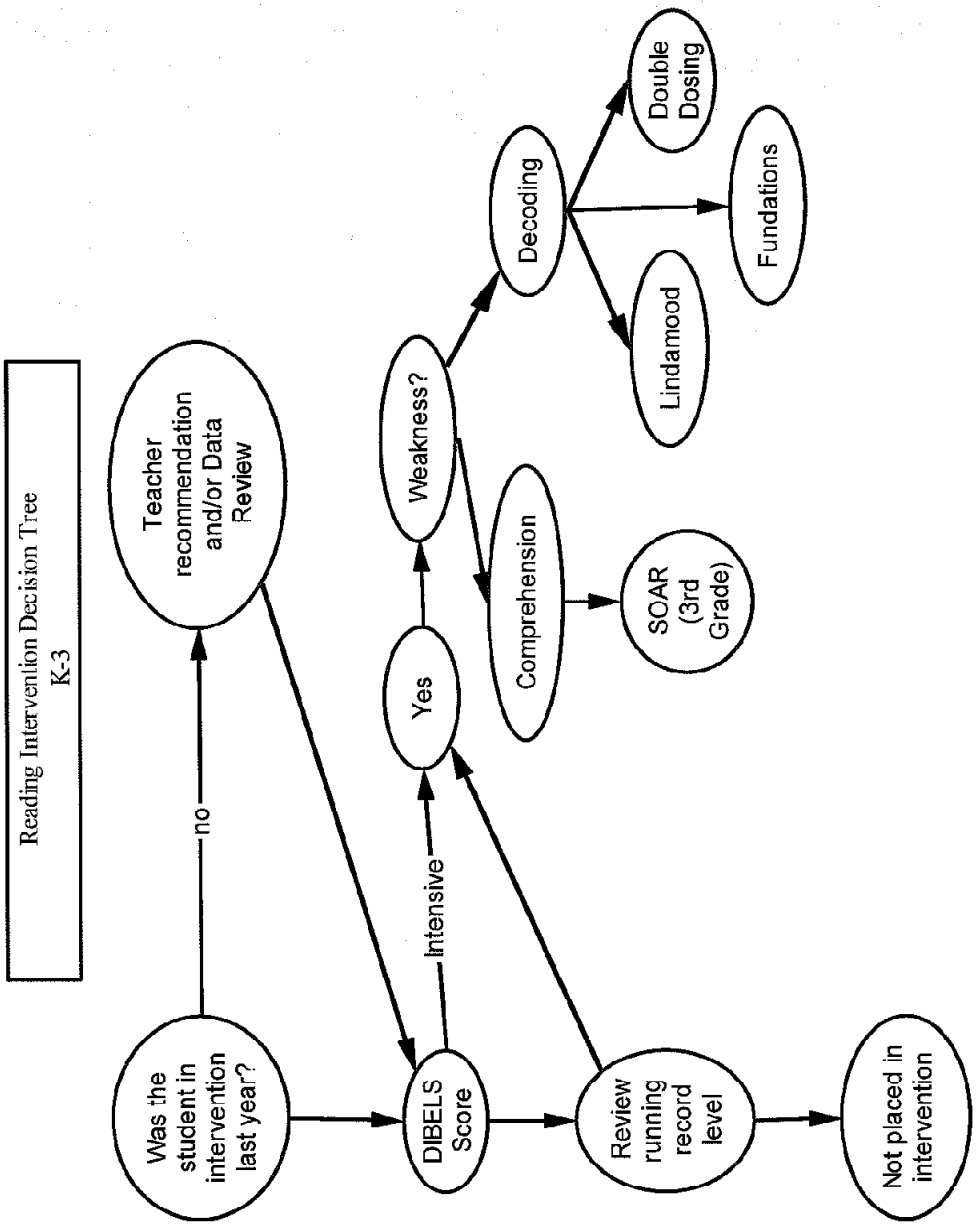
What are the next steps?

1. Add 2 or 3 review days throughout units since each unit included so much math content over an extended period of time
2. Math Vocabulary –
   a. Introduce a Vocabulary Book
   b. Incorporate vocabulary into objectives
   c. Think-pair-shares – to allow students to "talk" about math
3. Incorporate the "effective effort" rubric for formatives and summatives
4. Review estimating sums and differences of numbers <1,000 in warm ups
5. Keep S1 in Natalie's class – he has complete understanding of the on grade level indicators, and is being exposed to all of the above grade level indicators. He wouldn't get all of that, or at that pace in another class.
6. Move Student 4 into Dickinson's class
7. Continue exposing above grade level indicators to those students who are ready to be challenged – in differentiated small group instruction

Note: Student names redacted due to privacy rules.

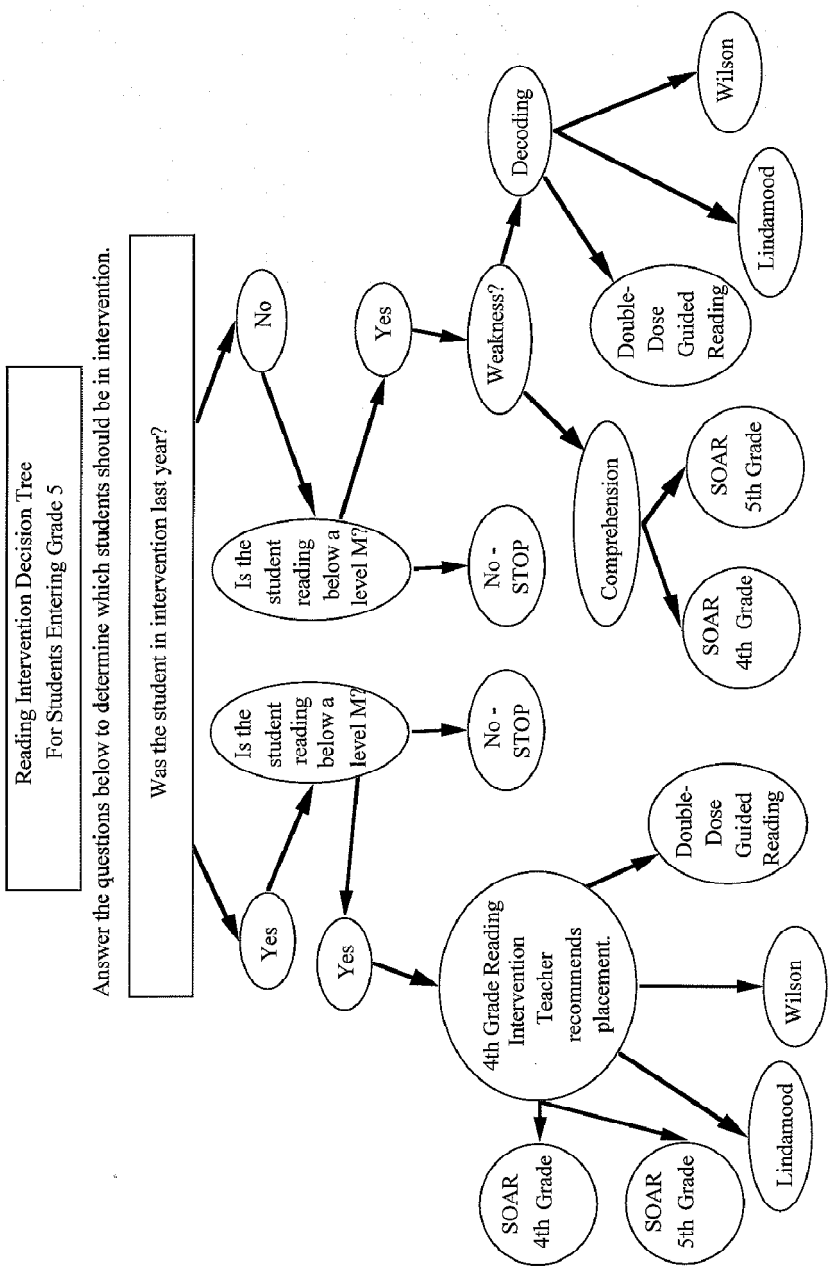
Source: Highland Elementary School

Exhibit 10: Sample Literacy Decision Trees



Source: Highland Elementary School and case writer analysis

Exhibit 10, continued: Sample Literacy Decision Trees



Source: Highland Elementary School and case writer analysis

Exhibit 11: Formative Assessment Document for Literacy

Highland Grade 3 MSA Reading Practice Test Results 2008-2009

Objectives	Form A #	Form B #	% Correct Form A	% Correct Form B	Review Needed
Vocabulary	1	1	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲
	2	2	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲•
	3	3	66	[redacted]	•
	4	4	78	66	
	5	5	58	[redacted]	•
	6	6	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲
	7	7	66	[redacted]	
	8	8	61	[redacted]	
	9	9	58	54	
	10	10	71	[redacted]	
	11	11	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲
	12	12	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲
Text Features	22	14	68	71	
	23	19	71	[redacted]	•
	47	54	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲•
		55		64	
Main Idea/Details	13	16	53	[redacted]	•
	16	18	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲•
	24	37	76	[redacted]	
	41	39	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲
	55	45	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲
	59		66		
Inferences/Conclusions Predictions Prior Knowledge	15	26	76	59	
	21	43	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲•
	35	48	61	[redacted]	
	37	50	[redacted]	64	
	40	51	58	[redacted]	
	43	53	56	[redacted]	
	49	56	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲•
	50	59	54	[redacted]	•
	51		53		
	54		56		
	57		58		
Summarizing/Paraphrasing	19		[redacted]		▲
Sequence	25	23	64	[redacted]	
	33	40	53	53	
Cause/Effect Problem/Solution Compare/Contrast	26	27	[redacted]	73	▲
	27	42	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲
	53		53		
Author's Purpose/Audience	18	58	[redacted]	53	▲
	38		59		
Fact and Opinion	17	17	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲•
	42	41	[redacted]	[redacted]	▲•
		57		[redacted]	•

Blue=80% and above Yellow=50%-79% Red=Below 50%
▲ = Objectives in most need of review (Form A)
•=Objectives in most need of review (Form B)

Source: Highland Elementary School

Exhibit 12: Effective Effort Rubric for Students

Name_____

Effective Effort for MSA

I...				
...was seated at my desk and ready to learn no later than 8:50 a.m.				
...looked at my teacher when she was giving directions.				
...attempted all test items.				
...went back in the text to find answers to my questions.				
...worked quietly without distracting others.				
...bubbled in my answers clearly.				
...checked my work carefully if I finished early.				
...tried my hardest at all times.				
...teacher initials (Hawk Bill earned)				

Source: Highland Elementary School

Exhibit 13: Core Principles of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

1. We can effectively teach appropriate behavior to all children. All PBIS practices are founded on the assumption and belief that all children can exhibit appropriate behavior. As a result, it is our responsibility to identify the contextual setting events and environmental conditions that enable exhibition of appropriate behavior. We then must determine the means and systems to provide those resources.

2. Intervene early. It is best practices to intervene before targeted behaviors occur. If we intervene before problematic behaviors escalate, the interventions are much more manageable. Highly effective universal interventions in the early stages of implementation which are informed by time sensitive continuous progress monitoring, enjoy strong empirical support for their effectiveness with at-risk students.

3. Use of a multi-tier model of service delivery. PBIS uses an efficient, needs-driven resource deployment system to match behavioral resources with student need. To achieve high rates of success for all students, instruction in the schools must be differentiated in both nature and intensity. To efficiently differentiate behavioral instruction for all students. PBIS uses tiered models of service delivery.

4. Use research-based, scientifically validated interventions to the extent available. No Child Left Behind requires the use of scientifically based curricula and interventions. The purpose of this requirement is to ensure that students are exposed to curriculum and teaching that has demonstrated effectiveness for the type of student and the setting. Research-based, scientifically validated interventions provide our best opportunity at implementing strategies that will be effective for a large majority of students.

5. Monitor student progress to inform interventions. The only method to determine if a student is improving is to monitor the student's progress. The use of assessments that can be collected frequently and that are sensitive to small changes in student behavior is recommended. Determining the effectiveness (or lack of) an intervention early is important to maximize the impact of that intervention for the student.

6. Use data to make decisions. A data-based decision regarding student response to the interventions is central to PBIS practices. Decisions in PBIS practices are based on professional judgment informed directly by student office discipline referral data and performance data. This principle requires that ongoing data collection systems are in place and that resulting data are used to make informed behavioral intervention planning decisions.

7. Use assessment for three different purposes. In PBIS, three types of assessments are used: 1) screening of data comparison per day per month for total office discipline referrals, 2) diagnostic determination of data by time of day, problem behavior, and location and 3) progress monitoring to determine if the behavioral interventions are producing the desired effects.

Source: PBIS website, http://www.pbis.org/school/primary_level/default.aspx, downloaded June 26, 2009

Exhibit 14: Sample Communication Log, Fourth Grade Math

In order to improve communication between intervention and classroom teachers, intervention teachers will complete the chart below for each group on a bi-weekly basis. Classroom teachers, please share any questions, comments, or concerns in the classroom teacher feedback section each week.

Intervention Teacher: Chapman/Lee
Classroom Teacher: Pellicci and Swenson
Grade: 4
Date(s): November 6 - December 19

Group	Targeted Skills	Questions/Concerns
Pellicci:	• Divisibility • Prime and composite numbers • Greatest Common Factor • Least Common Multiple • Prime factorization • Patterns • Expressions	The biggest struggle for all of the students is not having the multiplication/division facts memorized. In this group, [redacted] and [redacted] stand out as the strongest in remembering and applying the concepts. Both are very good at BCRs- using words and numbering to explain how they solved problems. [redacted] is struggling with keeping up the most. He is often distracted because the group is moving fast. As a whole, the students are able to do each skill individually at an introduction level, but struggle when they are given independent work and need to decide which skill is needed to complete a problem. This was the case with LCM & GCF. With the exception of David, they understood how to calculate LCM & GCF when given two numbers but couldn't apply it to a problem similar to one they will encounter on the assessment. Divisibility rules were particularly difficult for this group to grasp. Expressions, prime and composite numbers was an easier concept to grasp for all of them.
Swenson:	• Divisibility • Prime and composite numbers • Greatest Common Factor • Least Common Multiple • Prime factorization • Patterns • Expressions	The biggest struggle for all of the students is not having the multiplication/division facts memorized. In this group, [redacted] stand out as the strongest in remembering and applying the concepts. [redacted] are struggling to keep up the most. As a whole, the students are able to do each skill individually, but struggle when they are given independent work and need to decide which skill is needed to complete a problem. This was the case with LCM & GCF. With the exception of [redacted], they understood how to calculate LCM & GCF when given two numbers but couldn't apply it to a problem similar to one they will encounter on the assessment. Divisibility rules were particularly difficult for this group to grasp. Expressions, prime and composite numbers was an easier concept to grasp for all of them.

Classroom Teacher Feedback:

Note: Student names redacted due to privacy rules. Pellicci and Swenson each had six students in their groups

Source: Highland Elementary School