

December | 08

Needs Analysis of Topeka Public Schools

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 & Joftus, LLC to implement a model for working with KSDE and five Kansas districts—Garden City, Kansas City, Topeka, Turner, and Wichita—struggling the most to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP).

The rationale for this model, called the Learning Network, was 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 five participating districts focused on their ability to foster and sustain a school improvement process. The needs analysis comprised 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 & Joftus called Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success (K-PALSS). All needs assessment activities were 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 concluded with a debriefing conducted by Cross & Joftus for the district’s leadership that included a presentation of some preliminary findings. This report presents all findings and represents the culmination of the needs assessment for Topeka Public Schools (TPS).

District enrollment in TPS—which started the 2008-09 school year with a new superintendent after one year of an interim superintendent—has fallen steadily for about 20 years. The current student population of 13,470 is very diverse: 45 percent white, 24 percent black, 19 percent Hispanic, 2 percent American Indian, 1 percent Asian, 9 percent multi-ethnic, and 66 percent poor.

Students in Topeka in the 2007-08 school year, as with students across Kansas, evidenced increases in reading in every grade. In math, Topeka demonstrated gains in all grades

¹ The site visit for TPS occurred November 11-13, 2008.

except three and eleven. Despite this progress, overall achievement in Topeka is well below the state average in both subjects and in all grades. Alarming, graduation rates in Capital City High School, Hope Street Academy, and Highland Park High are 25, 57, and 77 percent respectively. Further, 7 out of 21 elementary schools, 3 out of 7 middle schools, and 4 out of 5 high schools are not making adequate yearly progress. The district as a whole did not make AYP for the fourth straight year. In 2008, Topeka did not demonstrate AYP for disabled and ELL students in reading and for disabled, ELL, and African American students in math.

II. Findings

Findings from the needs assessment of TPS are summarized below in the areas of leadership, empowering culture, human resources and professional development, and curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Leadership

One of the main, overarching findings of the district needs analysis is that the district lacks systemic coherence. Coherence means that “the elements of a school district work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy.”²

Topeka’s first challenge with regard to coherence is that there is no articulated strategy for school or instructional improvement and no strategic plan (it is in development).

“There’s no plan for anything!” *Principal, with agreement from other principals*

“You hope your school is aligned, but we don’t know with what.”
Principal

Second, based on interviews and focus groups with district leadership, it appears that Topeka has attempted to implement a core curriculum consistently across all schools, providing significant amounts of professional development to support teachers. To do so effectively requires the district’s central office to take a tightly coupled, centralized approach to managing the instructional process.

The problem is that the district is not organized to support this approach. For example:

- District administrators widely describe the central office as “siloeed”; principals describe their buildings as “isolated.”

² Childress, S., R. Elmore, A. Grossman, and Caroline King (2007). Note on the PELP Coherence Framework. Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University.

- While some principals believe that the district’s professional development is of high quality, no principal is able to describe a district instructional or professional development focus. Several senior district administrators are very critical of the district’s curriculum.
- The General Directors responsible for supervising schools focus overwhelming on administrative issues, providing little educational support to schools and principals. Most principals—especially at the elementary level—report that they receive little support from the General Directors.
- The work of the General Director for school leadership and academic programs does not appear to be clearly defined or integrated with the work of the General Directors supervising schools.
- Education division staff meetings are characterized as focused almost exclusively on administrative issues and very rarely on instructional or school improvement.
- There is a significant lack of communication between the business (e.g., finance, facilities, procurement, transportation, and nutrition services) and instructional sides of the district.
- Principals report that there is little clarity about who to call in the central office to help solve a problem and, until very recently, little interest in getting feedback from them.
- School walkthroughs are conducted sporadically and vary significantly from school to school.

In addition to these structural challenges, the district’s culture appears broken. Adjectives and phrases used to describe the culture include mistrustful and even fearful, individualistic (as opposed to collaborative), “good ol’ boy,” not customer focused, “old school,” and risk averse. Moreover, the change process that took place immediately prior to the start of the new superintendent lacked a clear strategy and transparency, resulting in some job changes among district staff that left many confused and some angry.

Many of the findings throughout this report are related to the need to foster and sustain systemic coherence throughout the district. Other key findings in the area of leadership include the following:

- The school board is widely described as divided, contributing to the lack of systemic coherence. Board members were described as pursuing personal agendas at the expense of doing what is best for the children of Topeka. According to one community leader, some board members “act like five-year olds in a sand box,” which “discourages qualified people from running” and leads to a significant “credibility gap.” That said, goals agreed upon unanimously by the board to be addressed in the district’s upcoming strategic plan include:
 - Improving ELL services and supporting ELLs in their first language
 - Meeting average proficiency at each grade level
 - Expanding access to preK

- There appears to be genuine hope about and support for the new superintendent, who was widely described as an able and visionary leader, creative thinker, and curriculum expert. In addition, most administrators, teachers, and civic leaders describe the diversity of the student body as a strength, and most district and building administrators, teachers, and staff appear to be passionate about serving the needs of students.
- The condition of school facilities was described by principals as “disgusting” and “appalling,” and there does not appear to be a long-range plan for improvement. There is confusion and anger among principals about how to get anything done from simple maintenance to larger facility-improvement projects. Moreover, the Service Center, which helps to maintain facilities, has faced significant cutbacks in recent year and, according to principals, operates under crisis management and with little customer service.
- The district has received a significant boost in funding in recent years but will need to cut up to \$10 million from the budget for school year 2009-10. The district has already started a planning process for deciding how to make the cuts. At the same time, the district is purchasing approximately 28 acres for a variety of purposes, including administration, professional development center, development and use of green technology, and preschool and/or daycare for young children.
- The district’s student enrollment has decreased approximately 35 percent in the last 20 years with little or no reduction (some schools were closed in the 1980s but other schools—magnets—were added) in the number of schools. Schools in the western part of the district are mostly full, while schools in the eastern part of the district tend to be under-enrolled (currently, eight elementary schools serve fewer than 250 students).
- English language learners (a population that is growing by approximately 18 percent each year and that is overwhelmingly poor) are bused to ELL “centers.” This busing exacerbates inequality in enrollments between the eastern and western parts of the city, results in some long bus rides for students who require additional academic assistance, disconnects ELL students from their community, and—at least in many cases—fails to provide the ELL students with the extra support they need.

Empowering Culture

An empowering school and district culture is characterized by collaboration, risk-taking, problem solving, high expectations, and accountability. TPS’ culture exhibits some clear strengths that support the teaching and learning process:

- All the groups we talked to agreed that the outstanding strength of the district is in the diversity of programs, class offerings, activities, people, and experiences that Topeka has to offer. For example:
 - There is a plethora of activities, including debate and forensics, band, science, and arts.
 - Students are appreciative of how open minded and appreciative the school district is of the arts.
 - The welcoming of diversity is seen in the district’s willingness to address the needs of students with whom surrounding school districts are not willing to serve through special programs (e.g., Second Chance) and alternative high schools (e.g., Hope Street School).
 - The Lundgren Family Learning Center provides resources for parents and grandparents as well as students.
 - Topeka High School is known as the premier high school in the area. Topeka West High School has an outstanding drama and theater department, and the bands in all the high schools are considered excellent.

“It’s cool if you’re in the band – not just football.” *Student*

- There was general agreement that TPS has many caring teachers and staff, teachers with strong subject-matter knowledge (although acknowledged challenges with classroom management), and knowledgeable principals.
- Schools are becoming data driven. There is a measurement and evaluation specialist assigned to each school. Principals said they cannot imagine working without them.
- There is a strong collaboration with the YMCA, which provides after-school care at 13 school sites.
- Community and business leaders reported that they stand wanting and able to support the school and district improvement process. Washburn University, in particular, could be tapped to provide such supports as tutoring and to create early-college or dual-enrollment programs.

TPS also must address some challenges relative to an empowering culture:

- There appear to be serious communication problems throughout the system and among all stakeholders. For example:
 - Principals and teachers said they have had no input into district-level decisions.

- Details about the district’s budget have not been available to anyone outside the central office.
- There appears to be little communication across schools’ academic departments or between general education and specialists (e.g., special education, ELL).
- Parents, especially those whose first language is not English, are not well informed about how to access help or programs and are typically not effectively engaged by their schools.

“The community still functions like a small town, characterized by compassion, giving, and wanting to do right by their neighbor. On the other hand, like a small town, bad news travels fast, and travels faster from southwest to east.” *Community member, with agreement from other community members*

- There is a risk-averse culture among TPS administrators and staff. District administrators are perceived to be risk-averse, giving in too easily, for example, to parents on transfer requests and avoiding any perceived areas of conflict with the Board of Education. Community members commented that they have found Board members willing to look at different options that administrators would not put before them because the administrators thought “the board won’t like it.” Among school and district administrators, there has been a perceived penalty associated with being out of line, according to administrators and community members.
- Expectations for students vary among schools and among classes within schools. Overall, there is a perception that there are low academic expectations for poor children. Administrators, principals, and teachers too frequently lay the blame for not meeting AYP on demographics, rather than taking responsibility for diagnosing problems and taking measures to turn the schools around. “At the high school level, teachers still take the position that it is their job to lay knowledge on the table, and [the student’s] job to partake.”
- There are chronic problems in implementation of programs and plans. For example:
 - Some programs are purchased but remain on the shelves because teachers are never trained to use them.
 - High school reform needs direction. Teachers and principals say there are mixed messages regarding curriculum, and it is not clear who is in charge of what.
- The district serves a very needy student population:

- Schools do not have enough support in areas such as counselors, nurses, and social workers. Elementary schools have no counselors.
 - Teachers need assistance in addressing severe behavior problems in their classes. Some of these problems are caused by students with IEPs, but many are not—as is the case in schools nationwide.³
 - There is a significant truancy problem.
 - Early childhood resources are thinly spread (although all-day kindergarten is available district wide).
- There are negative perceptions about the schools and the district that may be unwarranted. Negative images of TPS predominate in the media and informal gossip channels. One of the high schools is still known as “suicide high.” Many people perceive the schools as unsafe, particularly in the parts of town that are home to lower income families. Realtors have refused to show middle-class newcomers homes in the district, referring them to other jurisdictions with better reputations. Many in the community view the district as ineffective. Community members told us that the media do not report positive things about the school district, but that this tendency has not been helped by “the antics of the school board.”

“There is a feeding frenzy on negativity.”
Community member

- Many schools have become “islands.” There are few active parents in the community, but many would be involved if they were invited. Parents, teachers, and administrators we spoke with whom we spoke said that some principals are afraid to ask parents to become involved or don’t want them in their schools. Also, many schools never send anything (homework, textbooks) home, so parents who want to be involved with their children’s education do not know what to do.

“Like kids, parents need to feel special, important, and needed.”
Parent

 “When parents come in, principals don’t know what to do with us.” *Parent*

³ Dr. Ron Felton, private communication, November 23, 2008.

Human Resources and Professional Development

Key findings related to *human resources* in TPS include the following:

- Because of Topeka’s proximity to teacher training organizations, the district has a relatively easy time recruiting general education teachers, although there are problems hiring teachers for special education,⁴ library/media, ELL, technical education, math, and science as well as counselors.
- The Grow Your Own Program, currently in its third year, provides tuition and fees to help classified staff (currently 10 in the program) become teachers. One staff member has become a teacher and two are beginning their student teaching thanks to this program
- Online applications for teachers, currently in its first year, and the shift away from paper files in general, appear to be getting implemented effectively.
- There is significant lag time, however, between principals recommending the hiring of a teacher or paraprofessional and the offering of a job, likely resulting in the loss of teachers and paraprofessionals to surrounding districts and other fields. There also appears to be a lack of effective screening of job applicants.
- The teacher mentoring programs provides a mentor to all new teachers for their first three years and pays for mentors. Teacher mentors, however, are paid little (\$1,000 in year one, \$500 in years two and three), are provided no extra free time or support, and are asked to serve year after year, leading to some burn out.
- There is the perception among principals that teacher allocations to schools are based on faulty student enrollment projections.
- A comprehensive process for teacher evaluation, based on Charlotte Danielson’s framework, is used. The teacher evaluation process, while based on a high-quality framework, is dreaded by principals—who, despite receiving professional development, feel a lack of support from the central office—and overly complex and bureaucratic, making it very difficult to reward effective teachers and remove ineffective ones. No consideration of student achievement is given, and most principals agree that there is little emphasis given to the quality of teaching and learning.
- Similarly, the principal evaluation, which does not include a formal consideration of student achievement, is not viewed as effective or credible by principals or district administrators. Principals reported that they do want meaningful feedback about their performance and want to be held accountable.

⁴ As of November 2008, the district still had four vacancies for special education teachers, which were being filled by paraprofessionals.

- The payroll system is overly complex and difficult to use. There is also a lack of understanding among principals and some district administrators about the funding mechanism used to pay for staff positions.

Key findings related to *professional development* in TPS include the following:

- There are several promising practices related to professional development in TPS:
 - Schools have access to academic coaches and district liaisons.
 - A significant amount of professional development (nine days split between the district and school buildings) is provided.
 - The middle schools' 45 minutes per day of collaboration time appears to be a promising practice for providing teachers an opportunity to work together on issues related to student achievement once a day. This collaboration, according to focus group and interview participants, is leading to teachers gaining a deeper understanding of the instructional needs of students, a more consistent approach to improving instruction, and improved outcomes for students. This collaborative time, however, does not appear to be occurring at the elementary or high school levels.
 - The professional development for math is widely considered to be the district's strongest offering, thanks largely to a district administrator who, for reasons not completely understood, was reassigned to serve as a school librarian prior to the 2008-09 school year
 - The late start for high schools provides administrators and teachers with time to collaborate once a week. The late start, however, creates challenges for high schools in supervising students.
 - Training for special education has improved greatly in recent years.
 - The professional development provided to teachers in Highland Park High's 9th grade academy received praise from teachers and principals.
 - The district has stopped or greatly reduced the practice of pulling teachers out of their classroom during instructional time.
- Professional development at the district level in general, while significant in quantity and appreciated by some (especially elementary school principals), is not focused or systemic, tends to be driven by program (e.g., Title I) rather than district goals or student and teacher needs, is not tied to state standards, has not been evaluated, and does not support teachers' needs in the areas of classroom management, safety, technology, ELL instruction, and differentiated instruction. A new plan for professional development is currently under development. Professional development provided at the schools was described as lacking consistency in quality across buildings.

“There are nine days of professional every spring. But departments pick days rather than having a universal staff development thread with planned follow up for fidelity of implementation. There is no alignment and the real direction of professional development is not evident.” *Administrator*

- Similarly, the teacher support structure has several issues that could be addressed:
 - There is a significant amount of money spent on various types of academic coaches. While the value of the coaches was widely lauded (schools such as Chase Middle School appear to offer examples of a promising practice), there does not appear to be a coherent district or school strategy for using or coordinating the coaches paid for by the district or the Gear Up grant with the University of Kansas.
 - Teachers recruited from the Philippines do not receive extra time or support to transition to classrooms in Topeka.
 - There is a significant amount of money (roughly \$4 million per year) spent on various types of paraprofessionals. While principals generally express strong support for their own paraprofessionals, many principals and some district administrators acknowledge that many paraprofessionals are not high quality, are not used effectively by teachers, and receive little professional development. The turnover rate among classified (about 21% per year overall including about 12.5% among paraprofessionals) is high.
 - First year teachers are pulled out of the classroom too much for training.
- The collaboration time that appears to be so effective in the middle schools has not been applied at the elementary or high school levels.

Challenges are common and teaching “at all three levels have different challenges. Learning teams are not happening at the high schools, and there is no consistent plan for professional development of how to develop a learning team.” *Liaison Coach*

- MyLearningPlan.com provides the infrastructure to help teachers plan and track their professional development. The program, however, is not used by teachers and actually represents a point of conflict between the district administration, which believes that teachers should be tracking their own professional development, and teachers, who believe that it is the central office’s responsibility to track professional development and who note that their bargaining agreement exempts them from using the tool.
- There is a lack of teachers qualified to work with ELL students, the only growing population in the district, and a lack of training for all teachers who work with this population.

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Findings related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment—while frequently overlapping are presented in those categories below. More detail about the data collected during classroom visitations using the K-PALSS (Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success) process, cited below, can be found in the appendix of this report.

Overall, based on the K-PALSS process, focus groups, individual interviews, and a review of curriculum and other materials, it is clear that there is little curricular or instructional consistency across TPS. This appears to be especially true at the high school level. For example, members of the teacher and academic coach focus groups repeated a hope that good instructional practices would “trickle up” to the high schools soon. Similarly, K-PALSS data found that only 49% of high school classrooms visited demonstrated a support for high expectations for student learning and virtually all student learning takes place at the low rungs of Bloom’s taxonomy. Moreover, one of Topeka’s five high schools is a stand-alone school for special education high school. This “segregated” special-education school is inconsistent with the inclusive education model seen at the elementary and middle school levels and with best practices, and it may enhance the reported feelings of inequities in services, opportunities, and resources across the district’s five high schools.

Curriculum

TPS exhibits some clear *strengths* related to curriculum:

- The district has adopted and uses across K-6 Everyday Math with promising results. There is strong support among teachers for keeping Everyday Math.
- Elementary schools have an array of intervention materials, and middle and high schools have use of Read 180 for intervention.
- The special education inclusion model in elementary and middle schools has provided a positive behavior intervention system that is used in some schools for a school wide system for behavioral expectation and support.
- Middle schools appear to be the strength of the system.
- K-PALSS observations found *significant evidence* (70-100% of classrooms visited) of standards-based instruction at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. Focus group and individual interview data, however, did not corroborate this finding.
- K-PALSS observations found *significant evidence* (70-100% of classrooms visited) that teachers were providing checks for student understanding and giving

feedback regarding progress with the curriculum (however at the high school level only 17% of the teachers were providing such feedback).

TPS also must address some *challenges* relative to curriculum:

- Based on focus groups with teachers and principals, there appears to be no consistent vision for curriculum at the school level.
- The English Language Arts adopted program is not highly regarded nationally, is more than five years old, and believed to be weak by teachers. There is little evidence that it is in use across elementary schools. Moreover, there are inconsistent directions from the district office in regards to the English Language Arts pacing guides, and these guides do not contain time for pre-teaching or re-teaching.
- Focus groups noted that little was happening for students with different learning needs, including ELL and special education students, and that behavior was a major issue for children with disabilities who were fully included. While the groups agreed that much professional development had been provided in both curricular modification and behavioral strategies for these groups, focus group participants noted that paraprofessionals are frequently left to work with students, there is little ongoing support for teachers, and instructional strategies for ELLs are inconsistent and unrelated to core instruction.
- Intervention materials are not consistently used, not aligned with curriculum and instructional needs, and not supported by staff development.
- There appears to be inequity across schools in regards to curricular materials and resources, support, and technology.

“Originally the district office had strong leadership regarding instruction with pacing guides and materials to be used. Now there are inconsistent directions from the district office regarding ELA and math pacing guides, social studies, and science are weak. A big problem in all of the pacing guides is that there is not time for re-teaching.” *Administrator*

- K-PALSS observations found *evidence* (observed in 50-69% of classrooms visited) that technology was used to enhance the curriculum and provide access for middle school students, but it was only *minimally evident* (less than 50% of classrooms observed) at the elementary and high school levels. Corroborating evidence from focus groups of teachers, coaches and administrators indicated an insufficient number of computers at the high school level, as well as a need to move from adult to student use of technology at all levels.

- K-PALSS observations found *minimal evidence* (less than 50%) of teachers at all levels adjusting for multiple learning styles and providing culturally responsive materials and perspectives.

Instruction

In general, Topeka teachers and, to an even more pronounced degree, principals believe that many sound instructional practices are strongly evident in their schools. Table 1 presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 28.7%) and principals (response rate 78.8%) administered online by Cross & Joftus.

The sound instructional strategies that *principals* believe are most *strongly evident* in their schools include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 88% of principals);
- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment (85% of principals);
- monitoring instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers (81% of principals); and
- collaboratively functioning as a community of learners focused on improving student learning (81% of principals).

The strategies believed by *principals* to be *least evident* include:

- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (selected as strongly evident by 8% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 31%);
- providing adequate resources, incentives, and interventions to support teacher and administrator learning (selected as strongly evident by 12% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 27%);
- measuring effectiveness of staff development by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning (selected as strongly evident by 15% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 15%); and
- providing adequate resources, incentives, and interventions to support student learning (selected as strongly evident by 19% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 31%);

The sound instructional strategies that teachers believe are most strongly evident and least evident in their schools are similar to those selected by principals. *Teachers* believe that the strategies that are most *strongly evident* include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 68% of teachers);

- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment (59% of teachers);
- providing equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners (59% of teachers);
- using data to determine staff development (57% of teachers);
- identifying students who are struggling to master content and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction (56% of teachers).

The strategies believed by *teachers* to be *least evident* include:

- providing adequate resources, incentives, and interventions to support teacher and administrator learning (selected as strongly evident by 16% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 42%);
- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (selected as strongly evident by 19% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 30%);
- providing adequate resources, incentives, and interventions to support student learning (selected as strongly evident by 21% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 35%); and
- measuring effectiveness of staff development by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning (selected as strongly evident by 26% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 28%).

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%	68%	1%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment.	85%	8%	59%	12%
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	81%	0%	38%	19%
Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	81%	4%	50%	13%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the	73%	0%	45%	9%

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^
curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.				
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development.	73%	0%	57%	10%
Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction.	73%	4%	56%	9%
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.	62%	4%	53%	8%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.	58%	12%	43%	20%
Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.	58%	0%	59%	3%
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction.	54%	8%	39%	21%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students.	50%	8%	36%	14%
Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level.	46%	4%	43%	12%
Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well being.	42%	4%	41%	12%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	35%	15%	38%	23%

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^
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning.	19%	31%	21%	35%
The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning.	15%	15%	26%	28%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning.	12%	27%	16%	42%
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	8%	31%	19%	30%

Source: Cross & Jofthus survey of Topeka principals and teachers November 2008.

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

^The response option “No Opinion” was deleted from this presentation. No principals and generally less than 1% of teachers selected this option on any response.

#Response rate was 78.8%.

~Response rate was 28.7%.

Cross & Jofthus observations through the K-PALSS process and interviews and focus groups with administrators and teachers confirmed and added depth to some of the positive beliefs of principals and teachers expressed through their surveys. K-PALSS observations, for example, found *significant evidence* (observed in at least 70% of classrooms visited) that teachers in elementary and middle schools displayed student work and assessment results. At the elementary level, there was *significant evidence* of teachers setting objectives and providing immediate and continuous feedback. This research-based strategy was *evident* (observed in 50-69% of classrooms visited) at the elementary school level but *minimally evident* (observed in less than 50% of classrooms visited) at the high school level.

In addition, observations found *evidence* (observed in 50-69% of classrooms visited) that teachers used modeling to support instructional strategies (although in elementary classrooms it was observed to be *minimally evident*).

Several *challenges* related to instruction also emerged during the needs analysis. K-PALSS observations found *minimal evidence* (observed in less than 50% of classrooms visited) that teachers:

- Provided instruction and opportunities for learning at higher levels of thinking (rigor) aligned to state assessment questions that require Bloom’s levels of cognition of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

- Provided instructional opportunities or lessons designed to promote student-led learning, cooperative learning, or generation of and testing of hypotheses.
- Demonstrated the following research-based practices that have been shown to enhance student learning:
 - identify similarities and differences
 - summarize and take notes
 - organize learning in groups
 - generate and test hypotheses.

Assessment

TPS exhibited several *strengths* related to evaluation, assessment, and use of data:

- A large array of assessments is available for use, including for special education, to determine instructional efficacy and monitoring/modifications needed. Good formative assessments are in use, particularly in middle schools, and middle school educators appear to be using data from these assessments in the instructional improvement process.
- The Research, Evaluation, and Assessment office produces a great deal of high-quality data.
- The district developed an online tool that helps teachers and administrators identify standards that are proving problematic for students and develop lesson plans and instructional strategies for helping students master the standards.

“Schools with great scores unpacked the indicators, had problem solving teams using data, and changed practice based on this. We had turn over in staff until we got a coherent group. This is probably a model to look at for improvement.” *Middle School Coach*

- Middle school teachers, coaches, and principals all affirmed the practice of using data to determine student needs and professional development.

In the middle schools particularly, “there are effective practices around learning teams which use data, determine needs, cross team plan, use formative assessment, and a cycle of inquiry process.” *Middle School Teacher*

Several *challenges* were also identified:

- With the exception of those coming from the Kansas state assessments, assessment data are inconsistently analyzed and used to improve instruction at the elementary and high school levels.
- Transitional information and planning for instructional needs from elementary to middle schools and middle to high schools is inconsistent.
- There are distinct inequities in deployment of technology across schools. On-line assessments are to be required by the Kansas Department of Education in 2010, and there is a huge lack of computer accessibility for students in high schools.
- The TERMS data system was described as cumbersome to use, disliked by teachers, and not web based.
- According to teacher and principal focus groups, reading and math assessments rule what is being taught.

“We are working to win that test and screw the rest of the curriculum.” *Administrator*

- K-PALSS observations found *minimal evidence* (observed in less than 50% of classrooms visited) of teachers providing students opportunity for self-evaluation to increase shared responsibility for future learning or for demonstration of learning through presentations or performance.

III. Recommendations for Technical Assistance

One of the primary goals of this needs assessment is to identify areas in which the district would 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, LLC recommend that the technical assistance provided to TPS address one or more of the following general recommendations:

- 1) Develop a plan and create systems for fostering and sustaining systemic coherence, which includes addressing issues related to organizational structure, roles and responsibilities of senior staff, communication among senior staff, strategies for supporting schools and holding them accountable, and strategies for improving the quality and consistency of professional development across schools. *Due to its impact on all other recommendations, Cross & Jofus*

strongly recommends that the district implement this recommendation prior to—or at least at the same time as—any of the following recommendations.

- 2) Develop or refine a professional development plan and strategies for improving instruction and classroom management to address the challenges outlined in the findings above.
- 3) Design and provide ongoing professional development and support for teachers with English language learners.
- 4) Systematize walk-throughs and other evaluation strategies as a way to hone professional development and leverage instructional improvement.
- 5) Develop and implement a plan for facilities improvement and for closing under-enrolled and low-performing schools.
- 6) Analyze and, if necessary, revise student assignment policies, especially as they relate to ELL Centers.
- 7) Conduct training for the school board.

Once district leadership has had an opportunity to review this report, a representative from Cross & Joftus will contact the TPS superintendent to finalize a technical assistance plan that includes approximately 24 days of external support for the time period January through June of 2009. 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 K-PALSS Classroom Observations
TOPEKA, KANSAS

Using the K-PALSS (Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success) protocol and process, Cross & Joftus 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, 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.

The graphs following the tables show a summary of the practices that were observed in all classrooms.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS (36 classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	TEACHING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
Learning Environment		
100% Orderly/Clean 100% Safe 100% Displays student work 48% Respects cultural diversity with materials resources 67% Supports high expectations		Respect for cultural diversity needs to be more evident in the learning environment. High teacher expectations need to be more evident in the learning environment.
Instructional Design		
100% Standards-based lesson 0% Inquiry-based lesson 75% Total group 19% Flexible small skill group 11% Cooperative learning group 83% Teacher-led learning 19% Student-led learning 11% Modeling 100% Checking understanding 44% Guided Practice 19% Independent Practice	Use of small flexible learning groups and cooperative learning needs to increase. Student-led instruction needs to occur more. Modeling and inquiry based instruction needs to be embedded in instruction to a much greater degree.	
Strategies Used		
25% Adjust for multiple learning styles 14% visual 11% auditory 0% kinesthetic 0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 0% Address diverse language needs 22% Identify similarities & differences 11% Summarize & take notes 100% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 100% Use homework & practice opportunities 94% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 17% Organize learning in groups 83% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 11% Generate & test hypotheses 92% Use cues, questions & advance organizers 86% Increase student engagement	Of the 9 Marzano strategies, homework & practice and reinforcing efforts & providing recognition were the most predominant. Need to use a wider variety of strategies to reach and engage all students. A larger repertoire of instructional strategies is necessary to provide culturally responsive teaching and address diverse language needs Need to increase use of multiple learning styles.	

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS (36 classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	LEARNING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
<p align="center">Interactive Behaviors</p> <p>100% Asks/answers questions 94% Active involvement in classwork 0% Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways:</p> <p>25% interpersonal</p> <p>0% intrapersonal</p> <p>100% verbal-linguistic 33% logistical-mathematical 0% visual-spatial 0% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic</p> <p>100% Receives feedback on performance 8% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)</p> <p align="center">Cognitive Level</p> <p>100% Knowledge</p> <p>92% Comprehension 33% Application 0% Analysis 0% Synthesis 0% Evaluation</p> <p align="center">Work Produced</p> <p>83% Individual Work 33% Group Work</p> <p>83% Written work 83% Project 8% Presentation/Performance</p> <p>0% Self-Evaluation/Reflection</p> <p align="center">Resources</p> <p>33% Textbooks 42% Supplemental materials 36% Manipulatives</p> <p>42% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 47% Worksheets</p>		

MIDDLE SCHOOLS (15 classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +		PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
Learning Environment		
100% Orderly/Clean 100% Safe 47% Displays student work 53% Respects cultural diversity with materials resources 60% Supports high expectations	TEACHING	Respect for cultural diversity needs to be more evident in the learning environment. High teacher expectations need to be more evident in the learning environment.
Instructional Design		
100% Standards-based lesson 0% Inquiry-based lesson 100% Total group 0% Flexible small skill group 0% Cooperative learning group 100% Teacher-led learning 0% Student-led learning 53% Modeling 73% Checking understanding 73% Guided Practice 0% Independent Practice		Use of small flexible learning groups and cooperative learning needs to increase. Student-led instruction needs to occur more. Modeling and inquiry based instruction needs to be embedded into instruction to a much greater degree.
Strategies Used		
27% Adjust for multiple learning styles 0% visual 0% auditory 0% kinesthetic 27% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 0% Address diverse language needs 27% Identify similarities & differences 27% Summarize & take notes 73% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 53% Use homework & practice opportunities 27% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 0% Organize learning in groups 53% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 0% Generate & test hypotheses 100% Use cues, questions & advance organizers 100% Increase student engagement		Of the 9 Marzano strategies, cues, questions, & advance organizers and reinforcing effort & providing recognition were the most predominant. Need to use a wider variety of strategies to reach and engage all students. A larger repertoire of instructional strategies is necessary to provide culturally responsive teaching and address diverse language needs. Need to increase the use of multiple learning styles.

MIDDLE SCHOOLS (15 classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	LEARNING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ	
Interactive Behaviors			
100% Asks/answers questions			
93% Active involvement in classwork			Students need to demonstrate their knowledge in multiple ways through more rigorous, active engagement in their learning.
0% Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways:			Promotion of reflection/meta cognition and self-evaluation needs to be evident during lessons.
100% interpersonal			
0% intrapersonal			
47% verbal-linguistic			
33% logistical-mathematical			
0% visual-spatial			
0% bodily-kinesthetic			
0% musical-rhythmic			
67% Receives feedback on performance			
27% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)			
Cognitive Level			
100% Knowledge		Students should be expected to think at higher levels.	
53% Comprehension			
27% Application			
0% Analysis			
0% Synthesis			
0% Evaluation			
Work Produced			
100% Individual Work		Students should be expected to produce more work by performance and presentation.	
0% Group Work		Student work should reflect the promotion of reflection and self-evaluation more.	
100% Written work			
100% Project			
0% Presentation/Performance			
0% Self-Evaluation/Reflection			
Resources			
47% Textbooks			
27% Supplemental materials			
47% Manipulatives			
53% Technology		Use of technology needs to transfer from predominantly teacher-use to student-use, integrating it with instruction and student product.	
0% Materials reflect diversity			
47% Worksheets			

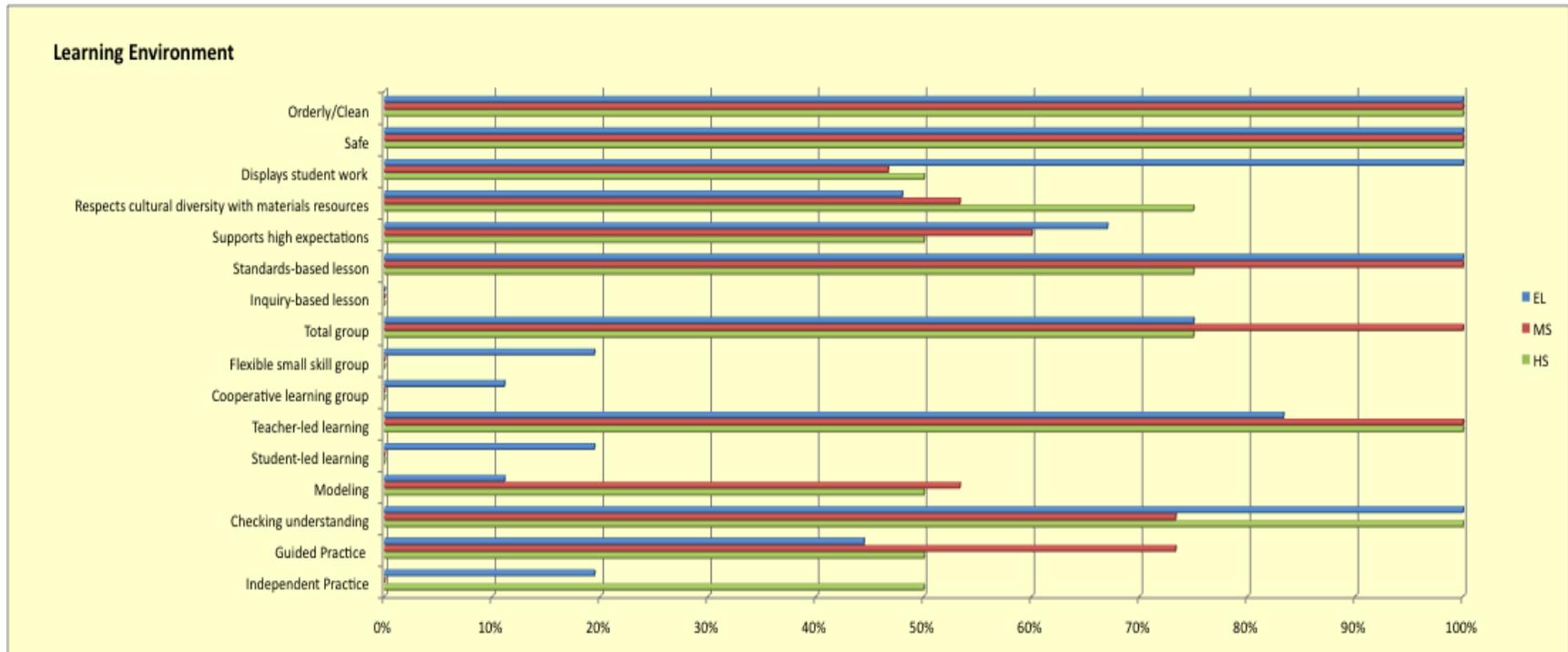
HIGH SCHOOLS (12 classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	TEACHING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ	
Learning Environment			
100% Orderly/Clean 100% Safe 50% Displays student work 75% Respects cultural diversity with materials resources 50% Supports high expectations			Respect for cultural diversity needs to be more evident in the learning environment. High teacher expectations need to be more evident in the learning environment.
Instructional Design			
75% Standards-based lesson 0% Inquiry-based lesson 75% Total group 0% Flexible small skill group 0% Cooperative learning group 100% Teacher-led learning 0% Student-led learning 50% Modeling 100% Checking understanding 50% Guided Practice 50% Independent Practice		Use of small flexible learning groups and cooperative learning needs to increase. Student-led instruction needs to occur more. Modeling and inquiry based instruction needs to be embedded into instruction to a much greater degree.	
Strategies Used			
17% Adjust for multiple learning styles 0% visual 0% auditory 0% kinesthetic 17% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 0% Address diverse language needs 42% Identify similarities & differences 42% Summarize & take notes 17% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 58% Use homework & practice opportunities 42% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 0% Organize learning in groups 42% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 17% Generate & test hypotheses 83% Use cues, questions & advance organizers 17% Increase student engagement		Of the 9 Marzano strategies, homework & practice and using cues, questions, & advance organizers were the most predominant. Need to use a wider variety of strategies to reach and engage all students. A larger repertoire of instructional strategies is necessary to provide culturally responsive teaching and address diverse language needs. Need to increase the use of multiple learning styles.	

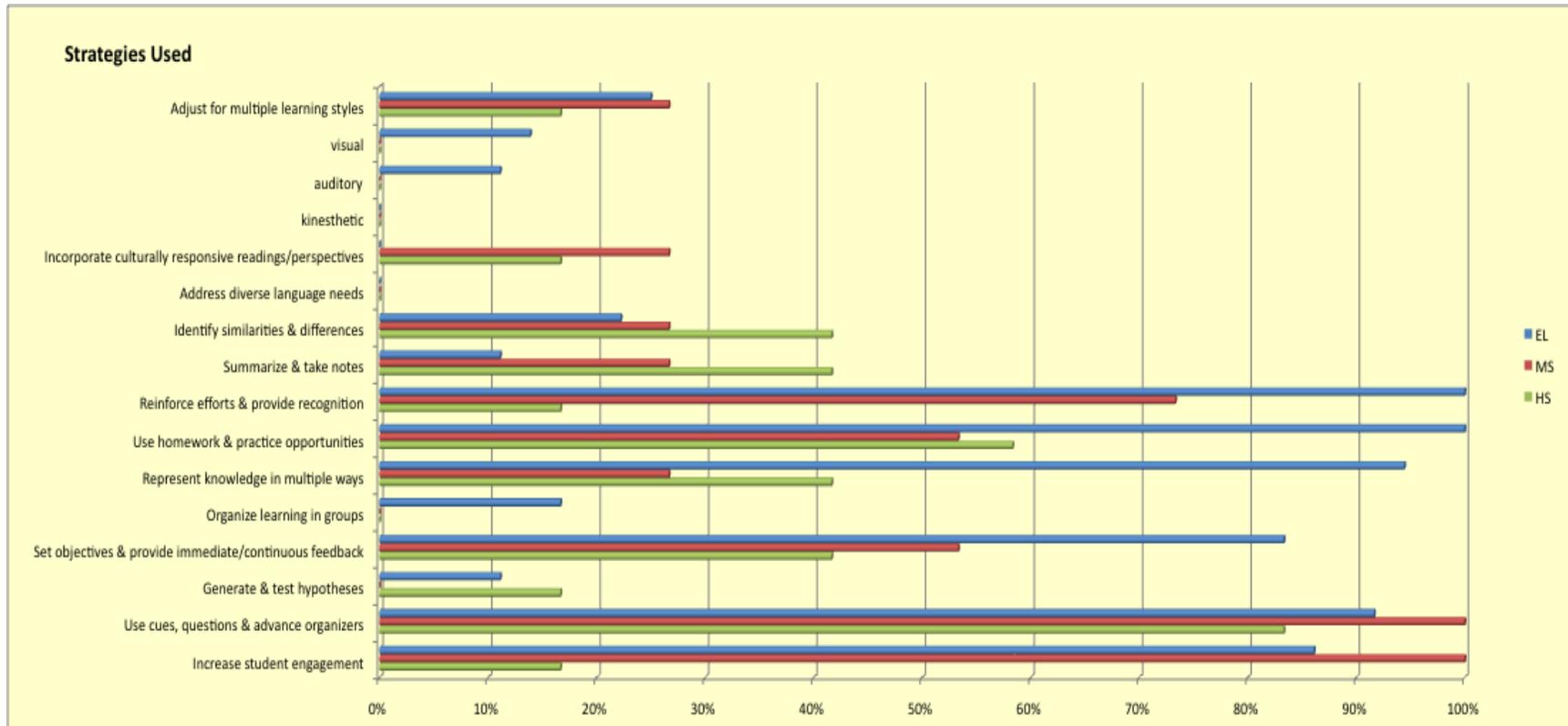
HIGH SCHOOLS (12 classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	LEARNING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
Interactive Behaviors		
83% Asks/answers questions 83% Active involvement in classwork		Students need to demonstrate their knowledge in multiple ways through more rigorous, active engagement in their learning.
0% Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways: 75% interpersonal		Promotion of reflection/meta cognition and self-evaluation needs to be evident during lessons.
0% intrapersonal 42% verbal-linguistic 0% logistical-mathematical 0% visual-spatial 0% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic 25% Receives feedback on performance 67% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)		
Cognitive Level		
100% Knowledge 100% Comprehension 33% Application 0% Analysis 0% Synthesis 0% Evaluation		Students should be expected to think at high levels reaching synthesis and evaluation.
Work Produced		
75% Individual Work 58% Group Work	Students should be expected to produce more work by performance and presentation.	
58% Written work 58% Project	Student work should reflect the promotion of reflection and self-evaluation more.	
17% Presentation/Performance 0% Self-Evaluation/Reflection		
Resources		
92% Textbooks 67% Supplemental materials 33% Manipulatives		
33% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 67% Worksheets	Use of technology needs to transfer from predominantly teacher-use to student-use, integrating it with instruction and student product.	

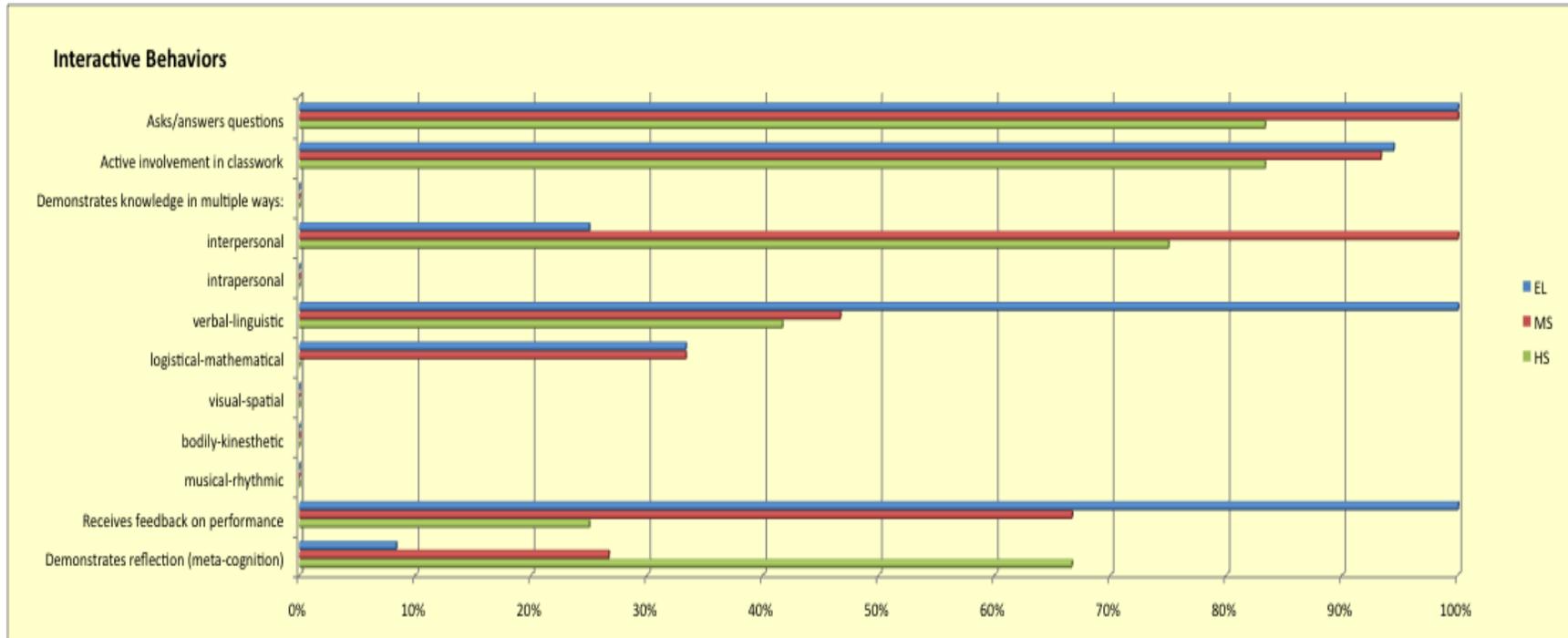
TEACHING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN TOPEKA PUBLIC SCHOOLS



TEACHING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN TOPEKA PUBLIC SCHOOLS (continued)



LEARNING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN TOPEKA PUBLIC SCHOOLS



LEARNING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN TOPEKA PUBLIC SCHOOLS (continued)

