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Needs Analysis of Iola School District – USD 257

Conducted by and for the Kansas State Department of
Education's Learning Network

I. Introduction

In September 2008, the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) contracted with Cross & Jofthus, LLC to implement a model for working with KSDE and five Kansas districts—Garden City, Kansas City, Topeka, Turner, and Wichita—struggling to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP).

In 2009, this model, the Learning Network, was expanded to reach all 17 Kansas districts not making AYP, including Iola School District, USD 257.

The rationale for the Learning Network is that districts struggling to demonstrate AYP need a combination of support and pressure to make difficult changes that will result in higher overall levels of student achievement and a narrowing of achievement gaps. Unfortunately, there is no “silver bullet” for making improvements, and the KSDE has finite capacity to help. Districts and the KSDE, however, can make significant progress if they think and act systemically, focus resources and energy on improving the teaching and learning process, and work collaboratively and with support from an external “critical friend.”

The goal, then, of the Learning Network is to improve school and district quality and increase student achievement through a collaborative, organization-development approach focused on applying systems theory and using data effectively.

One of the first activities in pursuit of this goal is to conduct a needs assessment of KSDE and all participating districts, focused on their ability to foster and sustain a school improvement process. The needs analysis encompasses an analysis of student achievement and other data; surveys of teachers, principals, and district administrators; and three-day site visits¹ that include interviews and focus groups with students, parents, civic leaders, teachers, academic coaches, principals, district administrators, and board members as well as classroom observations using a process designed by Cross & Jofthus called Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success (K-PALSS). All needs assessment activities are designed to both produce findings leading to recommendations for technical assistance and to train school and state officials to do their own needs assessments and classroom observations in the future.

The site visits conclude with a debriefing conducted by Cross & Jofthus for the district’s leadership that includes a presentation of some preliminary findings. This report presents all findings and represents the culmination of the needs assessment for Iola School District, USD 257 (referred to throughout the report as the district or Iola).

Just over 91% of Iola’s student population of approximately 1,470 is identified as White, while 9%, 3.8% are categorized as African-American, 3.2% as Other, and 1.8% as Hispanic. A majority of students—more than 57%—are classified as Economically

¹ The site visit for Iola occurred December 7-9, 2009.

Disadvantaged. Additionally, 18.4% of students have been identified as students with disabilities, significantly above the state average of 13.5%.

Overall, student achievement in Iola has improved over the last three years. In 2009, 83.5% of all students met or exceeded state benchmarks in reading, and 82.7% met or exceeded state benchmarks in mathematics.

Achievement scores for students with disabilities, however, continue to lag, placing the Iola on Improvement status. In 2009, only 60.7% of students with disabilities met state targets for reading and mathematics, signaling a slight improvement in reading scores, from 59.7% to 60.7%, and a dramatic improvement in math scores, from 43.2% in 2008 to 60.7% in 2009.

Iola faces other challenges as well. Currently, the district lacks aligned curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development. There also appear to be low expectations for many students, and no clear inclusionary model for students with disabilities. Staff and community members also report a lack of effective communication throughout the district.

To meet these challenges, Iola can draw upon several strengths, including a well-liked and respected board of education, superintendent, and staff; community assets, such as the presence of a regionally-renowned fine arts and cultural center, the Safe Base program, and Allen County Community College; and a district-wide commitment to improving student achievement through the initial implementation of the MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) approach and the use of instructional coaches.

The report elaborates on these strengths and challenges in the Findings section below. Detailed recommendations about how to address them can be found in the section titled Recommendations for Technical Assistance.

II. Findings

Findings from the needs assessment of Iola are summarized below in the areas of Leadership; Empowering Culture; Human Capital; and Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction, and Professional Development.

Leadership

Iola benefits from a number of leadership strengths:

- Iola's superintendent, Craig Neuenswander, is highly respected and viewed across the community as a dedicated, trusted, and ethical leader who speaks often about doing what is in the best interest of the students in Iola. Staff, parents, and community members see the superintendent as accessible and a good listener.

- Constituents view the Iola Board of Education as a group of good people who are doing what they believe is right for the school district. Board members pride themselves on being able to respectfully listen to opposing viewpoints, openly debate the issues, and then vote to make decisions. The relationship between the board and the superintendent appears to be positive and trusting. The board appears to listen to the superintendent and rely on his expertise, while not simply ‘rubber stamping’ the superintendent’s recommendations.
- “We will sit and listen to each other, but not always agree. I think it is good that we can openly disagree and still be respectful of each other.”
– *Board member*
- Iola is guided by a strategic plan that promotes high expectations for the staff and students of the district. The plan lays a foundation for taking actions to improve student achievement through a rigorous and relevant curriculum and dynamic instructional practices.
 - The district leadership team (district administration and principals) meets weekly. The meetings consist of information sharing, discussions of district issues and student data, staff development planning, and book study. The frequency of these meetings allows for ongoing conversations around alignment of district work.
 - The PowerSchool system provides up-to-date student information for parents and students. PowerSchool is an online gradebook that allows parents and students to access students’ real-time academic progress. Parents, students, and teachers were enthusiastic about PowerSchool. They see it as a tool that supports increased communication between parents and teachers.

While Iola has a number of leadership strengths, the district also faces some significant leadership challenges:

- There is a lack of effective communication in Iola. Currently, most communication about district issues/events appears to depend on each school communicating effectively with their staff and patrons. This creates inconsistency and communication gaps across the district. For example, there was a lack of communication around the implementation of early release this fall—many parents and community members were surprised to learn about early release at the start of the school year. Parents, community members, and staff participating in focus groups expressed the desire for a district newsletter and up-to-date Web site.
- “The district needs a Public Information Officer to get the word out. There are a lot of good things going on in Iola, but nobody knows about them.” – *Community leader*

- The district's decision-making process is unclear. It seems that many decisions in Iola happen without clarity about how decisions should be or are made and who is responsible for implementing them. Many issues are discussed, but there is not a clearly articulated process for how the decisions are to be made and implemented in the district.
- Principals do not appear to be serving as instructional leaders. Building administrators are seen by staff members, parents, and administrators as effective managers of buildings and of student behavior, but there appear to be limited expectations for principals to focus on leading the instructional improvement of their buildings. For Iola schools to have a consistently high level of instruction that serves the needs of all students, the principals will need to make instructional leadership the number one focus of their work.

Empowering Culture

Iola displays several strengths in the area of Empowering Culture.

- The Bowlus Fine Arts and Cultural Center is a community asset. The community appears to be proud of the Bowlus Center and its impact on Iola. Many focus group participants expressed pride that a town the size of Iola had a regional arts presence. The district uses the facility on a regular basis for classes and for special events, and a number of students pointed to the Bowlus Center as a source of inspiration for the high school's highly successful forensics team.
- The Safe Base program provides a safe and supportive learning environment before and after school. In collaboration with local community agencies and businesses, the district has secured grant funding for the Safe Base program. This program provides a safe environment outside the school day for structured enrichment activities, tutoring, and social/emotional supports for students.
- Allen County Community College provides opportunities for students to take concurrent enrollment college courses at the high school campus. In addition, the college is seen as a valuable post-secondary option, allowing many Iola students to continue their education beyond high school.
- Iola's small town atmosphere adds to the district's culture. Many interviewees talked about Iola's small town values, quality of life, and how Iola is a good place to raise a family. A number of community members who had left Iola after high school have returned in order to raise their families in this environment.
- According to focus groups of community and staff members, people appear to be generally satisfied with the quality of the school district. There is recognition that if a student works hard and wants to be successful, opportunities are available.

In addition to these strengths, the needs assessment also uncovered a number of challenges related to empowering culture in Iola:

- Despite the opinion expressed by some focus group participants—that opportunities are available for those who want to succeed—there appear to be low expectations for some students. These students were described in the following ways:
 - “Their parents don’t get engaged in school.”
 - “Their parents don’t care about education.”
 - “They come from generational poverty.”
 - “They are the foster kids.”
 - “They are kids who have lots of needs.”

These labels appear to have created a distinctly lower set of expectations for many children in Iola. Everyone (parents, students, community leaders, and staff) participating in focus group conversations in Iola seemed to know about “these kids” and acknowledge that they were not being successful, but felt at a loss as to what they could do to change the outcomes for these students. In fact, some focus group participants expressed concern about all students in Iola becoming highly successful and going on to post-secondary education for fear that they would leave Iola. These participants noted that this would drain the cheap labor pool that the community has used to attract some large manufacturing companies. These companies were courted, and subsequently chose to locate in Iola, due to an abundance of inexpensive labor. If the inexpensive labor pool disappears, according to some focus group respondents, the companies might leave, negatively impacting the local economy. The tension between having high expectations for all students and the need to have a cheap labor pool is a dilemma for the Iola community and an issue that must be openly addressed for equitable opportunities to become a reality for all students.

“If we expect the students to be too successful, they will leave Iola and will not come back.” – *Iola community member*

- Parents’ voices and involvement appear to be limited. Parents in focus groups noted that they have limited opportunities for influencing district policies and practices. The parents believed that the message from district was that it was the parents’ responsibility to figure out how to get engaged. Little district effort at reaching out to parents was seen. While each school has a site council, the parents don’t feel like this is an effective venue for influencing decisions. There are no district-wide committees for parents to serve on that would provide a forum for parents to voice their concerns and engage parents in possible solutions.
- District and community members interviewed believe that new facilities are essential for the future success of the school district and the community. The

district was ready to present a bond issue to the community for a vote but pulled back when the economy began to deteriorate. The facilities issue has now been temporarily put on the back burner, but clearly there is energy both inside the district and in the community to revisit the issue as soon as possible. In the meantime, the district will need to be careful not to let the facilities issue become an excuse for why students are not achieving at high levels.

- There is not a clear inclusionary model for students with disabilities in the district. This has led to confusion around roles and responsibilities in collaborative classrooms and about who is ultimately responsible for the success of students with disabilities. Since there is not a common model that everyone is working toward implementing, there has been little district supported professional development on inclusion.
- The McFadden Scholarship creates a dilemma for many students and the district. This highly regarded local scholarship does not allow students to earn any college credit while still in high school. This requirement also makes it difficult for the high school to increase the number of students who gain college experiences while still in high school and for students who are motivated to begin earning college credit.

“I would like to take college classes next year. I believe I am ready. But, I’m trying to decide if I should wait until after I graduate, so I will be eligible for the McFadden Scholarship.” – *High school junior*

Human Capital

Iola exhibits a number of strengths related to Human Capital.

- The district’s Interest-Based Bargaining (IBB) process is viewed positively.² The Iola Board of Education, district staff, and the teacher’s association view the IBB process as an important tool in the negotiations process. Prior to the introduction of IBB, the negotiations process was contentious. While negotiations are still difficult, the IBB process and the facilitator who supports the process have helped the district and the association work through some difficult issues.
- Principals are able to hire their building staff. Principals are responsible for the instructional quality in their building. Having the ability to decide on staff empowers the principals to make the hires they need to support a high-quality instructional program.

² Interest-based bargaining, as defined by the Federal Office of Personnel Management, is: “A bargaining technique in which the parties start with (or at least focus on) interests rather than proposals; agree on criteria of acceptability that will be used to evaluate alternatives; generate several alternatives that are consistent with their interests, and apply the agreed-upon acceptability criteria to the alternatives so generated in order to arrive at mutually acceptable contract provisions.” See <http://www.opm.gov/LMR/glossary/glossaryi.asp>, accessed 01/2010.

- Early release appears to be an effective tool to develop human capital. Weekly early release schedules have been implemented by many districts across the country as a tool for providing ongoing professional development. By implementing early release, Iola is making a positive statement about the importance of ongoing investment in its teaching staff.
- Community members, board members, and district leaders who participated in focus groups believe that district staff are in the profession for the right reasons. There was genuine sentiment across the focus groups that school district staff are good people who want the best for the kids.

“We have a good group of administrators and teachers who are dedicated to the kids” –
Iola board member

There are challenges in the area of Human Capital as well, however.

- Iola’s salary schedule is one of the lowest in the state. This is a significant issue for the district, especially when it comes to attracting high-quality staff to Iola. New teachers who are recruited by the district may entertain the idea of teaching in Iola until they are offered a contract from a neighboring district for a significantly higher salary.
- A review of the district’s evaluation materials indicates that the district’s evaluation system for teachers and administrators does not adequately promote instructional excellence. The evaluation system maintains the status quo and does not expect or drive instructional improvement for all staff. Moreover, the evaluation systems do not appear to be designed to support continuous improvement, but rather to support teachers in meeting a minimal threshold of performance. Goal setting by teachers and/or administrators for improving performance does not appear to be part of the expected process.
- While the implementation of weekly early release is a move in the right direction, the current schedule provides only 40 minutes of professional development time each week. As part of the negotiations process, other staff development time was reduced, leaving the weekly early release as the primary time for developing staff. Staff indicated that this is not enough time to support professional development.

Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction, and Professional Development

Findings related to the areas of Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction, and Professional Development are based upon a comparative analysis of information from the following three sources: (1) student achievement data; (2) perceptions identified by Iola educators on surveys of educational practices, and by representatives from all constituent groups during focus groups and interviews; and (3) data collected during classroom visits, which document to what extent effective teaching/learning practices are being implemented.

More detail about the data collected during classroom visits using the K-PALSS (Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success) process can be found in the Appendix of this report.

Curriculum

The needs assessment uncovered a number of curriculum strengths in Iola.

- Curriculum standards appear to be discussed regularly by both teachers and administrators. It is clear that there is a desire to make the state-tested standards a priority. And, when curricular decisions are made, standards are embedded in the discussions.
- Every Day Math (EDM), in the third year of adoption, is employed consistently at the elementary level. All three elementary schools are using EDM at each of the elementary grades, K-5.
- One early release/professional development day per month is focused on curriculum. With the limited amount of time that teachers have for collaboration, this demonstrates that curriculum is a high priority.
- The addition of two instructional coaches at the elementary level has provided district-wide specialists, one at the primary and one at the intermediate level, to ensure some consistency of curriculum in the elementary schools.
- Students in greatest academic need are being offered a modified curriculum in two different ways: first, the curriculum is adapted, or modified to meet the student's individual needs; and second, in some cases, students are receiving instruction in the curriculum for a greater amount of time through such experiences as reading labs or math labs.

Despite these strengths, however, an overarching finding of the needs analysis is that Iola lacks a coherent and consistent curriculum—and aligned assessment system—throughout the district.

- While Every Day Math (EDM) is used at the elementary level, there are no other examples of district-wide curricula.
- Moreover, though EDM is used at the elementary level, there appears to be little understanding of this curriculum at the middle school. Middle school math teachers, especially at the 6th grade level, expressed a desire for professional development in EDM to assist them in the transition of 5th grade students entering 6th grade.

“When it comes to curriculum, we are all doing our own thing.” –
Teacher

Additional curriculum challenges include the following:

- Currently, there are no K-12 curriculum committees or task forces. This is symbolic of the lack of vertical articulation in all curricular areas. This lack of articulation adds to the difficulty for students transitioning from one grade level to the next, and even more from one school to the next. Another facet of this challenge involves Allen County Community College, and the possibility of including the leadership at the college in K-14 curriculum discussions.
- Even though standards are being considered when decisions are made about curriculum, the “non-tested” standards at each grade level do not appear to be considered. This becomes especially problematic as students advance—they may have little to no instruction in the non-tested standards and bring no previous learning to the next grade level where that standard may be tested.
- The curriculum work that takes place during early release appears to be inconsistent from school to school. Also, time allotted for early release time is short, (50 minutes, which translates to about 40 minutes for professional development), which limits the depth and complexity of work accomplished. A regularly scheduled, longer block of time is recommended to accomplish curriculum work effectively.
- The addition of instructional coaches is a positive development. As the district moves forward, however, it will need to define the primary role of the instructional coach. Discussions should clarify whether the primary role of the instructional coach is to support the delivery of instruction in classrooms or to develop and ensure the consistency of the curriculum. Both are important tasks, but require a different focus by the instructional coaches.

Assessment

As it works to develop and fully implement an aligned curriculum and assessment system, Iola can build on some important strengths:

- The district has begun to develop quarterly formative assessments in various content areas, which provide data to make instructional and curricular decisions.

- The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment is used at all elementary schools, K-3. This assessment provides valuable and consistent district-wide data for instructional decisions in literacy in the early grades.
- Data are being used to make some instructional decisions in schools and classrooms. At the primary level, for example, teachers, with the support of the instructional coaches, are unpacking the indicators for 3rd grade and using this information to help make assessment and instructional decisions at the earlier grades, to target the teaching of indicators prior to students entering 3rd grade. This work has just recently begun and is being facilitated by instructional coaches.
- Instructional coaches are working to help teachers identify common assessments that will provide data necessary to make instructional decisions that are aligned with state tested standards.

The district must confront some fundamental challenges, however, as it begins this task.

- Currently, there is a lack of consistency around the identification of assessments that are used with all students. The instructional coaches have started this work at the elementary level, but it is in its earliest stages and is not embraced by all. Some teachers appear to be under the impression that initiatives, such as using common assessments, are optional and they can choose whether or not to participate.
- There is a lack of assessment expertise in the system. This lack of expertise, coupled with a lack of focus and a lack of resources identified for assessments at the district level, appears to have created the mindset that assessment is not a priority for Iola. Currently, it appears that assessment is primarily a priority for the assistant superintendent and the instructional coaches, who have many other priorities.
- There is no district-wide database for collecting and tracking individual longitudinal data. This cannot be developed until agreement has been reached on what assessments will be used at various levels and in various content areas.
- There is no long-term comprehensive plan in the system for thinking about, planning for, and making decisions that would create an effective assessment function within the district.

Instruction

Table 1 presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 63%) and principals (response rate 100%) administered online by Cross & Jofus. Instructional strategies that

principals and teachers *believe* are most strongly evident and are least evident, are highlighted below. Additional instructional strengths and challenges are identified later in this section.

In general, principals identified a few sound instructional strategies as strongly evident. The sound instructional strategies that *principals* believe are most ***strongly evident*** in their schools include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited by 88% of principals as strongly evident and 0% as not evident or minimally evident)
- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment (cited by 50% of principals as strongly evident and by 12% as minimally evident or not evident)
- identifying students who are struggling to master content and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction (cited by 50% of principals as strongly evident and by 12% as minimally evident or not evident).

The sound instructional strategy that *principals* indicated was ***least evident*** was:

- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited by 12% of principals as strongly evident and by 50% as minimally evident or not evident).

Principals were ***evenly divided*** on one strategy:

- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities (cited by 38% of principals as strongly evident and by 38% as minimally evident or not evident).

In general, teachers' views are not significantly different from principals'. On the whole, however, teachers are less optimistic about the use of sound instructional practices. The sound instructional strategies that *teachers* believe are most ***strongly evident*** in their schools include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 53% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 4%)
- identifying students who are struggling to master content and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction (cited by 50% of teachers as strongly evident and by 9% as minimally evident or not evident).
- using data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development (cited as strongly evident by 45% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 7%).

Sound instructional strategies that *teachers* believe are ***least evident*** include:

- providing adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions to support teacher and administrator learning (cited by 9% of teachers as strongly evident and by 38% as minimally evident or not evident)
- measuring the effectiveness of staff development by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning (cited by 11% of teachers as strongly evident and by 32% as minimally evident or not evident)
- administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers (cited by 16% of teachers as strongly evident and by 36% as minimally evident or not evident)
- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities (cited by 21% of teachers as strongly evident and by 33% as minimally evident or not evident).

Table 1. Extent to Which Principals and Teachers Believe that Sound Instructional Strategies Are Present in Their Schools

Please rate the extent to which you believe the following instructional practices are evident in your school.	Principals		Teachers	
	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^
Educators create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments.	88%	0%	53%	4%
Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction.	50%	12%	50%	9%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment.	50%	12%	39%	25%
Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level.	38%	12%	34%	9%
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development.	38%	0%	45%	7%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.	38%	0%	36%	10%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.	38%	38%	21%	33%
Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations,	25%	0%	46%	7%

Please rate the extent to which you believe the following instructional practices are evident in your school.	Principals		Teachers	
	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^
development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.				
Educators use a variety of appropriate instructional strategies and resources, including technology, to actively engage students, encourage positive social interaction, and emphasize critical thinking, problem solving, and interdisciplinary connections.	25%	0%	36%	12%
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	25%	0%	16%	36%
Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	25%	12%	29%	9%
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction.	25%	12%	13%	25%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students.	25%	25%	16%	18%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	25%	38%	22%	21%
Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well being.	12%	12%	24%	22%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning.	0%	12%	13%	29%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning.	0%	12%	9%	38%
The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning.	12%	38%	11%	32%
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	12%	50%	24%	24%

Teacher Response Rate = approximately 76/120
Principal Response Rate = 8/8

Source: Cross & Joftus survey of Iola principals and teachers November 2009.

*The response option “Evident” was deleted from this presentation to help highlight differences.

^The response option “No Opinion” was deleted from this presentation. Eight percent or less of teachers and 0% of principals selected this option on any response.

Survey responses only tell part of the story. Classroom observations, reviews of assessment data, and conversations with focus group participants indicate a number of strengths in Iola:

- The district has focused instructional practices to improve student learning in both reading and math as evidenced by the Kansas State Assessments. Spring 2009 data indicate that 85.3% of Iola students were proficient in reading and 82.7% proficient in math. These scores represent growth from the previous two years’ data. The subgroups of students with disabilities and those eligible for free and reduced lunch continue to demonstrate growth in both reading and math. Moreover, the district received 18 State Standard of Excellence Awards.
- The district is building an academic intervention model using the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. The district MTSS team has been identified, trained, and is meeting on a regular basis. Elementary and middle school teams are in place for the 2009-2010 school year. And, the district early release calendar identifies the third Wednesday of each month as time to focus on the MTSS process and implementation.
- Iola understands the need to improve instruction and has hired two instructional coaches to work with elementary teachers. One is assigned to work with primary grade teachers in both reading and math while the other works with intermediate grade teachers.

Several instructional challenges are apparent as well:

- Though survey results suggests that teachers and principals believe they are using effective instructional practices to meet rigorous academic standards, observations of 33 classrooms in Iola identified the need to increase the following teaching practices, which were “minimally evident” in the classrooms visited (see Appendix for specific percentages related to these and other strategies). Improvement in these areas may bring about higher student achievement for those students not yet proficient:
 - Design lessons based upon data from formal and informal assessments
 - Design lessons to include more teacher modeling, guided practice, and independent practice with teacher support
 - Adjust presentations of information to accommodate for visual and kinesthetic learning styles

- Increase the use of Marzano’s research-based instructional strategies³: identify similarities and differences; summarize and take notes; represent knowledge in multiple ways; provide opportunities for cooperative learning; generate and test hypotheses; and use higher level questioning and advanced organizers
- Provide instruction and opportunities for learning at higher levels of thinking, aligned to state assessment questions that require cognitive levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
- The district lacks an instructional model that is aligned with district learning goals and expectations. There is a need for a district-wide instructional model that identifies systematic processes to ensure vertical and horizontal alignment, implementation with fidelity, and a system of evaluation of instructional programs and strategies to increase student learning and to assist students in the transition from one grade to another and one school to another.
- The district lacks consistent frameworks to support early identification and instructional support for low-performing students or students with disabilities.
 - MTSS interventions need to be more fully identified and implemented to address student needs prior to special education identification. Robert Coleman, the Director of the Special Education and special education teachers agreed that over identification of students with disabilities is a problem.

“Everyone does their own thing. Continuity and fidelity to an instructional model is our biggest challenge.” – *Instructional coach*

“They’ve ended up in special education as more of a poverty thing. We do not have high enough expectations for these kids” –*Special education teacher*

- The delivery model for special education students needs immediate attention. Instructional delivery varies from full inclusion to tracking groups of special education students in the core curriculum. Clear articulation of the delivery model is needed to clarify the roles of special education teachers, general education teachers, and paraprofessional support staff. It was reported that the level of special education teacher and support staff involvement in the inclusive classroom is determined by the general education teacher. Moreover, not all teachers are required to teach special education students.
- The district has not yet fully implemented systematic procedures to conduct classroom observations, provide substantive feedback to teachers, and use observation data to inform a professional development program that identifies

³ Marzano, R. (2001). *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

research-based instructional practices needed to accelerate student learning. While Iola has made a recent attempt to put a walkthrough instrument in place, principal respondents in the focus group were unclear of its purpose, how the data would be used, or even if they were directed to use the instrument.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Iola exhibits some clear professional development strengths.

- The district supports teacher professional development. Early release time for teacher collaboration is built into the district calendar. The district uses Federal Title II dollars to pay for individual teacher participation in professional development opportunities needed for licensure and highly qualified requirements.
- MTSS is a focus of district professional development, to help teachers and staff better understand data analysis, progress monitoring, and differentiated instructional strategies. The third Wednesday of each month is used to focus on the MTSS process and implementation. The district has contracted with Greenbush Service Center to provide ongoing training to all district teachers.
- The district continues to host the KSDE Summer Standards Academy, which allows for a great number of district teachers to participate in subject specific content and pedagogy professional development that aligns with state assessments.

Despite these strengths, however, Iola needs to address three key professional development challenges:

- While professional development is seen as a priority in the district, more time and focus is needed to address the pressing needs of district staff. Early release allows for about 40 minutes of collaboration time and the district has one and a half days for staff in-service. Professional development topics are driven top down and vary from week to week, creating confusion and frustration among staff. Work that was started in school improvement may not be finished until it becomes the focus of early release the following month.
- Professional development is needed to assist teachers with the implementation of inclusion. It was reported by all focus groups that neither the district nor the special education cooperative provided training for general and/or special education and support staff prior to implementation.

“Early release days were to be MTSS but have now morphed into other things.” –*Principal*

- The district lacks a data-driven professional development plan. It was reported by both teacher and principal focus groups that there is a lack of continuity, expectations, and accountability in the area of professional development. Too many initiatives have resulted in insufficient opportunities to practice new learning, receive feedback and support, and monitor for effective implementation—resulting in a lack of application and impact district wide.

III. Recommendations for Technical Assistance

One of the primary goals of this needs assessment is to identify areas in which the district could most benefit from technical assistance and to design that technical assistance in a way that will have the greatest impact on the district’s school quality and student achievement. Based on this needs assessment, Cross & Jofus recommends that the technical assistance provided to Iola address one or more of the following general recommendations:

- 1) Revisit the district strategic plan and identify specific metrics that will be used to monitor progress toward the goals outlined in the plan. The language in the plan articulates the district’s desire that “all students” are challenged and inspired to be successful. With the right metrics attached to the goals, this plan can be a driver for Iola to raise expectations for all students to graduate college and career ready. As part of this process, convene a task force that includes parents, community leaders, and district staff to address the differentiated expectations (in the district and in the community) for different groups of students. This task force should report to the Iola Board of Education, for the purpose of informing the district’s strategic plan.
- 2) Develop a plan for supporting principals and assistant principals in practicing instructional leadership as the primary focus of their administrative role. This plan should include clear expectations for activities and actions, including a systematic process for classroom observations, that effective instructional leaders’ practice. In addition, the plan should include professional development and coaching supports for the principals as they work to implement the instructional leadership practices.
- 3) Include in the weekly district administrative meetings the following practices:
 - a) review current ‘hot’ data, such as that collected through classroom observations, that chart progress toward district goals
 - b) discuss the impact of recent instructional leadership moves made by building and district leaders, and
 - c) chart next instructional leadership moves for each administrator.
- 4) Clarify decision-making processes in the district. Clarification should address the following questions: Which decisions will be made at the district level and which decisions will be made at the building level? How are decisions made in the district (consensus, majority rules, leader makes the call)? Who makes the

decisions (individuals, teams, committees)? How will the implementation of the decisions be monitored? What data will be used to make decisions and to monitor the effectiveness of decisions?

- 5) Improve district communication through the following steps:
 - a) update and keep the district Web site current
 - b) develop a monthly district newsletter for parents and community members
 - c) develop a bi-weekly district newsletter for internal communication.

- 6) Develop a coherent framework⁴ to support and ensure improvement in curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development. Within this framework the district should:
 - Develop and fully implement priorities—including aligned curriculum, assessment, instruction, classroom observations, and professional development—with the assistance of principals, teachers, and paraprofessionals. Reform efforts that cannot be fully supported through comprehensive professional development and monitoring should be put on hold. Priorities should be communicated widely to all stakeholders.

 - Appoint teams of general education and special education teachers and paraprofessionals, as well as principals, to share the leadership with the district administration in these areas. The district should also consider hiring an outside consultant, who can provide expertise in curriculum and assessment specifically, to provide professional development in these areas.

 - Develop and implement a comprehensive data system to link assessment data and track student performance over time, and develop and implement procedures to ensure data-based decision-making on all district initiatives.

 - Develop, implement, and continuously improve a system-wide instructional model tied to rigorous standards. This model should draw on an analysis of student achievement data and identify research-based instructional practices that will have the greatest impact on increasing achievement. Instruction should be monitored systemically and evaluated for effectiveness. As part of this process, the role of instructional coach should be fully defined and supported.

 - Develop and fully implement a data-driven professional development plan that includes input from general and special education teachers, instructional support staff, and principals. The plan should include a systematic process to gather data from classroom observations to monitor implementation of the curriculum and instructional practices aligned with district goals. The long-

⁴ See Childress, S., Elmore, R., Grossman, A., and King, C. (2007). *Note on the PELP Coherence Framework*. Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University.

range plan should include procedures to evaluate the effectiveness of the professional development in meeting teacher learning needs.

- Complete a special education program review. Based on the findings of the review, develop and implement a plan to identify a model of instructional delivery in an inclusive classroom, create a coherent system of best practices to address the needs of students with disabilities, and articulate professional development needs of teachers and administrators. The plan should include guidelines and processes to ensure accuracy of identification, appropriate state assessment identification, appropriate use of instructional support staff, and appropriate classroom placement in an inclusive classroom or a resource classroom.
 - Increase the amount of early release time to 90 minutes every week and/or create release time during the school day. This amount of time would allow for deeper development of the professional learning community structure and provide support for effective inclusion practices in the general education classroom.
- 7) Review the current budget and compare to other districts in the region for the purpose of finding out how other districts are able to pay their teachers significantly more.
 - 8) Work with the teachers' association and other constituencies to develop evaluation tools that align with the expectations in the strategic plan.

Once district leadership has had an opportunity to review this report, a representative from Cross & Joftus will contact the Iola superintendent to finalize a technical assistance plan that includes 24 days of external support for the time period January through September of 2010. This plan, developed in collaboration between the senior leadership of the district and Cross & Joftus will describe in detail the goals, objectives, activities, service provider, and timeline of the technical assistance.

APPENDIX
Findings from Classroom Observations
IOLA SCHOOL DISTRICT

Using the K-PALSS (Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success) process, Cross & Jofus staff in collaboration with representatives from the Kansas State Department of Education and district staff visited classrooms and recorded observations of effective “teaching” demonstrated by the teacher and “learning” demonstrated by the students.

The entries under the “plus” column on the left side of the charts below show the percentage of classrooms visited in which research-based practices that consistently contribute to enhanced learning were observed. The entries under the “delta” column on the right side highlight areas that the district should address to improve the teaching and learning process.

Data were aggregated in school-level alike (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school) groupings to determine the percentage of classrooms in which evidence of the specified practices were observed. For reporting purposes in the narrative, we describe practices as having ***strong evidence*** if they were observed in 70% or more of the classrooms visited, ***evidence*** if they were observed in 50-69% of classrooms visited, and ***minimal evidence*** if they were observed in less than 50% of classrooms visited.

Elementary Schools (14 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	TEACHING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
Learning Environment		
79% Orderly/Clean/Well-Managed 79% Safe/Conducive to Learning 57% Evidence of Learning/Displays student work		
Instructional Design		
43% Standards-based lesson 0% Data-based instruction is explicit 29% Modeling		Provide opportunities for teacher modeling, guided practice, and independent practice to enhance instructional design. Focus on creating standard-based lessons to include teacher/student evaluation.
86% Checking understanding 43% Guided Practice 43% Independent Practice 0% Teacher/Student Evaluation/Summary		Checking for understanding should be expanded to each step of the learning process and not limited to the process of the activity to be completed.
Strategies Used		
Adjust for multiple learning styles 29% visual 86% auditory 21% kinesthetic 0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 14% Address diverse language needs 14% Identify similarities & differences 0% Summarize & take notes 50% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 79% Use homework & practice opportunities 7% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 21% Organize learning in groups 71% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 0% Generate & test hypotheses 29% Use cues, questions & advance organizers		Adjust to accommodate various learning styles beyond auditory. Incorporate culturally responsive readings to provide support for students with diverse language needs and backgrounds. Increase demonstration of research-based practices that are evident less than 50% of the time.

Elementary Schools (14 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	LEARNING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ	
Cognitive Level			
21% Knowledge 7% Comprehension 36% Application 14% Analysis 7% Synthesis 14% Evaluation			Students need to be provided instruction and opportunities for practicing higher level thinking skills to increase rigor in the classroom.
Environment/Resources			
21% Textbooks 36% Supplemental materials 21% Manipulatives 36% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 64% Worksheets: Open-ended/Fill-in/Multiple choice			Students need exposure to fewer ready-made worksheets and greater use of other classroom resources. Students need exposure to materials reflecting diversity.
Interactive Behaviors			
86% Active involvement in classwork 64% Asks/answers questions 71% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)			Students need opportunities to think about their thinking in order to demonstrate reflection.
Strategies Demonstrated			
Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways: 14% interpersonal 0% intrapersonal 100% verbal-linguistic 21% logistical-mathematical 29% visual-spatial 0% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic		Students need opportunities to expand exposure to multiple intelligences, beyond verbal-linguistic.	

Middle Schools (12 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	TEACHING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
Learning Environment		
100% Orderly/Clean/Well-Managed 100% Safe/Conducive to Learning 33% Evidence of Learning/Displays student work		Display samples of student work that has been evaluated using a rubric.
Instructional Design		
50% Standards-based lesson 0% Data-based instruction is explicit 25% Modeling 83% Checking understanding 17% Guided Practice 50% Independent Practice 0% Teacher/Student Evaluation/Summary	Utilize modeling, guided practice, and student evaluation to enhance instructional design. Checking for understanding should be expanded to each step of the learning process.	
Strategies Used		
Adjust for multiple learning styles: 33% visual 83% auditory 17% kinesthetic 0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 8% Address diverse language needs 17% Identify similarities & differences 0% Summarize & take notes 50% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 58% Use homework & practice opportunities 8% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 25% Organize learning in groups 50% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 0% Generate & test hypotheses 42% Use cues, questions & advance organizers	Adjust for various learning styles/needs to accommodate and enhance student learning, i.e. increase visual and kinesthetic approaches. Increase repertoire of culturally responsive readings/perspectives and increase support for diverse language needs. Increase research-based practices that allow students to identify similarities and differences, summarize and take notes, represent knowledge in multiple ways, and participate in group work. State the objective at the beginning of the lesson and provide continuous and immediate feedback throughout the lesson; support students with cues, questions, and advance organizers to guide their thinking. Allow students to generate and test hypotheses, to promote higher order thinking skills.	

Middle School (12 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	LEARNING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ	
Cognitive Level			
17% Knowledge 17% Comprehension 33% Application 17% Analysis 8% Synthesis 8% Evaluation			Students need to be provided instruction and opportunities for practicing higher-level thinking skills
Environment/Resources			
25% Textbooks 50% Supplemental materials 17% Manipulatives 33% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 17% Worksheets: Open-ended/Fill-in/Multiple choice			Student use of textbooks, manipulatives, technology, and materials that reflect diversity should be increased to address diverse learning needs.
Interactive Behaviors			
92% Active involvement in classwork 75% Asks/answers questions 50% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)		Students should be asked to reflect and think about their thinking, to encourage higher-level thinking skills which can create an opportunity to build leadership skills and responsibility.	
Strategies Demonstrated			
Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways: 17% interpersonal 0% intrapersonal 92% verbal-linguistic 42% logistical-mathematical 33% visual-spatial 0% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic		Students need to be able to demonstrate their learning using a variety of multiple intelligences. (interpersonal, intrapersonal, logistical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and musical-rhythmic.)	

High Schools (7 Classrooms)

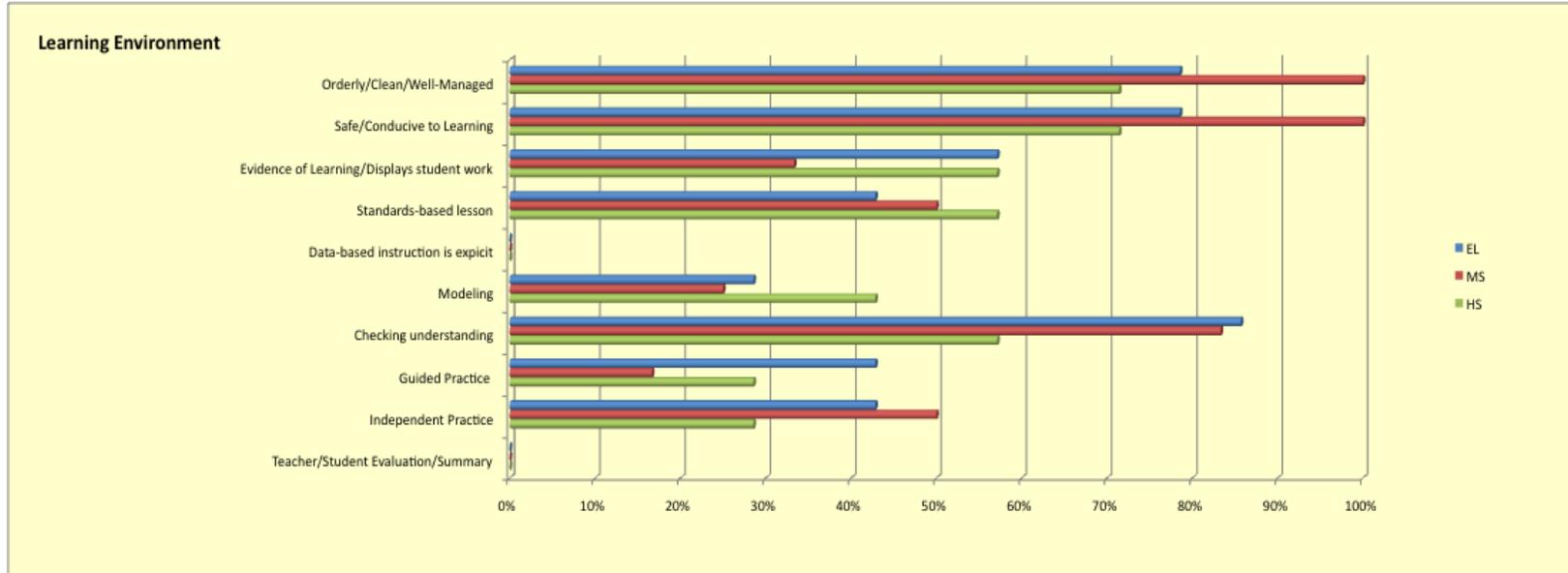
OBSERVED PRACTICES +	TEACHING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
Learning Environment		
71% Orderly/Clean/Well-Managed 71% Safe/Conducive to Learning 57% Evidence of Learning/Displays student work		
Instructional Design		
57% Standards-based lesson 0% Data-based instruction is explicit		An increase in active involvement of students in guided practice and independent practice would lead to more academic learning time for all students. More emphasis should be placed on using data to drive instruction through the use of focused professional learning communities.
43% Modeling 57% Checking understanding 29% Guided Practice 29% Independent Practice 0% Teacher/Student Evaluation/Summary		
Strategies Used		
Adjust for multiple learning styles 57% visual 71% auditory 0% kinesthetic 14% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 0% Address diverse language needs 14% Identify similarities & differences 0% Summarize & take notes 29% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 43% Use homework & practice opportunities 0% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 14% Organize learning in groups 29% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 0% Generate & test hypotheses 0% Use cues, questions & advance organizers		A greater emphasis needs to be placed on the use of research-based strategies. A larger repertoire of strategies will provide educators with skills to scaffold instruction for all tiers of learning. Need to increase the use of research-based teaching practices, especially those that were evident in less than 49% of the classes visited.

High Schools (7 Classrooms)

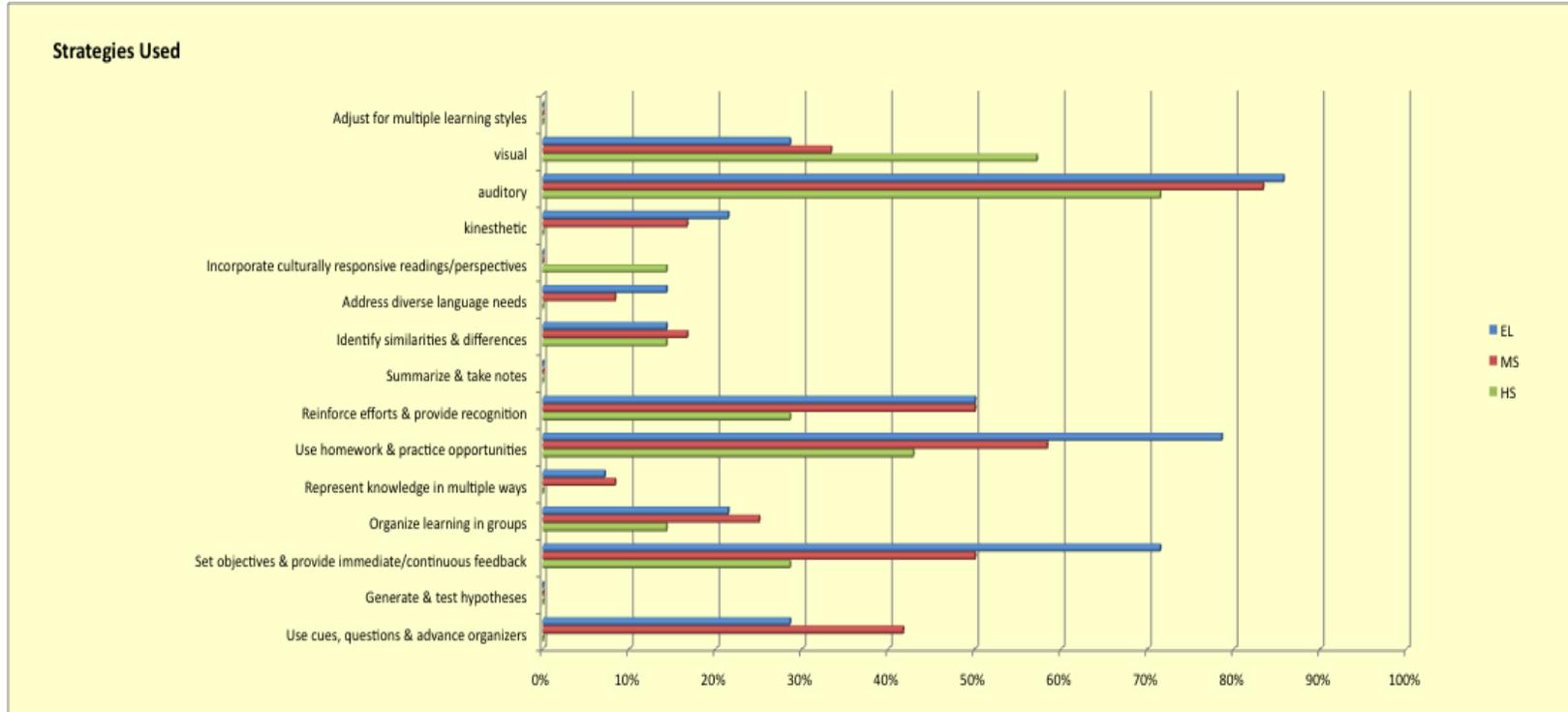
OBSERVED PRACTICES +	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
Cognitive Level	
29% Knowledge 29% Comprehension 43% Application 0% Analysis 0% Synthesis 0% Evaluation	Data indicates that more emphasis needs to be placed on higher level thinking skills both in student performance and teacher questioning, resulting in increased rigor in each classroom.
Environment/Resources	
29% Textbooks 57% Supplemental materials 0% Manipulatives 14% Technology 14% Materials reflect diversity 43% Worksheets: Open-ended/Fill-in/Multiple choice	While technology is abundant in the district, there was little use of the technology by students. Lessons should be designed to provide hands-on activities, through the use of manipulatives and technology, which will result in less dependence on worksheets.
Interactive Behaviors	
43% Active involvement in classwork 43% Asks/answers questions 57% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)	Provide students the opportunity to be meta-cognitive and increase academic learning time of all students (think-pair-share, partner work, cooperative learning).
Strategies Demonstrated	
Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways: 0% interpersonal 0% intrapersonal 86% verbal-linguistic 57% logistical-mathematical 57% visual-spatial 0% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic	Students need to be provided opportunities for using multiple learning styles, especially interpersonal, intrapersonal, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and musical-rhythmic.

LEARNING

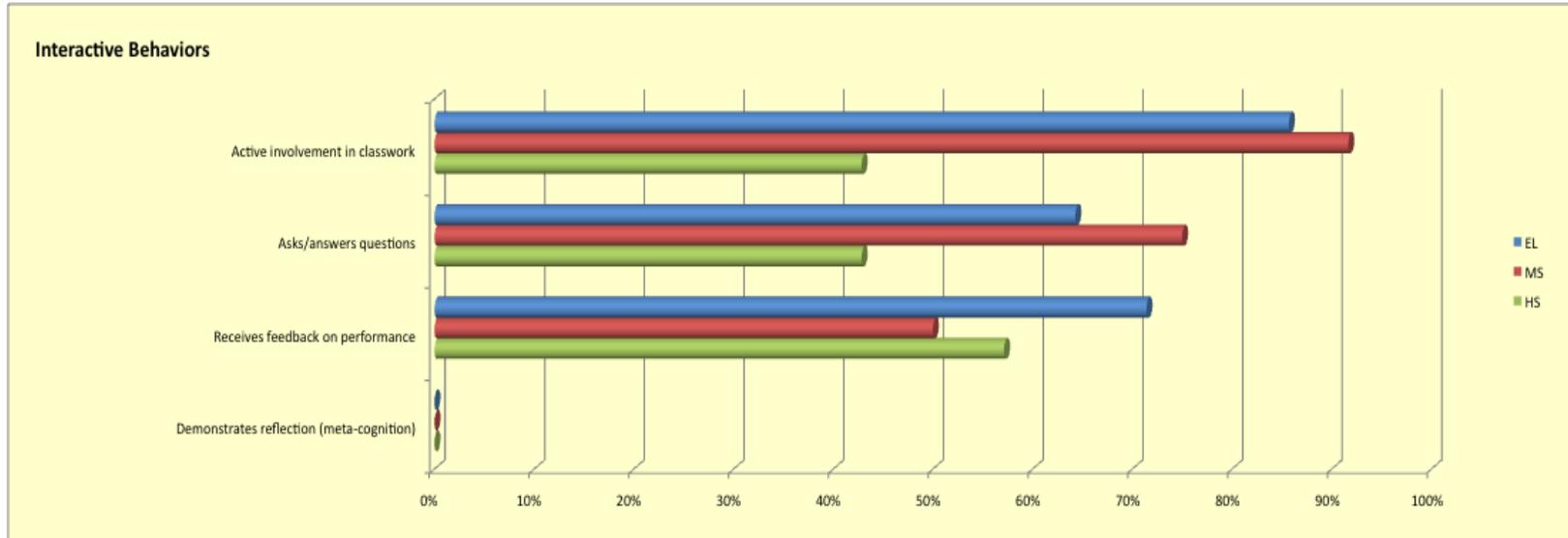
TEACHING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN IOLA SCHOOL DISTRICT



TEACHING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN IOLA SCHOOL DISTRICT (continued)



LEARNING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN IOLA SCHOOL DISTRICT



LEARNING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN IOLA SCHOOL DISTRICT (continued)

