

Improving student achievement is a top Priority for Schools

By MEAGHAN CASEY

Equipped with the task of "making good schools better," the Worcester Public Schools has utilized the



Joseph Palumbo

resources of Focus on Results (FOR), an educational consulting group with offices in Boston and Huntington Beach, Calif. Joseph Palumbo, a senior executive with FOR, has worked with the WPS since February. He is targeting the district's 18 Commonwealth Priority Schools. A Commonwealth Priority School is any school that has a No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability status of Corrective Action or Restructuring in English language arts and/or mathematics. The WPS received state funding to support the implementation of

improvement plans and related strategies at these schools in order to improve student achievement.

As an expert facilitator, Palumbo has trained, coached and provided technical assistance to hundreds of school-based personnel engaged in whole-school improvement. He was contracted to work with the WPS by the Mass. Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Since his start, he has spent 10 days a month in Worcester, hosting monthly presentations and workshops and providing follow-up visits to the individual schools. He is confident about the district's progress.

"The Worcester educators have all the tools they need," said Palumbo. "They have a coherent focus and a passion for making schools better. I'm really looking forward to this year, pushing these good schools towards the next level."

"Good days are ahead," said Dr. Stephen Mills, WPS deputy superintendent. "With the great support and new relationship we have with the DESE and with Joe



From left, teacher Kathy Foley, literacy coach Pat Andersen and Principal Ellen Kelley, all from Roosevelt School, discuss ways to improve student achievement.

(Palumbo) and his staff, we have the tools to lead this district to a better place."

Palumbo and Mills agree the key to success is collaboration. At a workshop on June 9, Mills described a case in which a group of heart surgeons from New Hampshire, Vermont and Maine took the initiative to regularly meet with one another. Collectively, the fatality rate at their hospitals declined 25 percent in two

years. team shared with other schools some of the work they have accomplished in the past few months. Kerry Purcell, the principal of Harvard Park Elementary School in Springfield, Ill., also presented some of the lessons she and her staff have learned, as well as the tools and strategies they have tried to help support all students. While Harvard Park's poverty rate has increased to more than 90 percent in the past few years, student test scores and parent involvement levels have significantly grown. Purcell worked with Palumbo to overcome the challenges of the school environment and make those gains.

"We learned to focus on the most important thing in the school setting, and that's the teaching and learning," said Purcell. "The ah-ha moment came the day we turned the mirror away from curriculum barriers and excuses and onto identifying and using research-based teaching practices to meet the needs of each student."

DESE will continue to fund Palumbo's work with Commonwealth Priority Schools this school year.

years.

"That's the power of working together and sharing ideas," said Mills. "That's what we're trying to do with all of you."

"We want to tap into the power of the group, so that teachers and principals within the schools and district are working with each other and talking to each other," said Palumbo.

At the June meeting, each school