

November

11

Needs Analysis of McLouth Unified Schools, USD 342

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

I. Introduction

Background

In September 2008, the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) contracted with Cross & Jofus 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 and 2010, this model, the Kansas Learning Network (KLN), was expanded to reach 23 additional Kansas districts struggling to demonstrate AYP. In 2011, 12 more districts joined the Network, including USD 342, McLouth Unified Schools. Since 2008, four districts have left the Network because they demonstrated AYP for two consecutive years.¹

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 analysis of 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 two-day site visits² that include interviews and focus groups with students, parents, civic leaders, teachers, instructional coaches, principals, district administrators, and board members as well as classroom observations using a process designed by Cross & Jofus called the Focused Classroom Walkthrough process (part of Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success, or K-PALSS).

All needs analysis activities are designed both to identify strengths and challenges leading to recommendations for improvement and technical assistance, and to train school and state officials to do their own needs analyses and classroom observations in the future.

¹ Under the No Child Left Behind Act, a district must demonstrate AYP two consecutive years in order to be removed from the “needs improvement” list.

² The site visit for McLouth occurred October 25-26, 2011.

The site visits conclude with a debriefing conducted by Cross & Joftus for the district’s leadership that includes a presentation of some preliminary results. This report represents the culmination of the needs analysis for McLouth Unified Schools, USD 342 (referred to throughout the report as USD 342 or McLouth).

McLouth Student Demographics

In the 2010-11 school year approximately 527 students enrolled in McLouth, a decrease of about seven percentage points from 2006-07, when there were 564 students enrolled in USD 342. The district employs 44 certified and 31 classified full- and part-time employees, and has three schools—McLouth Elementary, McLouth Middle, and McLouth High School, housed at one site. One principal, Mike Bogard leads McLouth secondary schools—McLouth Middle and McLouth High School—and another principal Mark Dodge leads the elementary school.

Over the last five years McLouth demographic patterns have shifted somewhat, most notably in the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals. In 2006-07, 27.7% of students were identified as economically disadvantaged. That number has now climbed more than 10 percentage points, to 40.4%. This percentage increase may be due in part, however, to a concentrated effort on the part of the district to make sure that all families who are eligible sign up to receive free and reduced priced meals.

Table I—Demographic Patterns in USD 342

Race-Ethnicity	2006-07	2010-11
American Indian/Alaska Native	.4%	.8%
African-American	.4%	1.7%
Hispanic/Latino	2.5%	2.5%
Asian/ Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander	.7%	.4%
Multiracial	2.0%	4.2%
White	94.1%	90.5%

The number of students with disabilities has also increased. In 2006-07, approximately 12.8% of students were classified as students with disabilities, just below the state average of 13.5%. In 2010-11, that number rose more than three percentage points, to 16.1%, well above the state average.³

Student Achievement

Overall, McLouth students have performed relatively well on state assessment tests in reading. All student groups have either exceeded state reading assessment benchmarks or have met criterion benchmarks for demonstrating proficiency in reading for the past three years (for additional detail, see Table II below). Moreover, the district boasts high

³ KSDE and district data.

graduation rates, and McLouth schools also received five Kansas Standards of Excellence Awards in 2011, including building-wide awards for the high school in reading and math and for the middle school in reading.

Table II—McLouth Summary Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Data

Reading – Met AYP in 2009, 2010, and 2011. Not on Improvement

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2009 - 76.7%	2010 - 81.3%	2011 - 86%
All students	Met (88.3%)	Met (88.1%)	Met (89.2%)
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (88%)	Met (84.8%)	Met (78.2%) ⁴
Students with Disabilities	Met (70.6%) ⁴	Met (69%) ⁴	Met (70%) ⁵
ELL Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
African-American Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hispanic	N/A	N/A	N/A
White	Met (88%)	Met (87.8%)	Met (89.7%)
Asian*	N/A	N/A	N/A
American Indian or Alaskan*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Multi-Racial*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Is.*	N/A	N/A	N/A

Mathematics – Met AYP in 2009; did not meet in 2010 or 2011. On Improvement

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2009 - 70.5%	2010 - 76.4%	2011 - 82.3%
All students	Met (84.2%)	Met (82.9%)	Met (79.2%) ⁴
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (81.9%)	Met (77%)	No (67.8%)
Students with Disabilities	Met (60.6%) ⁴	No (54.8%)	Met (57.5%) ⁵
ELL Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
African-American Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hispanic	N/A	N/A	N/A
White	Met (84.1%)	Met (83.8%)	Met (78%) ⁴
Asian*	N/A	N/A	N/A
American Indian or Alaskan*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Multi-Racial*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Is.*	N/A	N/A	N/A

Overall Graduation Rate: 2009—94%, 2010—97.6%, 2011—93.5%[^]

Notes:

*These categories were reconfigured in 2010—Asian-Pacific Islander was split into two categories: Asian and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; Multi-Ethnic was changed to Multi-Racial; and Alaskan was added to American Indian.

[^]This percentage represents the four-year graduation rate for 2011. As of 2011, all states are now required by the US Department of Education to calculate schools' graduation rates based on a cohort model, in this

⁴ The percent standard or above is below the target but above the criterion.

⁵ The group made Safe Harbor through the hypothesis test at the 75% level of confidence.

case, the percentage of students who graduated in four years. The change is designed to ensure that all students are accounted for in the graduation rate calculation.
N/A indicates that data are not available.

Despite these accomplishments, however, USD 342 has some clear achievement challenges. Students with disabilities failed to meet benchmarks on the state math assessment in 2010, and students qualifying for free and reduced priced meals failed to meet benchmarks in 2011 placing the district on improvement in math. Moreover, in 2011 other groups of students met benchmarks on the state math assessment through safe harbor or confidence interval designations.

The Big Picture

McLouth lies between Topeka and Kansas City, north of Lawrence. The latest census data indicate that there are just over 1,000 people living in McLouth area. Median household income is approximately \$56,000, above the state average of \$47,000.

Like many small towns and districts across the nation, McLouth has operated under considerable budget strain over the last few years. Positions and programs have been cut, to the point where many perceive that there is nothing left to cut.

There is also a great deal of hope in McLouth, however. New leaders—a new superintendent and a new principal—have brought new life to USD 342, and while transitions are always challenging, this sense of renewal appears to be energizing staff, students, parents, and the larger community.

McLouth possesses a number of overall strengths that it can build upon as it moves through this transition.

- The new superintendent is highly respected by all stakeholders. He has articulated a three-pronged improvement strategy, and the board of education is very supportive of his work.
- The district has recently made several strategic investments to improve technology and infrastructure, in an effort to better support students and staff.
- Staff members participate in professional learning communities (PLCs) in all McLouth schools, and recently some staff members have taken advantage of new professional development opportunities, visiting classrooms to observe learning in other districts and attending regional training sessions.
- USD 342 appears to provide a safe, supportive, and caring learning environment for students.
- The elementary school uses tiered instructional strategies to guide reading instruction, and district educators have begun to observe instruction, using the PALSS protocol.

The district can draw on these strengths and others to address five key systemic challenges as it works to improve.

- A challenging budget environment means that the district will have to continue to make difficult choices.
- While everyone appears to be happy with new leadership in the district, there is concern that some may want to continue doing things the way they have always been done. In order for the district to continue to improve, everyone—the board of education, staff, leaders, students, and the community—will have to be on board with change and work together in a coherent fashion.
- There are a number of opportunities available to students. It appears, however, that McLouth may not have high expectations for *all* students.
- As part of its transition to the Common Core, the district faces the challenge of implementing a viable and rigorous written curriculum for all students, including students with disabilities and high performing students, and creating mechanisms to ensure that the curriculum is implemented consistently across schools.
- Though the district has begun to implement tiered instructional strategies in reading at the elementary level and educators have begun to observe instruction, the district would benefit from receiving additional training and support from a state-approved MTSS facilitator to implement MTSS with fidelity in reading at the elementary level and to expand MTSS to other subjects and other levels. The district would also benefit from using classroom observation data to guide professional development and systematically improve instruction.

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

II. Strengths and Challenges

Strengths and challenges identified in the needs assessment of McLouth are summarized below in the areas of Leadership; Empowering Culture and Human Capital; Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction, and Professional Development.

Leadership

The district exhibits a number of leadership strengths.

- There is new and very visible leadership at both the district and building levels. Universally—from board members to students—everyone interviewed in focus groups seems happy with the new leaders and appreciates the changes they are making. Teachers report that they feel more accountable for their work, and they are pushing students in appropriate ways. Both the superintendent and the new principal are reported to be in classrooms a great deal of the time.
- Steve Splichal, the new superintendent, has a three-pronged improvement strategy:

- Make sure that everyone is working with a curriculum that is aligned to the new standards.
 - Focus attention on improving instruction.
 - Use data to drive instruction and improvements.
- Teachers and principals appear to be taking advantage of new professional development opportunities available to them under the district’s new leadership. The high school principal, for example, attended a workshop from the Southeast Kansas Education Service Center at Greenbush on leadership for the first time in his six years at the school, and teachers note that they appreciate new professional development opportunities as well.
 - The district has made several recent investments in technology and infrastructure. There are new laptops for each teacher and classroom, six new SMART Boards in the elementary wing, new computers in the elementary and high school computer labs, and a new mobile computer cart. McLouth has also purchased a new security system and performed other maintenance that had been on hold for some time.
 - The board of education includes a number of new members who seem very supportive of the superintendent and are willing to let him do his job.

The district can rely on these strengths to address a number of leadership challenges.

- The tough fiscal climate and years of budget cuts have left McLouth with a very thin staff. What happens in Topeka this budget cycle will have a big effect on what McLouth can realistically accomplish next year.
- Historically, principals have lacked support to provide instructional leadership; there appears to be very little use of data to drive instruction or improvement.
- An increasing number of children are eligible for free and reduced priced meals and families are under added pressure to make ends meet. Moreover, many parents work outside of McLouth, so they are not around during the day and as a result, are not actively engaged in school activities.
- According to several sources, there is a small but significant group of teachers that want to keep “doing the same old same old.” They have not been held accountable for updating or improving their lesson plans in many years.
- By focusing most of its attention on low-performing students, the district may be under-serving those students who are higher-performing and those at the very top of the class. Several parents and teachers commented that teachers do not have resources to support students whose learning is ahead of the class. There is a gifted program, but it appears that elementary students rarely participate.

“In upper grades, when teachers see grades they know there is a problem; they just do not know what to do about it.”

—*Teacher*

- The district lacks consistent policies and procedures to support positive behavior. Students, parents, and staff in focus groups all reported inconsistent policies. Some noted, for example, that detention tends to be a “waste of time;” students sit around and do nothing. Many felt students should be doing homework or class projects during detention. Before budget cuts, the district had an “opportunity room” for detention—where students had more structured activities.
- Attendance is also a challenge. Teachers noted that a number of students are chronically late and that the district would benefit from implementing and enforcing a stronger truancy policy. Staff also reported that some parents let their children miss a lot of school for appointments, vacation, etc.—that for a significant percentage of parents “school was just not a priority.”
- The board of education does not have a clear agenda or goals to guide decisions. Board members very much appreciate the new superintendent and are excited to work with him. The board would benefit, however, from establishing priorities for action.
- Like many small towns across the United States, everyone in the community seems to know someone on the board of education, resulting in a situation where “you have to be careful who you tell what and to whom.” This also means that teachers and other staff may be reluctant to push some students for fear of board reprisals. Board members are challenged to ensure that there are no conflicts of interests that might affect their decision-making.

Empowering Culture and Human Capital

McLouth boasts some vital strengths in the area of empowering culture and human capital.

- Most staff members appear willing to work together to improve outcomes for students. Educators also seem willing to try new things.
- Despite the challenge of engaging some families in school activities, McLouth appears to have strong community-school relationships. The school building is a hub—if not the hub—for activity in the community. Sports are very popular and important. Many parents are from McLouth and attended McLouth schools when they were young. The community also provides scholarships for graduates.
- Hiring is fairly easy, since McLouth is in proximity to three cities—Kansas City, Lawrence, and Topeka. Though base pay may be a little lower than some Kansas districts, benefits are generous and attractive to many prospective staff.
- Kids seem happy at school, and the school building is very safe and friendly. For the most part, students report that they like and respect their teachers.

Despite these strengths, however, a number of challenges are apparent as well.

- Some parents and teachers interviewed expressed the perception that more families are moving back or into McLouth for financial reasons. There is a sense that these new families have lower incomes and that a higher proportion of students have IEPs.
- McLouth appears to lack high expectations for *all* students. There is not a strong and consistent focus on preparing students for college and/or careers.
- Parental expectations and support may be a challenge as well. Some parents did not go to college and are “doing just fine” with a high school diploma. Several parents commented that they just don’t understand why a high school diploma is not going to be enough for their children.
- District teachers and staff report a great deal of staff turnover at Keystone Learning Services, which provides special education services to the district. We heard from many teachers and staff that they have never met the Keystone staff; they do not know who they are when they come to school buildings and there is frequent turnover among special education paraprofessionals at Keystone. Staff turnover makes it difficult for students with disabilities to form connections and build lasting relationships.
- Though hiring does not appear to be a challenge, leaders report that it is difficult for the district to retain staff. McLouth has lost a number of new young teachers in the last few years. To address this challenge, the district has taken the proactive step of paying a retention bonus to one new math teacher (as indicated in minutes from a recent school board meeting). Though well-intentioned, the bonus appears to have ruffled the feathers of many staff members that “work just as hard” but are not receiving a retention bonus.
- Additionally, the small size of the district staff limits opportunities for students. McLouth recently lost a middle school math teacher. While the district can get by with one less teacher, this limits course and grouping options for students.
- This year, most teachers received a raise, but about one-third of teachers have topped out on the salary scale. So, when raises are approved this group of teachers is not eligible to receive them (they did receive the \$100 base increase that everyone received). This may also prove to be a challenge over the long-term in terms of retaining staff.

“Parents can take a day off for homecoming, but they cannot make an IEP meeting.”

—*Teacher*

Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction, and Professional Development

Strengths and challenges identified within 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 McLouth 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 the extent to which effective teaching/learning practices are being implemented in the classroom.

More detail about the data collected during classroom visits using the Cross & Joftus Focused Classroom Walkthrough process can be found in the Appendix to this report.

Curriculum and Assessment

The needs analysis uncovered several curriculum and assessment strengths in McLouth.

- Parents, students, and teachers report that there is a strong focus on state standards and tested indicators. Classroom teachers and teachers of students with disabilities report that they know the standards and feel responsible for making sure students are prepared for state assessments.
- Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been established in each building, allowing teachers an opportunity to discuss issues surrounding curriculum, assessment, and instruction.
- The kindergarten and first grade staff have begun learning about and implementing Common Core standards. Several staff members attended the Common Core Summer Academies sponsored by KSDE.
- High School students have access to dual credit courses through Highland Community College and Pratt Community College. Vocational/technical courses are offered through Washburn Technical School.
- There are a variety of assessments available in the district to support data-based decision making. DIBELS is utilized in grades K-2, AIMSWeb is used for screening students in grades 3-8, and high school students take NWEA Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessments. Teachers also use state assessment data to determine which students need additional support. STAR, Explore, PLAN, PSAT, ACT, and Work Keys are available as additional resources. Proactively, McLouth is beginning to use progress monitoring to track and work with student-level data.
- Elementary teachers have participated in Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) training in reading, which has given them the tools to begin the process of data-based decision-making. Teachers are using data to help determine which students are at benchmark and which students are in need of tier 2 and tier 3 support.
- Formative assessments are made available to help students and staff prepare for state assessments. Some educators have increased their use of formative

assessments beyond the CETE and KCA websites, using assessments such as “daily dipsticks” which are implemented by many high school staff.

To build on these strengths, however, McLouth must also face some significant curriculum and assessment challenges.

- The district lacks a coherent and systemic approach to curriculum development and implementation. Teachers and administrators report that the English Language Arts curriculum is very fragmented, with different grade levels using different resources. The Curriculum Council, a paid committee, was disbanded three years ago due to budget cuts. Staff members have been trained to do PALSS classroom walkthroughs (now known as Focused Classroom Walkthroughs), however, the data have yet to be used systematically to guide instruction.
- While some staff attended KSDE Common Core Summer Academies, there is no definitive plan for transitioning to the Common Core standards.
- Based on conversations with both general and special education teachers, it is unclear how many students with disabilities are receiving access to the core curriculum in general education classrooms. There is an awareness of this issue, and teachers have made strides to return students to the core classroom.
- Due to the elimination of the Curriculum Council, curriculum resources lack consistency and have become dated. Teachers report that the textbook adoption cycle has been abandoned and that new resources have not been purchased in several years.
- Teachers of students with disabilities report that access to resources and curricular materials for those students is limited at best. There is substantial confusion as to the process and procedures for accessing needed materials; teachers don’t know who to ask for help and/or how materials should be requested and paid for.
- While elementary teachers have participated in MTSS training, there appears to be no systemic approach to data-based decision-making. Secondary staff members have not been trained in MTSS.
- Students and parents report that there is a heavy emphasis on one area of testing—the Kansas State Assessments. Students appear to be under a great deal of pressure to perform well on this one measure, possibly at the expense of other measures that may assist in meeting students’ individual needs.
- Many of the assessments available to high school students have little or no follow-through with regard to college and career supports. Students and parents

“We are all doing something different. We need consistency.”

—*Teacher*

report that while students appear to be prepared for post-secondary opportunities, the school could do much more to assist students in finding the best opportunities available.

Instruction

Table III presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 93%) and principals (response rate 100%) administered online by Cross & Joftus. 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.

Teachers and principals are generally in agreement about which strategies they believe to be most evident in McLouth schools. The sound instructional strategies that *principals* and *teachers* believe are most ***strongly evident*** in their schools include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 100% of principals and 95% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 0% of principals and teachers)
- fostering collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well-being (cited as strongly evident by 50% of principals and 50% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 0% of principals and 2% of teachers)
- collaboratively functioning as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources (cited by 50% of principals and 50% of teachers as strongly evident, and by 0% of principals and 14% of teachers as minimally or not evident).

The sound instructional strategies that *principals* and *teachers* and teachers believe to be ***least evident*** include:

- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities (cited as strongly evident by 0% of principals and 17% of teachers, and not evident or minimally evident by 100% of principals and 43% of teachers)
- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited by 0% of principals and 10% of teachers as strongly evident, and by 100% of principals and 53% of teachers as minimally evident or not evident).

Table III—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.	100%	0%	95%	0%
Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well-being.	50%	0%	50%	2%
Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	50%	0%	50%	14%
Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.	0%	0%	43%	2%
Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction.	0%	0%	43%	15%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment.	50%	50%	33%	31%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning.	50%	50%	19%	35%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.	0%	50%	33%	7%
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of	0%	0%	43%	12%

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^
instruction.				
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development.	0%	50%	62%	2%
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.	0%	50%	45%	10%
Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level.	0%	50%	31%	10%
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	0%	50%	38%	23%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students.	0%	50%	19%	19%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning.	0%	50%	7%	43%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	0%	100%	31%	24%
The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning.	0%	100%	17%	26%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to	0%	100%	17%	43%

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^
examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.				
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	0%	100%	10%	53%

Teacher Response Rate = 42/45

Principal Response Rate = 2/2

Source: Cross & Joftus survey of McLouth principals and teachers October 2011.

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

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

In addition to survey data, classroom observations, reviews of district and state assessment data, and conversations with focus group participants suggest some valuable instructional strengths in McLouth.

- One indicator of effective instructional practice is the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the Kansas State Assessment. All students, as a group, have exceeded state benchmarks in reading for the past three years.
- During observations of 80 classrooms using the Cross & Joftus Focused Classroom Walkthrough observation protocol, the following effective teaching practices were evident in classrooms visited.
 - The majority of classrooms displayed an environment conducive to learning.
 - Classrooms were viewed as orderly, well-managed, and adaptable to the learning task, with clear expectations for student behavior and participation in the learning process.
 - Students demonstrated a willingness to participate in the learning task over 90% of the time and were actively engaged 70% to 100% of the time at all school levels.
 - Positive “student to teacher” and “teacher to student” interactions were consistently observed.
 - Standards/skill based lessons were communicated to students (See Appendix for specific percentages related to these and other strategies).
- After participating in MTSS structuring training in reading in the 2008-09 school year—provided by a facilitator at Keystone Learning Services—elementary staff began implementing an “MTSS tiered instructional framework” in reading. Interviews with district staff, principals, and special education teachers indicate that teachers are using “MTSS tiered instructional strategies in reading” at the

elementary school, and staff members have received some additional training from the Greenbush Service Center to support those strategies.

- The district has used the PALSS classroom walkthrough process. Building administrators and teachers are using the PALSS template to observe instruction.

To build on these strengths, McLouth must address some important instructional challenges as well.

- Though staff have begun “implementing” MTSS tiered instructional strategies at the elementary level in reading, elementary staff members have not participated in formal MTSS implementation training, and while the SIT group at the elementary school serves as a defacto MTSS leadership team, the district has not participated in MTSS leadership training and has no official MTSS leadership team. Though the district has plans to complete additional training in the future, a tiered instructional framework is not used in other subjects, including math, and secondary leaders have not participated in MTSS structuring or implementation training.
- Though McLouth principals and teachers are using a classroom observation protocol to observe instruction, at present, educators are not systematically using the data collected from observations to guide professional development and improve instruction.
- Focused Classroom Walkthroughs identified other instructional challenges. There is a need to increase the following *teaching practices*, which were observed in less than 50% of the classrooms visited (see Appendix for specific percentages related to these and other strategies):
 - Use of strategies that enable students to generate and test hypotheses.
 - Differentiation to match student learning needs and strengths (above 50% at elementary).
 - Use of interdisciplinary or real world instructional examples.
 - Employment of metacognitive strategies—teacher modeling of the thinking process.
 - Use of strategies that enable students to identify similarities and differences.
 - Organization of learning in groups (above 50% at the intermediate level).
 - Use of strategies to meet diverse language and cultural needs.
 - Representation of knowledge using linguistic/non-linguistic forms of information.
 - Use of strategies that enable students to summarize and take notes.
- Observations revealed that *student learning strategies* designed to bring about high levels of cognitive engagement were visible in less than 50% of classrooms observed across all levels. Those strategies include:

- Asks/answers higher level questions.
- Participates in individual reflection.
- Uses technology in the learning process.
- The following strategies used to illustrate how students demonstrate physical and cognitive engagement and learning at high levels were minimally evident (observed in less than 50% of classrooms visited) at all school levels:
 - Displays a real world connection.
 - Engages in peer and self-assessment of the learning.

Professional Development

McLouth has a number of professional development strengths.

- Schools have scheduled time for professional learning communities (PLCs). Teachers use this time for collaboration and planning to support students. Respondents in the Cross & Jofus Teacher Survey indicate that PLCs are valued and should continue.
- The district is in the process of adopting the new Professional Learning Standards developed by Learning Forward. These standards will be used as a guide for planning and implementation of professional learning in the district.
- The McLouth Professional Development Council has scheduled monthly meetings to review, update, and plan for professional development with involvement from individuals at all levels in the district.
- The district has supported several book studies in recent years, and participants receive college credit from a local university for participating.
- Special education teachers participate in the same professional learning opportunities as those made available to general education teachers.

McLouth must also address some clear professional development challenges.

- While the district does offer professional development, and there are connections to student learning, teachers in focus groups noted that current professional development is not *consistently* on-going, job-embedded, and specifically tied to the learning needs of students.

“We need to focus; inservice tends to be the flavor of the month.”

—*Teacher*

- The district would benefit from developing a systematic procedure for using classroom observation data to inform professional development. The extent of implementation of research-based effective teaching practices could also be measured.

- Special education teachers at McLouth do participate in the staff development that is offered by the district. However, in the last two years staff development opportunities have been reduced due to budget constraints.
- As the district transitions to Common Core standards, professional development around an instructional model with a focus on rigorous instruction would benefit all students.

III. Recommendations

One of the primary goals of this needs assessment is to identify areas in which the district could most benefit from technical assistance. Building on the district's current capacities and strengths, technical support should help increase the quality of individual schools and the achievement of all their students.

At the outset of this report, five key systemic challenges were identified.

- A challenging budget environment means that the district will have to continue to make difficult choices.
- While everyone appears to be happy with new leadership in the district, there is concern that some may want to continue doing things the way they have always been done. In order for the district to continue to improve, everyone—the board of education, staff, leaders, students, and the community—will have to be on board with change and work together in a coherent fashion.
- There are a number of opportunities available to students. It appears, however, that McLouth may not have high expectations for *all* students.
- As part of its transition to the Common Core, the district faces the challenge of implementing a viable and rigorous written curriculum for all students, including students with disabilities and high performing students, and creating mechanisms to ensure that the curriculum is implemented consistently across schools.
- Though the district has begun to implement tiered instructional strategies in reading at the elementary level and educators have begun to observe instruction, the district would benefit from receiving additional training and support from a state-approved MTSS facilitator to implement MTSS with fidelity in reading at the elementary level and to expand MTSS to other subjects and other levels. The district would also benefit from using classroom observation data to guide professional development and systematically improve instruction.

To address these challenges and others identified in this report, technical assistance should address the following recommendations:

1. The superintendent should work with the board of education and the district leadership team to develop a new long-range plan based on the superintendent's improvement strategy. A key focus of this planning should be how the district will meet the academic and social needs of *all* its students in a challenging fiscal

- environment. Where can resources be leveraged? How can the district share staff with nearby districts? How can committee work be restructured to better meet the needs of students and staff? How can parents and community members be engaged to support school improvement?
2. The district should engage Keystone Learning Services in addressing the challenges and implementing the recommendations identified in this report. This process should include:
 - a. Identifying challenges to communication between service center staff and McLouth staff and developing strategies to meet those challenges;
 - b. Defining leadership roles and responsibilities of Keystone special education staff throughout the McLouth school buildings and examining staff needs in light of the overall KLN needs analysis findings;
 - c. Clarifying how and what professional development is provided for Keystone special education teachers and paraprofessionals;
 - d. Agreeing on how planning time is scheduled to ensure a common instructional focus for students who experience instruction from general education and special education teachers, as well as paraprofessionals and;
 - e. Examining whether assistance from KSDE's Technical Assistance System Network (TASN), www.ksdetasn.org, might be useful now or in the future.
 3. The district should articulate, align, and fully implement curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development with the goal of continually improving student learning and achievement to support high expectations for *all* students. As part of this process, the district should receive necessary support and training from a KSDE approved MTSS facilitator to implement MTSS with fidelity district-wide. This process should also include:
 - a. Creation of a district process for transitioning to a curriculum guided by the Common Core standards, with resources and professional development to support teachers' content knowledge and implementation in the classroom. A clear communication plan should be developed to inform all stakeholders of the timeline, process, and roll out for implementation.
 - b. Implementation of a process to review and align curriculum and assessments; if possible, develop a data warehouse that enables educators to use and manage assessment data effectively, and track individual student data over time.
 - c. Implementation of a system-wide instructional model tied to rigorous standards. This model should draw on an analysis of student achievement data and prioritize research-based instructional practices that will have the greatest impact on increasing achievement.

- d. Systematization of PLCs and classroom observations as catalysts for implementing research-based effective educational practices, by:
 - Using classroom observation data systematically to provide regular and helpful feedback to educators.
 - Ensuring that there is sufficient time for educators to collaborate and plan together; developing and implementing common PLC protocols; monitoring the effectiveness of PLCs.
 - Identifying priority data and analyzing data to determine the extent of implementation of effective teaching/learning practices.
 - Determining future professional development practices using observation data.
 - e. Development of a monitoring system to measure the implementation and impact of professional development on changes in teacher behaviors.⁶ In addition to classroom walkthroughs, the district may consider the use of tools such as the Innovation Configuration Matrix (ICM).⁷ The ICM was designed to ensure that strategies are implemented correctly and with fidelity; it includes teacher self-assessment of the use of best-practice strategies.
4. The district should look for opportunities to take advantage of distance learning. Through a grant two years ago, McLouth purchased equipment that will support high-quality video connections. Taking advantage of this technology could help to broaden course offerings in the wake of budget cutbacks. Technology could also be used to support professional development for staff.

Next Steps

1. Based on the findings and the recommendations in this needs appraisal, Cross & Joftus recommends that the district participate in the following KLN Communities of Practice (CoPs):
 - Curriculum, Stage I
 - Tiered Interventions, Stage I
2. Your district facilitator will be in touch with the superintendent within the next couple weeks to discuss the CoPs, answer questions, and begin planning for the drafting of the district's Integrated Improvement Plan.

⁶ Reeves, D.B. *Transforming Professional Development Into Student Learning Results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2010.

⁷ Champion, Robby. "The Innovation Configuration can gauge progress of reform initiatives and take the guesswork out of professional development planning." National Staff Development Council, 2003.

Process for Analyzing Classroom Walkthrough Data

As recently proposed by City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Lee in *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, “Since what goes on in the classroom is at the heart of instructional improvement, a key part of developing an improvement practice is observation.” Connecting classroom observations to the “larger context of the system’s improvement strategy” is how to support sustained improvement.⁸

In short, observation data need to be used regularly and systematically to improve teaching and learning. In order to do this effectively, districts must determine the skills educators need to develop, practice, implement, and refine during professional development.

The following process will assist district personnel in identifying what skills should take priority in future professional development:

1. Analyze classroom observation data summarized in the Appendix in the **“Teaching/Learning Practices Graphs.”** Based on work from the National Implementation Research Network at the University of South Florida, Cross & Joftus has developed an implementation matrix that quantifies the extent to which research-based practices are being implemented in classrooms observed (see percentages in the Appendix).
2. To prioritize professional development topics, consider using the following criteria provided by the Implementation Research Network:
 - Mark as a first priority those effective practices that are “*inconsistently evident*” in less than 29% of the classes visited.
 - Mark as a second priority those effective practices that are “*minimally evident*” in 30-49% of classrooms visited.
 - Mark as a third priority those effective practices that are “*partially evident*” in 50-69% of the classrooms visited.
 - Mark as a fourth priority those effective practices that are “*consistently evident*” in 70-100% of the classes visited.

⁸ Elizabeth A. City, Richard F. Elmore, Sarah E. Fiarman, and Lee Teitel, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009.