

River Valley Charter School

Relevant Comments to the Final Site Visit Report of Findings

January 24, 2006 Department of Education Site Visit

May 2, 2006

Page and paragraph numbers below reference the draft of the 2005- 2006 Site Visit Report by the Massachusetts Department of Education. Findings are numbered to aid communications of our responses. This document differs from the March 10, 2006 Corrections Report in that the corrections made by the D. O. E. are eliminated in this document and the Relevant Comments continue to correct and clarify the Site Visit Report findings.

Page 1, paragraph 5

Relevant Comments: Regarding a participant in site visit: As you know, one of the participants on the site visit team has a child on the wait list at River Valley Charter School. Her child is #25 for our third-grade wait list for the fall 2006 school year. She received extensive mentoring by RVCS board members and administration in conjunction with the opening of Hill View Montessori Charter School. RVCS was given a dissemination grant to provide these services. In addition, she worked as a substitute teacher for RVCS. In order to maintain impartiality, we strongly suggest that future site team members sign a disclosure statement of non-affiliation with schools they are auditing.

Academic Success

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Finding #4: "In all observed classrooms, student behavior was exemplary, though some inconsistencies were noted regarding time on task, particularly in the middle school."

Relevant Comments: (With regard to lost instructional time in the middle school as a result of inefficient transitions) In order to accommodate the site visit team, the middle school vacated two of its five classrooms and shifted those classes across the hall to the middle school Great Room and stage areas. The art classes were moved from the stage area to the science lab. All three of these shifts resulted in art and other instructional materials not being readily assessable due to the creative nature of the classes. Normally, we find transitions to be efficient and timely. The accountability system utilized by the teachers of recording tardy arrivals to class on the progress reports has proven to be effective in limiting late arrivals. In reference to the statement "RVCS does not have a passing time built in for older students," we do have an expectation for passing time in the middle school. Given the proximity of the classrooms, the small number of middle school students, and the fact that classrooms, lockers, and bathrooms are within 30 feet of each other, students are expected to be in the appropriate classes within a few minutes.

Finding #5: "Learning objectives have been identified for all grades and members of the faculty have developed the RVCS Assessment Toolset as an internal assessment system based on these objectives. However, the Toolset itself does not outline the standards for measurement and for those without Montessori training, definitions of proficiency are unclear."

Relevant Comments: The River Valley Toolset does outline the standards for measurement. This is a complex system and those observers who are not Montessori trained may have some difficulty understanding how we measure student progress with the various documents of the River Valley Toolset. The "standards for measurement" (four-point scale) are outlined in the River Valley Toolset through the progress reports' definitions for proficiency. They are additionally listed on the teachers' tracking sheets.

The current middle school team, consisting of two new teachers, met repeatedly this fall in order to gain an understanding and maintain consistency in the use of our standards of measurement. The key to the progress report (see table below) is a four-point-system because of the transitional nature of middle school to high school. We saw a need to convert to the "four-point system" so that high schools receiving our transcripts could easily translate our standards of measurement and levels of proficiency.

A part of the progress report sent home to parents includes an explanation of the levels of proficiency. In addition, this information is presented to parents each fall as part of our "Forum on Assessment." The definitions are listed here for clarification.

River Valley Charter School Progress Report Key	
I	Introductory Level -The student is developing a knowledge base for further exploration.
W	Working Level -The student has a knowledge base for further exploration. The student is moving towards independent practice of skills.
P	Proficient Level -The student consistently demonstrates skills and understanding. The student is capable of self-directed exploration.
A	Application Level -The student is internalizing and assimilating knowledge. The student is able to effectively share knowledge and creatively apply understanding.

This four-point system is used at all levels, K-8, on the tracking sheets and the progress reports. The progress reports include essential learning objectives (Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and Montessori scope and sequence) or categories of them for each level. *This response is made to clarify the consistency of our assessment documents used for "standards of measurement."*

Relevant Comments: In the explanation of Finding # 5, there is a reference to the "exit level report." The "exit level report" is a summative document used by the administration to determine student retention and promotion as well as for accountability data used in the annual report.

Using our standards of measurement (IWPA), teachers make decisions on the levels of mastery for exit level goals based on teaching experience with a child over a three-year time block. It is also important to note that the Montessori materials are self-correcting, giving instant feedback to the learner. Work by the child is immediately observable by the teacher so that notes can be made on the tracking sheets as to the child's progress. This information is then transferred to the progress reports three times a year which are used to complete the end of the year exit level documents.

Finding #6: "The school reports high percentages of success on the learning objectives across grade levels, far exceeding their stated accountability goal for internal assessments."

Relevant Comments: Clarification of "Table I-Percentage of students who meet or exceed documented learning objectives"

Our exit level data for Elementary 1 third-year students shows that not all students met their goals in all subjects. This determination was based both on qualitative and quantitative data which stem from the TerraNova and MCAS tests, as well as teacher-collected information using the River Valley Toolset.

In Elementary 2, Table I states that four students did not pass the MCAS math test. They demonstrated academic progress in math and other subjects according to their TerraNova test scores and by Toolset data. *This determination was made based on data that we had at the time of the exit level for those students.* Unfortunately, MCAS scores for grades 3, 6, & 8 students arrive in the fall and are not timely for use as exit level data.

MCAS- UPDATE

A total of 193 River Valley students in grades three through eight participated in the MCAS test in spring 2005. The results of these tests have been compared to state averages, as well as analyzed longitudinally to identify possible weaknesses of our program. Following is a table of revised scores for the spring 2005 MCAS for both River Valley and the state. Note the small sample sizes (*n*) for River Valley, which is between 20 and 39 students.

Percentage of Students in Each Category									
	River Valley					State			
	<i>n</i> =	A	P	NI	W	A	P	NI	W
3 rd -Grade Reading	39	NA	74	26	0	na	62	31	7
4 th -Grade ELA	31	6	39	48	6	10	40	40	11
4 th -Grade Mathematics	31	10	16	55	19	14	26	44	15
5 th -Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	32	19	59	22	0	16	35	38	12
6 th -Grade Mathematics	33	12	24	52	12	17	29	30	23

7 th -Grade ELA	38	11	66	16	8	10	56	27	8
8 th Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	20	15	35	40	10	4	29	41	26
8 th -Grade Mathematics	20	10	40	25	25	13	26	30	31

(Key: A= Advanced P= Proficient NI= Needs Improvement W= Warning)

MCAS Analysis

- For nearly every test given, *River Valley had a lower percentage of students in the Warning category than the state.* The exceptions are fourth-grade math, which was lower and seventh-grade ELA, which was the same. In three instances, the rate at which River Valley students scored in the Warning category was at least 11 percent lower than the state (11 percent for sixth-grade Mathematics, 12 percent for fifth-grade Science and Technology/Engineering, and 16 percent for eighth-grade Science and Technology/Engineering).
- For third-grade Reading and fifth-grade Science and Technology/Engineering, *River Valley had no students scoring in the Warning category.*

Percentage of Students in Warning Category			
	River Valley	State	Difference
3 rd -Grade Reading	0	7	-7
4 th -Grade ELA	6	11	-5
4 th -Grade Mathematics	19	15	4
5 th -Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	0	12	-12
6 th -Grade Mathematics	12	23	-11
7 th -Grade ELA	8	8	0
8 th -Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	10	26	-16
8 th -Grade Mathematics	25	31	-6

- For most of the tests administered, *River Valley had a lower percentage of students scoring in the lower two categories combined (Needs Improvement and Warning) than the state.*

Percentage of Students in Needs Improvement and Warning Categories Combined			
	River Valley	State	Difference
3 rd -Grade Reading	26	38	-12
4 th -Grade ELA	54	51	3
4 th -Grade Mathematics	74	59	15
5 th -Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	22	50	-28
6 th -Grade Mathematics	64	53	9

7 th -Grade ELA	24	35	-11
8 th -Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	50	66	-16
8 th -Grade Mathematics	50	61	-11

- In five of eight of the tests administered, *River Valley had a higher percentage of students scoring in the Proficient category than the state.*

Percentage of Students in Proficient Category			
	River Valley	State	Difference
3 rd -Grade Reading	74	62	12
4 th -Grade ELA	39	40	-1
4 th -Grade Mathematics	16	26	-10
5 th -Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	59	35	24
6 th -Grade Mathematics	24	29	-5
7 th -Grade ELA	66	56	10
8 th -Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	35	29	6
8 th -Grade Mathematics	40	26	14

- In five of eight of the tests administered, *River Valley had a higher percentage of students scoring in the upper two categories combined (Advanced and Proficient) than the state.*

Percentage of Students in Advanced and Proficient Categories Combined			
	River Valley	State	Difference
3 rd -Grade Reading	74	62	12
4 th -Grade ELA	45	50	-5
4 th -Grade Mathematics	26	40	-14
5 th -Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	78	51	27
6 th -Grade Mathematics	36	46	-10
7 th -Grade ELA	77	66	11
8 th -Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	50	33	17
8 th -Grade Mathematics	50	39	11

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Finding #8: “River Valley has consistently made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), although performance compared to the state and the primary sending district varies.”

Relevant Comments: When one considers the state-wide performance of special needs students compared with the higher percentage of special needs students at River Valley, then RVCS is performing quite well.

- In third-grade Reading, special needs students from River Valley outscored those from the state. In fact, 21 percent of the state’s special needs students failed the test; no River Valley student failed the test.
- In fourth-grade ELA and Mathematics, the percentage of special needs students in the Needs Improvement and Warning categories was higher than that of the state. However, only 20 percent of River Valley’s special needs students scored in the Warning category in both tests, compared with a state average of 30 percent for ELA and 39 percent for Mathematics.
- In fifth-grade Science and Technology/Engineering, the percentage of special needs students in the Needs Improvement and Warning categories was much lower than that of the state average. Also, no River Valley students scored in the Warning category, as compared to 31 percent of the state’s special needs students.
- In sixth-grade Mathematics, River Valley’s special needs students performed better than those of the state. In addition, only 10 percent of River Valley students scored in the Warning category, compared to 56 percent of students from the state.
- In seventh-grade ELA, River Valley’s special needs students outperformed the state by a substantial margin.
- In eighth-grade Science and Technology/Engineering, the average River Valley special needs student performs at much higher level than the average state special needs student.
- In eighth-grade Mathematics, River Valley’s special needs students performed at a slightly lower level than the state. However, only 50 percent of River Valley’s students scored in the Warning category, compared to 67 percent of those students from the state.

Percentage of Special Needs Students in Needs Improvement and Warning Categories			
	River Valley	State	Difference
3 rd -Grade Reading	38	66	-29
4 th -Grade ELA	100	81	19
4 th -Grade Mathematics	100	86	14
5 th -Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	50	76	-26
6 th -Grade Mathematics	70	85	-15
7 th -Grade ELA	44	72	-28
8 th -Grade Science and Technology/Engineering	67	92	-25
8 th -Grade Mathematics	100	91	9

Historical Data

If one compares the eighth-grade math scores of 2005 with those students' scores in grade six in 2003, there is significant improvement over the two-year period. The same is true for the current sixth grade when compared to their fourth-grade scores.

TABLE 1. Same Class MCAS MATH Comparisons

Year	Grade	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning
2003	Grade 6	0	45	35	20
2005	Grade 8	10	40	25	25

This class had 45 percent in the two highest categories in 2003 and 50 percent in 2005. They had 55 percent in the NI and W rankings in 2003 but only 50 percent in 2005. This indicates that the math scores have improved over the past two years.

TABLE 2. Same Class MCAS MATH Comparisons

Year	Grade	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning
2003	Grade 4	6	35	41	18
2005	Grade 6	12	24	53	12

As a class in 2003, 82 percent passed the MCAS. In 2005, this same group had 87 percent success in passing scores.

Of the current 25 grade seven students (reported in table 2 as sixth-year students) who are identified as needing extra math support for this year: 12 advanced their scores from grade four to grade six; four were not in our school prior to 2005; four remained the same (one in Advanced); five of the remaining scores went down slightly. This is another indication that Math MCAS scores have improved over time.

In reference to Table II in Finding #8 (RVCS MCAS Results by Performance Category, 2002-2005), the following is true:

Grade Four ELA: Two students failed the test, accounting for 6 percent of the W category. These two students were at RVCS less than one year.

Grade Four Math: Six students failed the test, accounting for 19 percent of the W category. One student was at RVCS less than one year. Two others only attended RVCS for a few years and

arrived poorly prepared. Their TerraNova scores have risen substantially since arrival at RVCS. This leaves two students who are definitely RVCS students with significant special needs.

Grade Six Math: Four students failed the test, accounting for 12 percent of the W category. One student has been at RVCS less than two years. Three students who failed were definitely RVCS students with special needs.

Grade Seven ELA: Three students failed the test, accounting for 8 percent of the W category. One of the three was new to RVCS that year. Two others have severe learning disabilities.

Grade Eight Math: Five students failed the test, accounting for 25 percent of the W category. Two students attended RVCS for less than two years and came to RVCS with learning difficulties. The three remaining students attended other schools in addition to RVCS for a varying number of years. Two of these three had learning disabilities and the remaining one was going through extreme family difficulties.

Ten of the 31 failed scores (or one-third) of our data in the Warning category do not accurately portray a true picture of RVCS performance. An extremely small sample size limits the ability to compare data and results in data volatility.

Some of the local districts have been identified under No Child Left Behind as being in need of improvement because of low special education sub-group scores. RVCS scores for this sub-group clearly indicate that, even though our special needs population is greater, River Valley Charter School is outperforming its local district.

Page 6, paragraph 1

These comments reference comparisons of RVCS students with state and national averages.

Relevant Comments: The school's Charter sets forth a goal under student performance that states: "School-wide averages on TerraNova, Iowa, and MCAS test scores will be above national and state averages." The Charter does not read "significantly above" for *student performance*. Under the area of *school performance*, the term "significantly above" pertains to sample sizes that demonstrate appropriate statistical power. Our sample size is not within that adequate range and therefore is not valid for comparisons.

Our Charter does not direct that we compare our performance with local districts. When the charter was written and the current accountability plan was modified in 2004, district comparisons were purposefully omitted. This is further supported by the statement found on the DOE MCAS Web site, which is as follows: "NOTE: The Massachusetts Department of Education does not rank schools or districts on the basis of MCAS results."

Our accountability plan states that student performance is above the national averages on the TerraNova achievement test; and the performance objectives for students for school-wide averages are that they be above the state average on the MCAS tests.

Relevant Comments: In reference to Tables II and IV, pages 4 to 6, the number of students taking the grade four ELA and Math tests was 31, not 32. These scores have been acknowledged as incorrect and have been revised by the D.O.E. The corrections to the report have positively impacted our MCAS scores and should improve our CPI scores for the 2005 MCAS grade four tables.

Table IV: Performance Comparison of RVCS and Newburyport CPI

Relevant Comments: The population of RVCS students and Newburyport students are not comparable for the following four reasons:

1. RVCS has a proportionately larger special education population than Newburyport.
2. Fifty-two percent of RVCS students come from communities outside of Newburyport, many of which are distinctly different in comparison.
3. Students, struggling in other schools, are seeking an alternative learning environment.
4. RVCS is more racially and ethnically diverse than Newburyport.

To clarify these points:

River Valley Charter School's special education population is 19 percent and Newburyport's is just under 15 percent, which is more than a 20 percent difference. According to the state level data, special needs students tend to score lower on MCAS tests, and River Valley Charter School has 20 percent more special needs students than Newburyport.

Newburyport is a wealthy seaside community in relation to some of the rural districts we also serve. Salisbury, which is one the five districts in our region, has historically had one of the largest transient populations in the Commonwealth.

In some cases, parents of children who are not successful in their home districts are seeking alternative education. Some of these students are "on the cusp," meaning that they do not qualify for special education services, but they appear to have some degree of learning difficulties. In order to better meet their learning styles, their parents chose to enroll them in River Valley Charter School. Their siblings, who may have similar issues, now attend our school. Our population of 288 students is derived from only 183 different families.

Because of its composition and small sample size, the RVCS population is not a normal curve distribution. Statistically, RVCS is not comparable to Newburyport.

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We strongly believe that the MCAS data provides extremely valuable information to us, as was indicated during our site visit. Our goal is not to outperform Newburyport students but to use this external testing to inform instructional practice and measure student growth.

However, if one chooses to compare RVCS and Newburyport students, Science and Technology scores should also be evaluated. This data shows that RVCS provides equal amounts of instruction for all subjects and does not just concentrate on the MCAS/AYP related subjects of ELA and Math. This supports our integrated curriculum approach.

Science and Technology Grade Five Comparison of RVCS and Newburyport

2005	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning
RVCS	19	59	22	0
NBPT	10	39	45	5

Percentage A & P = 78 percent RVCS compared to 49 percent Newburyport

Percentage NI & W= 22 percent RVCS compared to 50 percent Newburyport

Science and Technology Grade Eight Comparison of RVCS and Newburyport

2005	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning
RVCS	15	35	40	10
NBPT	3	43	46	9

Percentage A & P = 50 percent RVCS compared to 46 percent Newburyport

Percentage NI & W = 50 percent RVCS compared to 55 percent Newburyport

The 10 percent in the RVCS Warning category consists of two special education students.

Finding #9: "TerraNova scores indicate students consistently scoring above the 50th Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE).

Relevant Comment: Because the TerraNova is a nationally recognized and Norm Referenced test, it is a valuable instrument for determining student and school performance.

TerraNova

The TerraNova test has been given every year since the inception of River Valley Charter School. At least four years of data, for five cohorts, exists. Following a thorough summary of this data, we conclude the following:

- *The longer students attend River Valley, the higher their performance.*

Analysis of TerraNova testing for the 2005-2006 school year indicates that the average student in each of grades one through eight has a National Percentile Total Score of at least 69 (which occurred in the first grade) to as high as 86 (which occurred in the seventh grade).

For all groups taking the TerraNova, River Valley students exceeded the national average on their Total Score (comprised of reading, language, and mathematics) by at least one standard deviation. The results demonstrate that our students significantly exceeded the objective set out in our charter.

In addition, the Total Score (reading, language, mathematics) increased over the 2004-2005 school year for five of eight cohorts. For those cohorts whose scores decreased, students were still performing at a high level and well above the national average.

National Percentile of the Mean Normal Curve Equivalent			
	Percentile in '03-'04	Percentile in '04-'05	Percentile in '05-'06
Kinderhaus	na	53*	na**
1 st Grade	na	72	69
2 nd Grade	81	82	77
3 rd Grade	76	80	77
4 th Grade	68	81	81
5 th Grade	85	85	85
6 th Grade	81	85	81
7 th Grade	83	84	86
8 th Grade	80	82	81

*TerraNova Achievement Test, Version I

**TerraNova Achievement Test, Version II – this test is not nationally norm-referenced.

We performed a thorough analysis of the TerraNova scores for all subcategories tested as well – reading, language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. The results for the 2005-2006 school year are as follows:

National Percentile of the Normal Curve Equivalent									
	K**	1 st Grade	2 nd Grade	3 rd Grade	4 th Grade	5 th Grade	6 th Grade	7 th Grade	8 th Grade
Reading	na	74	76	84	85	85	82	84	83
Language	na	68	73	70	80	86	83	89	79
Math	na	60	77	73	71	79	74	80	77
Total Score (Reading, Language, Mathematics)	na	69	77	77	81	85	81	86	81
Science	na	na	86	79	79	78	84	75	78
Social Studies	na	na	84	87	81	82	72	79	69

**TerraNova Achievement Test, Version II – this test is not nationally norm-referenced.

Finding #9: “Subject specific percentiles for (2004-)2005 indicate a low national percentile (at 53 percent) of the NCE for the Kindergarten reading test”

Relevant Comments: If it is true that the Kinderhaus scored at the 53rd percentile for the reading test*, which was given after only seven weeks of school, then what this shows is that about half of our kindergarten students arrived at River Valley unable to read. The purpose of this Kindergarten test is to provide *baseline* data for our new students. It is not specifically intended for use as school performance data, nor should it be, since the students have not had any measurable amount of education.

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Finding #10: “The school is committed to using analyses of internal and external assessments to inform the educational program.”

Relevant Comments: Students with special needs were not separately identified for our new math workshop program support unless they were in the Needs Improvement or Warning categories for the MCAS Math, Reading, or Science and Technology and TerraNova tests.

The special education director maintains an up-to-date list of special needs students' MCAS and TerraNova test scores. These documents are used to make educational planning decisions, and they are an integral part of the success of our special needs program. These documents were submitted for the Mid-Cycle Review, and they were given to Diane Chadwell in a large binder. These documents are presently in the possession of Judy Miller. In addition, these documents were also in a large binder which was available at RVCS for site team review during the visit.

Organizational Viability

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Finding #11: "All constituencies understand and are committed to the Montessori based academic program at River Valley."

Relevant Comments: The River Valley Charter School curriculum is clearly based on the Massachusetts Frameworks and the corresponding scope and sequence of the Montessori curriculum. It is not a private school model, but is an application of the Montessori approach based on the "Essentials of a Public Montessori School." Guidelines for this can be accessed on the American Montessori Society Web site, www.amshq.org. Our external Montessori audits have confirmed that we have met and exceeded the guidelines found in the document titled "Essentials of a Public Montessori School." Although Montessori public schools are rare in Massachusetts, they are part of a growing national model represented by more than 354 schools.

Relevant Comments: Regarding the differences between the Montessori model and standards-based assessments, again, we work daily with the frameworks and the corresponding Montessori lessons. Teachers articulate that this approach creates what we all refer to as a "healthy tension" between the Montessori and Massachusetts standards. Our emphasis is on student learning and student progress, and, for this reason, we believe that our combination of the state standards and Montessori philosophy are strengths of the school. The site team's perceived "disconnect" is not a negative, according to the faculty, but a catalyst for continued development of our students' academic success. As stated by Montessori consultant Pat Ludick in her audit report of 2005, "The teachers reflect a more cultured spirit and confidence in their Montessori work. For many of them it has been a series of challenging years of patient experimentation and continued study. There are always tensions in the work of 'Montessori made public', but several of the teachers seem to have mastered the adjustments." Pat Ludick is an internationally known Montessori consultant for both public and private Montessori schools.

In reference to the statement about our teachers not being able to articulate a clear sense of "what academic success at RVCS looks like," the teachers were somewhat confused by the

various terms used by the site team, such as student success, successful student achievement, academic rigor, success, academic achievement, and success at school.

The teachers do not consider academic testing as the sole representative of student achievement. In fact, they look at a wide variety of internal assessment indicators of which MCAS and TerraNova are a part. In addition, our teachers consider (accountability plan reference) “critical thinking, creative problem solving, personal and social development” are also part of our charter’s definition and goals of individual student academic achievement. RVCS teachers tend to think about academic achievement at the classroom level for the individual child and what will make each child successful.

Because of the multi-age groupings in our classrooms, coupled with the broad grade level (K-8) distribution, teacher descriptions of what student success looks like should and will differ. Montessori philosophy focus is on the individual learning process as well as the learning content. The “whole child” is our focus, and using the term “academic achievement” is only asking for a portion of the student’s success. This is borne out in detail in Montessori training centers.

Student exhibitions, portfolios, classroom observation and assessment that is based on the judgment of teachers who know their student’s growth, learning and capabilities after working closely with them over a three-year cycle clearly weigh in as effective and essential measures of student performance and success.

It is vital that these factors of student assessment have considerable weight in determining student and school performance.

In the site visit report findings, in the section on Organizational Viability, the teachers thought they were responding to discussions about “student success,” not school success. The teachers focus on the students, and the administration and additional stakeholders focus on the organization.

The teachers had difficulty understanding what they were being asked because of the interchanging terminology (academic success, student success, academic achievement, academic rigor) used by the site team. This is further complicated by different perceptions of the meanings. For instance, when asked to define student success, our teachers hold that academic success is only a portion of that answer.

A uniform definition of academic success is difficult to articulate because it refers to an individual child’s progress. It is not solely based on content, but on the growth of each unique child. Our teachers do not associate external testing as the only definition of academic success. (Please refer to the River Valley Toolset, as defined by our accountability plan and explained below.)

In reference to Finding #11: “While all stakeholders could passionately speak about success of the Montessori model at RVCS, less explicit was an emphasis on academic achievement and a common definition of student success.” In our review of your findings of our site visit, we have tried to articulate both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of public Montessori assessments.

In order to help define high academic achievement, we used quantitative references such as the TerraNova and MCAS test scores. This information is valuable when supplemented by additional qualitative data, which is compiled at the classroom level. Teachers use the River Valley Toolset as an instrument for qualitative evaluation. Using their Montessori training, they make daily observations and recordings, which document student progress in achieving intermediate goals and are written in students' Individual Learning Plans (ILPs). The teachers document the lessons given to each student and track this data. This teacher tracking tool is called M³, Montessori Made Manageable. The students' work is gathered in portfolios, and this information, coupled with other teacher documentation, substantiates student progress toward goals set in the ILP. Three times a year, parent conferences are held, and teachers use the aforementioned information to document student progress. Having assessed where the student is, the next set of goals are written on the ILPs and the assessment cycle continues at each level.

As listed in our Charter, River Valley believes that social growth is an integral aspect of necessary student performance. Therefore, social growth behaviors of the students are noted by the teachers and become a valuable part of the progress reports.

Another aspect of determining student performance is the success of River Valley graduates. At this point, our eldest alumni are in their junior year in high school, and we have documented their successes through student surveys, parent letters, news articles, and other sources. Success at future schools is a phrase contained in our Charter. Student performance on AP and honors classes, honor rolls, leadership roles in student government, sports, and other school activities have demonstrated student success. Further proof of "student success at future schools" is the number of students who are admitted to highly selective private and public schools. Next year, our first graduates will be applying to colleges. We will seek out their college plans for data to support our students' success records.

The non-academic outcomes, as listed on our progress reports, which are included in the River Valley Toolset, are also part of our review process. Annual Montessori audits, which are conducted by a Montessori consultant, measure progress toward these outcomes. Social skills are interwoven in all levels of progress reports and are found in the personal development, life skills, and work habit sections of these documents.

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Finding #13: "Two members of the middle school staff have completed a middle school adolescent program...and desires 100% rate of training for its teachers."

Relevant Comments: The majority of teachers at River Valley have some level of training or certification by national or international Montessori training programs. River Valley administration desires 100 percent rate of training for Kinderhaus and Elementary level teachers.

We consider that 100 percent of our Middle School teachers are trained based on the training available. Currently, there is an American Montessori Society certification program, but it is a

generalist model with a narrow curriculum scope. We sent a middle school teacher to this program and found that it did not meet the needs of our academic program or the teacher qualifications required by the state of Massachusetts and No Child Left Behind.

Recently, two members of our middle school faculty have successfully completed the rigorous North American Montessori Teachers' Association adolescent program. While this training has many positive aspects, we have yet to identify a program that will meet the needs of our staff. Therefore we have designed some of our own training using in-house staff. At this time, all middle school faculty have attended our Montessori summer training conducted by our curriculum coordinator. Our intention is to continue in-house training programs coupled with selected external professional development activities that meet the needs of our Montessori Middle School program.

Finding #15: "While teachers reported high levels of support, the lack of planning time during the day was discussed as a challenge."

Relevant Comments: Teachers have three hours each week during their art, music, and physical education classes for planning time. In addition, they usually have one faculty meeting each month for planning purposes. Also, teachers do not have morning or afternoon non-teaching responsibilities. This allows them to have additional paid planning time from 8:00 to 8:30 a. m. and from 3:30 to 4:00 p.m. In recent discussions with the faculty, teachers continue to choose instructional time with students during the day rather than gaining more daily planning time.

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Finding #16: "Teachers are evaluated based on goals set with the Director at the beginning of the school year."

Relevant Comments: The decisions regarding hiring and salaries reside solely with the school's Director. The goal-setting process between the Director and teachers provides a common understanding of expectations and a recording of actions and successes toward the goals that have been agreed upon by both parties. In previous discussions with the faculty, when implementing this process, it was acknowledged that a common rubric could potentially limit goal-setting that would be unique to each individual. The goal-setting documents themselves clearly list areas of focus for the teachers. The Assistant Director and Curriculum Coordinator have observed most of the classrooms and provided teachers with feedback. The faculty requested peer observation time and the Administration supported a formative developmentally based non-judgmental sharing of best practices as a means of improving instruction. All but one lead teacher actively participated in this opportunity.

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Finding #33: "River Valley Charter School is becoming a model for others interested in the notion of Montessori made public and is making strides in the marriage of Montessori curriculum and standards-based assessments."

We agree with the finding that the school is performing as a model in the public Montessori realm. Since 2001, the number of public Montessori schools nationwide has increased significantly from about 200 to more than 354 schools today.

Because of the differences inherent in the philosophies of a standards-based education versus a whole child-centered approach, there is a value placed on assessment in that the first requires a quantified response for each year a student is enrolled; and the second one has a qualitative aspect in conjunction with annual data used to inform instruction over multiple years. Benchmarks are used to track the progress of each child through transitions from one developmental level to the next. (Kinderhaus, grade three, grade six and grade eight) The school recognizes that child development is a continuum and is not necessarily tied to a certain performance expectation for each chronological year of age. However, each student is expected to meet the basic benchmarks for transition to the next level but transitions may not be solely based on just student achievement.

Conclusion

Relevant Comments: In reference to the comment, "Continued progress in institutionalizing the various curriculum partners," please consider the following statement:

The school cannot guarantee that existing curriculum partners will always be able to participate in our programs, as there is no way to predict whether or not they will continue to have the resources to do so. One interesting outcome of our work with these partners is that their programs have grown and benefited from additional funding because of our association with them.

River Valley has both school-wide and classroom curriculum partnerships. High curriculum integration at the classroom level is our goal, rather than "institutionalizing" our partners on a school-wide basis. Some partnerships are shared by many classrooms, but the projects relate to each class's work and are dynamic in that they change to meet the needs of the curriculum being studied at different levels. However, we do have partnerships, such as Salem State College, that exist at the school level and are of benefit to both institutions.

We recognize the unique nature of this learning institution and the efforts of the site visit team to understand it. One of our future challenges will be to figure out ways to better explain our educational model. It can only help us as we continue to disseminate our best practices.