

Massachusetts School Visit Report

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School Visit Report Summary

This report summarizes four days of school visits undertaken by James W. Guthrie between April 14 and 17 of 2003. The twelve schools involved were located in the districts of Lowell (7 schools visited) and Springfield (5 schools visited). A total of five elementary schools, three middle schools, and four high schools were visited. Individual schools were as follows:

Lowell

Reilly Elementary School
Moody Elementary School
Varnum Elementary School
Daley Middle School
Butler Middle School
Sullivan Middle School
Lowell High School

Springfield

Alfred G. Zanetti Elementary School
Rebecca Johnson Elementary School
Commerce High School
Central High School
Springfield Science and Technology HS

Visits to individual schools ranged in length from one to three hours. A school administrator (Principal, Assistant Principal, or Athletic Director) familiar with the purposes and functions of a building's rooms and spaces led the tours in all but two instances. Head Custodians led tours of the Rebecca Johnson Elementary School in Springfield and of the Daley Middle School in Lowell.

Enrollments ranged from a low of approximately 250 students in the Moody School of Lowell to close to 4,000 at Lowell High School. School buildings ranged in age from 163 years of operation in Moody to 10 years since construction at the Rebecca Johnson School in Lowell.

In elementary and middle schools, virtually every room was entered and observed. Note was made of the number of students in a room and presence of technology such as computers and TV sets. Conversations were not held with teachers, except to explain the purpose of the observation. In high schools, all rooms were observed, though not all were entered.

Tour guides were asked specifically at the beginning of each school tour "What if any significant inadequacies are present in this school?" Their answers are recorded for each school in the following detailed section. On occasion, though not solicited, tour guides made gratuitous comments regarding their school. Where relevant, those were noted. School floor plans were obtained when available.

Details for each school follow. However, here is the summary finding. In a select few instances, deficiencies of structure or site were noted. Generally these consisted of matters such as inadequate playground facilities or playing fields. No issues of safety were noted or raised by school personnel.

Overwhelmingly, visited facilities were sufficient for purposes of providing an adequate instructional program for the students they enrolled.

Individual School Observations¹

Lowell

James S. Daley Middle School (Principal: William Skinner,) Tour Guide: Head Custodian. 911 students. Constructed in 1954-56. Renovated in 1995. Adequate physical condition

School is typical post WW II curtain wall construction. No frills. Entry area is adequate but was not well maintained (loose papers on the floor of the lobby / foyer.). Many specialized facilities (e.g., cafeteria, gymnasium, computer laboratories, teacher lounges and workrooms, media center, nurses station, band room, Industrial Arts classrooms, Art room, Guidance Suite, science laboratories, and parent liaison office). Entered 30 classrooms. Seven had no students in them, even at 9:00 AM when there was no lunchtime in session. All classrooms were sufficient in size and equipment to conduct instruction. All specialized facilities were sufficient for the purposes intended. School had a mixed feeling regarding instruction. Student engagement with teachers was uneven. Student discipline was good.

Butler Middle School (Maryalice Foley Principal and Tour Guide)
635 Pupils in Grades 5-8. Handicapped inclusion
School constructed in 1992. Good physical condition

Architecturally this is a dramatic school with many innovative features (Two story high Library at center of the school serves as focal point for both first and second floors of building). Many recent immigrants from Cambodia populate the school. Many symbols of their culture displayed throughout school. Building is well maintained. Plentiful outside playground space. Attractive entry and public areas. Gorgeous auditorium. Restrooms were clean and accessible. Many specialized facilities (e.g., band room, media center, cafeteria, choral music room, full size gymnasium, and computer laboratories). Classrooms were of adequate size; virtually all had computers for both teachers and two or three for students. Informed that all computer laboratories and classrooms are Internet connected. Principal proud of her school.

Lowell High School (William J. Samaras Principal. Walter Nelson, Athletic Director Tour Guide. 3,800 students located in multi-building campus straddling canal, pedestrian mall and trolley line. Landlocked. Buildings constructed in 1891, 1922 and 1980. Grades 9-12

This is one of the nation's largest high schools. It operates more like a community college than a public high school It is remarkable in the diversity of its physical facilities. Its specialized rooms include a field house-gymnasium,

¹ Listed in order in which they were visited

indoor running track, swimming pool, wrestling room, locker and shower rooms, ceramic studios, television production and editing capacity, industrial arts rooms, nurses offices, guidance wing, cafeteria, huge auditorium, science laboratories, numerous teacher lounges and work areas, Little Theater, library, and 12 computer laboratories. The most desired classrooms are in the older buildings. These have large windows, high ceilings, and oak hardwood floors. All classrooms were observed. Only forty percent were entered. All specialized facilities were entered.

The size of the school affords it amenities seldom seen in a conventional high school. However, the landlocked nature of the site poses challenges. There are no outside play or athletic facilities. Athletic teams are transported in district buses to playing and practice fields several miles away. The 1980 building has design flaws (e.g., the kitchen is separated from the cafeteria by 100-200 feet necessitating transport of food through a common area prior to being able to serve it).

The school had no discernible instructional philosophy, other than to cater to diversity of interests and preferences. All instructional facilities were adequate to excellent. Specialized facilities, with the exception of outdoor athletic and recreational spaces, were adequate for purposes for which they were intended.

Peter W. Reilly Elementary School (Thomas Vernonochi, Principal Roberta Keefe, Assistant Principal Tour Guide). Curtain wall construction, 1958-59. 600 students. Poorly maintained building. Encompasses K-4. On same site as Sullivan Middle School.

This is not an inviting school. It is a sprawling one-story building that has been poorly maintained. Whereas many of the classrooms observed had no students in them, specialized services (pull out instruction) were still often taking place in corridors and in nooks, corners, and crannies of hallways. The school gave an impression of being uncoordinated. The schools has many specialized facilities including a large cafeteria/multipurpose room, media center, gymnasium, music room, teacher workrooms and lunges, nurses office, computer laboratories, and an art room). The exterior has plenty of play space. The principal space shortfall appears to be adequate storage. The school had no discernible instructional profile or theme.

Even if shabby in places, instructional spaces are adequate and specialized facilities are sufficient for purposes they perform.

James Sullivan Middle School (Paula J. Hutton Principal and Tour guide)
700 students. Constructed in 1992. Innovative Design. Two story concrete/stone structure that fits neighborhood nicely. Well maintained. Grades 5-8
Has four portable classrooms

This is an attractive school in appearance. It is of modern design. It has many specialized facilities including a cafeteria, social worker office, theater, computer laboratories, science laboratories, teacher lounges and workrooms, media center, art rooms, a gymnasium, guidance office, and nurses office.

The school was strangely empty. The principal/tour guide explained that eighth grade students (presumably 25 percent of the school) were on a field trip. However, this does not explain the 24 classrooms that held no students at 10 AM. Even at only twenty students per class, these rooms would be capable of holding half the school's enrollment. When asked, the principal explained that students were in specialized classes such as music and art. Nevertheless, when asked regarding the school's principal deficiencies, Ms. Hutton described space shortage and portables as the problem.

All classrooms and specialized facilities were more than adequate for instructional and related purposes.

Moody Elementary School (Robert Keegan Principal and tour guide) 238 Students
Grades K-4. Constructed in 1841. Beautifully maintained. Bilingual (Portuguese). Citywide

The small enrollment and beautiful facilities combine to provide a unique sense of community in this school. It is one of the most interesting elementary schools I have ever visited. Through one set of lenses, the site is cramped, classrooms (though quite large individually have few modern amenities or storage space, there are only a few specialized rooms, and some would say the building is old. On the other hand, high ceilings, beautiful wood, large windows, wide corridors and large public areas are inviting and cheerfully serve as a productive context for instruction.

The site is cramped and parking and play space are combined. The play yard is unpaved and uneven. Handicapped access is restricted. Specialized functions such as food service have to be fitted into a basement intended for other purposes. There is no modern gym or specialized rooms for music. Kindergarten classrooms do not have bathrooms or immediate access to playgrounds, as increasingly is the norm in new schools. There is a nurses' office, a science workshop, a specialized speech room, and a large multipurpose room that can serve for community meetings and some physical education. All classrooms have computers for teachers and pupils and Internet access.

Principal volunteered that he had no difficulty recruiting or retaining teachers. He also mentioned that if they offered him a brand new school, he doubted that he and his staff would want to move.

While old and absent amenities, this building is adequate for instruction and judging from the high levels of student engagement and displays of adult and student happiness, a lot of good instruction is taking place

Varnum Arts Elementary School (Principal and tour guide, Kerry Gillis)
Constructed in 1850 and 1900. 265 students.
Brick three stories. Grades K-4. Draws Citywide.
Building on National Historic Register.

This school is two brick buildings, constructed fifty years apart that have been joined. It is an awkward structure to navigate internally. The play yard is uneven, and there is no grassy play field. Kindergarten rooms are absent modern amenities such as mentioned above in the description of the Moody school

Still, this school has a marvelous spirit, and the principal repeatedly made reference to the lovely old classrooms with their high ceilings, varnished wood, oak hardwood floors, and large size. She made much of the Palladium windows that could be restored to great beautify. The school has an accomplished violin program with forty percent of the students enrolled.

Despite its age, there are several specialized rooms including library, music, cafeteria, social worker office, and school nurse.

According to principal, there is a stable teaching force and no difficulty in recruiting new teachers when openings occur.

The building is old, but it is adequate for instruction.

Springfield

Alfred G. Zanetti Elementary School (Alnida Munera Principal and tour guide)
Approximately 425 students, Pre-K –6 this
Is a Montessori theme school. Constructed
in 1900. This is a citywide school. Heavily
bilingual.

From the outside, this school appears to be a disaster. It gives the impression of a boarded up three story warehouse. It has no parking, no play yard, and no grassy area. It is in the inner city of Springfield. It suggests "Disaster."

Little could be further from the truth. This is a marvelous school filled with more student engagement and teacher commitment than I have ever before seen in an elementary school. There is virtually no teacher turnover, and given the heavy bilingual population, the achievement levels seem high.

There are few specialty rooms. The old auditorium doubles as a gymnasium. The principal and staff good-naturedly refer to the basement as the "Garden Level." (There is no garden.) The basement is a catacomb in which one could get lost.

Still, classrooms are unusually large high ceilinged, filled with varnished wood, and well lit from large and plentiful windows. Instructional materials are everywhere (as one comes to expect in a Montessori school). Students are almost universally engaged in self paced learning activities. Meals are deliberately eaten in the classroom as a part of the curriculum.

Perhaps a new school is in order. It is not at all clear that one scintilla of instructional benefit would result.

Commerce High School (Ann J. Henry Principal. Thomas O'Neil, Assistant Principal, Tour guide) 1700 Students. Constructed in 1910 with 1998 Modern Science and Athletic Addition

Nicely maintained older building with well-designed supplementary structure. School has many amenities and specialized facilities including cafeteria, swimming pool, auditorium (on National Register of Historic buildings), new media center, science laboratories, computer laboratories, nurses' office, guidance suite, band room, Choral room, teacher work rooms and teacher lunge, newspaper office, yearbook office, computer laboratories, television production and editing facilities, drama rooms, exercise and nautilus room, visiting team lockers, and a greenhouse for science labs.

Classrooms are large and well equipped. All instructional spaces and specialized facilities are adequate. Tour guide responded that only inadequacy was a shortage of faculty parking.

Rebecca M. Johnson Elementary School (Very Daley, Principal. Head Custodian Tour Guide) 780 Students. Constructed in 1992 Grades Pre-K -5. Reasonably well maintained.

This is a good example of how a school can be both modern (structurally adequate) and instructionally ineffective. School had made little or no visible plans for visit. Tour guide was uninformed regarding purposes of rooms. Twenty classrooms were observed as containing no students. This was after all lunch sessions were complete. Custodian had no idea where students were and expressed dismay at large number of vacant rooms. Students seldom appeared to be engaged in classroom activities.

Many specialized rooms including a gymnasium, cafeteria, swimming pool, library, music room(s), health and guidance suite, science laboratories, computer laboratories, and faculty dining room.

There is nothing about the facility that is inadequate for instruction. Added amount of outdoor playground space would be useful.

Central High School (Celeste T. Budd-Jackson Principal. Robert Fernandez, Assistant Principal, Tour guide.) Constructed in 1986
Almost 1800 students in grades 9 – 12. Poorly maintained.

This is a sprawling modern American high school. It has virtually every specialized facility and amenity one can imagine. However, it has no feeling of instructional coherence. It seems to be a 'shopping mall' high school where students have their culture and adults a separate one.

Specialized spaces include gymnasium, swimming pool, locker rooms, weight room, auditorium, media center, health suite, guidance suite, laboratories, computer laboratories, music rooms, industrial arts classes, Television production and editing facility and graphic design studio.

When asked regarding possible inadequacies the principal responded that there was a shortage of classrooms. This was despite the fact that between 10:00 and 11:00 AM, when no cafeteria sessions were in progress, I observed 112 unoccupied standard classrooms.

The physical facilities of all types are adequate for instruction and the other purposes for which they are intended.

Science and Technology High School (Principal is James F. Jara. Tour Guide was Assistant Principal Short). 1700 students. Grades 9 – 12. School is a renovated Mass Mutual office building. Renovation undertaken in 1986. It also has an added athletic complex.

This school appears dysfunctional. Faculty members appear to be in control of instructional spaces, but all public spaces are "owned" by students. Acoustics are terrible, noise levels are mind-boggling. Little adult supervision in hallways during passage and norms of behavior are taunting, roughhousing, and hitting.

The facility is adequate, but just barely. It is terribly maintained. The conversion from an office structure to high school was ill conceived. For example, stairwells are fine for a few adults passing one another. They are insufficient for large numbers of students moving from class to class during passing periods.

There are odd features. For example, a nutrition class has a magnificent kitchen to instruct only a small handful of students. The locks on the kitchen doors in this instance do not fit the building master key (hmm!).

Science and computer laboratories appear to be outstanding. Good instruction appeared to be taking place in these sectors. There were many specialized spaces including a gymnasium, swimming pool, television production studio, and library. There were no outside playing fields.

These buildings are adequate for instruction and related purposes. They are cumbersome, however. The conversation of space was not creative or thorough.