

Needs Analysis of Fort Larned School District, USD 495

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 & Joftus 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 495, Fort Larned School District. 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 & Joftus 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 USD 495 took place November 9-10, 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 Fort Larned School District, USD 495 (referred to throughout the report as USD 495 or Fort Larned).

Fort Larned Student Demographics

In the 2010-11 school year, Fort Larned School District enrolled 965 students, a slight increase in enrollment from 2006-07, when 927 students were enrolled. The district employs 91 certified and classified full- and part-time employees—over 80 of which are teachers—and includes three elementary schools (Hillside, Northside, and Phinney), Larned Middle School, and Larned High School.

The racial-ethnic balance in Fort Larned has shifted somewhat over the past five years. Most notably, the percentage of students identified as Hispanic/Latino has more than doubled, from 5.6% to 12.1%, and the percentage of students identified as White has declined, from 87.3% to 81.8%. The percentage of students identified as English language learners (ELLs) has also increased, from zero percent in 2006-07 to 1.8% in 2010-11.

Table I—Demographic Patterns in USD 495

| Race-Ethnicity | 2006-07 | 2010-11 |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| American Indian/Alaska Native | .3% | .3% |
| African-American | 3.2% | 2.1% |
| Hispanic/Latino | 5.6% | 12.1% |
| Asian/ Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander | .3% | .8% |
| Multiracial | 3.2% | 2.9% |
| White | 87.3% | 81.8% |

Like many other districts new to the KLN this year, the most profound demographic shift in Fort Larned over the past five years lies in the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals. In 2010-11, 54.6% of students were identified as economically disadvantaged—an increase of 13 percentage points from 2006-07, when 41.6% of students qualified for free and reduced priced meals.

The percentage of students with disabilities has also climbed slightly over the past five years, from 22.2% to 23.3%, and is almost 10 percentage points above the Kansas average of 13.5%.³

Student Achievement

³ KSDE and district data.

Overall, Fort Larned students have performed fairly well on state assessment tests. The group “all students” has exceeded state assessment benchmarks for proficiency in reading, for example, for the past three years (for additional detail, see Table II below). Additionally, three Fort Larned schools—Northside, Fort Larned Middle, and Fort Larned High School—received Standards of Excellence Awards in 2011, including a building-wide award in math at the elementary school, and building-wide awards in reading at the middle and high school.

Table II—Fort Larned Summary Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Data

Reading – Met AYP in 2009; did not meet in 2010. Met in 2011; not on Improvement.

| Student Category | Year & State Target | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | 2009 - 76.7% | 2010 - 81.3% | 2011 - 86% |
| All students | Met (89.2%) | Met (86.6%) | Met (87.8%) |
| Free & Reduced Meals | Met (82.9%) | Met (80.5%) ⁴ | Met (81.7%) ⁴ |
| Students with Disabilities | Met (74.1%) ⁴ | No (69.2%) | Met (81.2%) ^{4, 5} |
| ELL Students | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| African-American Students | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Hispanic | N/A | Met (77.1%) ⁴ | Met (83.7%) ⁴ |
| White | Met (90.1%) | Met (87.6%) | Met (89.1%) |
| Asian* | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| American Indian or Alaskan* | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Multi-Racial* | Met (93.3%) | 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 (82.3%) | Met (75.9%) ⁴ | Met (78.7%) ⁴ |
| Free & Reduced Meals | Met (71.9%) | No (67.4%) | No (74.7%) |
| Students with Disabilities | Met (68.2%) ⁴ | No (59.5%) | Met (68%) ^{4, 5, 6} |
| ELL Students | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| African-American Students | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Hispanic | N/A | Met (77.8%) | Met (90.5%) |
| White | Met (83.1%) | Met (76.5%) | Met (78%) ¹ |
| Asian* | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| American Indian or Alaskan* | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Multi-Racial* | Met (86.7%) | N/A | N/A |
| Native Hawaiian/Pacific Is.* | N/A | N/A | N/A |

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

⁵ This year’s participation rate was below 95%, but after merging the data across two years, was at or above, so met participation goal.

⁶ The group made Safe Harbor.

Overall Graduation Rate: 2009—94.8%, 2010—86.2%, 2011—78%[^]

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 reported in 2011 AYP data, which is actually based on 2010 graduation data. See Footnote 7 below for more recent graduation data. 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 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, there are some clear achievement challenges in USD 495. Students eligible for free and reduced priced meals failed to meet proficiency benchmarks on state math assessments in 2010 and 2011, placing the district on improvement in math. Moreover, in 2011, several groups of students met benchmarks on the state reading and math assessments through safe harbor or confidence interval designations. Finally, four-year graduation rates for some groups of students—most notably students eligible for free and reduced priced meals and students with disabilities—hovered around the 50% mark, as reported in August 2011.⁷

The Big Picture

The Fort Larned School District is located in central Kansas about two hours west Wichita and just over an hour northeast of Dodge City. The Larned State Hospital, located just west of town, is the largest employer in the school district.

Most students who attend Fort Larned schools live in the town of Larned, which has approximately 3,650 residents according to 2010 census data. The vast majority of the residents are White; 4.5% identify as African American and 8.2% as Hispanic or Latino. The median household income in Larned is \$35,608, well below the Kansas median of approximately \$50,000.⁸

Like many districts across United States, Fort Larned has been hard hit by the recession. The number of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals has climbed by 13% over the last five years, and the district has had to manage with fewer state resources as well. Fortunately, USD 495 has been able to maintain key services to students in spite of these challenges.

⁷ More recent graduation and dropout data, as reported in the fall 2011 Dropout Graduation Summary Report for USD 495, indicate that 2011 graduation rates (which are tabulated in October of the following school year) improved by more than 10 percentage points for “all students,” by almost 20 percentage points for students eligible for free and reduced priced meals, and by almost 40 percentage points for students with disabilities.

⁸ According to 2010 US Census data.

Moreover, Fort Larned possesses a number of overall strengths that it can build upon to address challenges.

- The superintendent appears to be well liked and respected by stakeholders, and he has managed the economic downturn well, maintaining vital services to students.
- The board and the superintendent work well together. Their work is guided by clearly stated goals and priorities, designed to address important issues facing the district.
- Parents, community members, board members, and students express pride in the district. Teachers and principals care about students' well-being, and parents and community members perceive that schools provide safe learning environments for students.
- USD 495 teachers and administrators have worked together to develop and implement vertically aligned mathematics and reading curricula, aligned to state standards, and early grades have begun transitioning to the Common Core standards.
- Along with the other supports identified above, the district has a number of important elements in place to support improvement—a commitment to instructional improvement and support for professional development, for example, and recently implemented classroom observation processes and protocols.

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

- As the student population diversifies, the number of students identified as economically challenged increases, and state education funding continues to tighten, the district will be challenged to serve *all* students well and ensure that *all* students receive a high quality education.
- Fort Larned is also faced with a high student mobility rate, especially at the secondary level. District data indicate that those students who are more mobile are not doing as well academically as students who are more stable. Moreover, this challenge has repercussions for all students and the broader community, as the school system and teachers struggle to educate all students effectively.
- Though district decision-making is guided by goals and priorities, currently, the district lacks a long-range plan with measurable objectives, timelines, and accountability structures to ensure that the district can track progress and meet its goals.
- USD 495 has developed and implemented a number of initiatives to improve curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development. The district is challenged, however, to ensure that initiatives are implemented with fidelity, and integrated to ensure rigor and support student learning and achievement. Fort Larned would benefit from putting systems and processes in place to support continual improvement.

- In 2010-11, more than 23% of Fort Larned students were identified as students with disabilities. Fort Larned may want to look at why this percentage is so much higher than the state average and take steps to ensure that students are not being “over identified.”

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

II. Strengths and Challenges

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

Leadership

Fort Larned displays a number of leadership strengths.

- Jon Flint is in his ninth year as superintendent of the Fort Larned School District. He served as high school principal prior to being named superintendent, and he has been in the district for 20 years. He is well respected throughout the district and community.
- The superintendent has been proactive in anticipating the challenging financial times the district is facing. By choosing not to replace certified and classified positions when possible, the district has been able to retain classroom paraprofessionals, central office and building administrators, and other key academic supports for students.
- District decision-making is guided by a set of board-superintendent priorities and goals. Goals and priorities help the district stay focused on important issues, including: student learning and achievement; effective relationships to support student services; high performing personnel; effective communication; safe and healthy environment; and effective use of resources.
- The school board appears to work well with the superintendent and board members appreciate the leadership the superintendent has provided. Additionally, the board is focused on governance and policy, rather than operations. This allows district and school staff members to do their jobs with little inappropriate interference.

“I trust Jon, he tells us the truth.”

—*Board Member*

- Fort Larned principals and assistant principals appear to have significant building-level responsibility. This enables principals to exercise a great deal of authority within their schools. Principals have begun using a structured classroom walkthrough protocol.
- The district has made a commitment to acquire and maintain quality technology and infrastructure in an effort to support students and staff.

The Fort Larned district can draw on these strengths and others to address key leadership challenges as it works to improve.

- Though district decision-making is guided by a set of board-superintendent priorities and goals, Fort Larned has not articulated specific strategies to meet these goals, nor has it implemented progress measures to gauge how effectively priorities and goals are being met and to hold people accountable for meeting them.
- The current teacher and administrator evaluation system has not been updated for some time. District leaders have identified the need to develop and implement a new evaluation system. Currently several districts across the state are participating in an evaluation pilot effort. When this pilot has been completed, district leaders note that they plan to update Fort Larned’s evaluation process.
- One principal currently supervises the three elementary buildings, which she has done for the past two years. Teachers, parents, and patrons expressed concern about potential “burn out”—as one teacher said, she is “burning the candle at both ends.” Others noted that since her work is spread across three buildings, they don’t have access to her when they need it.

Empowering Culture and Human Capital

USD 495 displays several strengths in the area of Empowering Culture and Human Capital.

- There is significant community support for Fort Larned Public Schools. Parents, community leaders, and board of education members had several positive things to say about USD 495 in focus groups—they expressed support for the school district and staff in the school district.
- Patrons and community leaders also value student participation in community service projects, including: community-wide “clean ups,” work on the Splash Pad, and Night at the Museum.

“Our school leaders care about the children here.”

—*Community Leader*

- Principals and teachers we interviewed noted a strong commitment to and concern for the well being of all students. Educators appear to work hard to improve students’ academic success. Moreover, students we met with acknowledged and appreciated this effort.
- Staff, students, parents, and patrons in focus groups expressed the view that Fort Larned schools provide safe and orderly learning environments.
- The elementary school has increased class sizes within the last two-three years due to budget cuts. Classes remain very manageable, however. Elementary classrooms, for example, average 23 students per class and have significant support from paraprofessionals and teacher aides.
- The district has an early release day once a month, providing time for educators to meet and participate in professional development activities.
- High school students have ample opportunities to join in various clubs and participate in school-based extra curricular activities. Parents we spoke with were proud of the music and other performance programs produced by the high school.

“I feel our kids are safe here”
—*Parent*

To capitalize on these strengths, Fort Larned must also address several challenges in the area of Empowering Culture and Human Capital.

- Principals, teachers, parents, patrons, and community leaders expressed concern in focus groups that the high number of children living in foster homes in the community impacts how the school district serves students. Focus group participants noted the perception that oftentimes students from foster homes come to the district below grade level and frequently with an IEP; educators are challenged to provide needed educational services for these students. Though the total percentage of students living in foster homes in the community is only 3%, many of these students are highly mobile, and this presents added challenges for the district.
- For a small community, Fort Larned has a high student mobility rate. At Larned High School, for example, as of January 18, 2012, out of 275 students, 72 new students have enrolled and 53 have left since the beginning of the year. According to the counseling office, “*everyday, LHS has an average of 1.33 students enrolling or leaving.*” This high mobility rate makes it very challenging for teachers and the school system to connect with and

“We just have too many kids that come and go.”
—*Teacher*

effectively educate students over time.⁹

- A number of stakeholders in focus groups and interviews noted that it no longer makes sense for the district to have three elementary schools, each serving different grade levels. It is expensive for the district to maintain three school buildings, transitions are difficult for children who move from one building to the next, and it is very challenging for the principal to provide leadership on three campuses. Five years ago there was an attempt to pass a bond issue that would have enabled the district to build a single campus for all elementary students in the Fort Larned district—the bond issue failed by only 50 votes. Since that time, the community passed a six-mill bond to build a new community hospital and agreed to a one-cent sales tax increase. According to district administrators, the community still needs to address the elementary school issue, but due to the increased tax levy for the hospital, it’s not feasible to have bond election for a new elementary school at the present time.
- Like many small school districts in central and western Kansas, Fort Larned struggles to recruit and maintain a top quality teaching staff. Currently, three teachers do not meet the NCLB Highly Qualified requirement, and projected staff retirements are likely to present additional challenges.
- Some parents in focus groups expressed concern about communication with schools. They noted, for example, that some teachers and administrators did not respond to questions or concerns in a timely manner.
- Teachers, parents, and patrons noted that educators seem overwhelmed by the number of instructional and professional development initiatives the Fort Larned School District is undertaking. The district is encouraged to focus and communicate the vision of these initiatives to staff and patrons.
- The focus group of middle school students and parents of middle school students we met with reported that students would benefit from having a broader range of elective classes and extra curricular activities to choose from at the middle school.
- Focus group conversations with parents and students suggest that Fort Larned may not have a culture of high expectations for *all* students.

“We are trying to do so many things, and we aren’t doing any of them well. We have been overloaded.”

—*Teacher*

⁹ District data also demonstrate that Larned’s high mobility rate affects students’ grades as well; on average, GPAs for “new” students in all grades 9-12 are at least a half point lower than they are for “stable” or returning students.

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 Fort Larned 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

Fort Larned has several valuable curriculum and assessment strengths.

- The K-12 reading and math curriculum is vertically aligned to state standards. The teaching staff, school administrators, and the director of curriculum and instruction identified the need to align and color code the core curriculum in math and reading and worked together to complete that alignment successfully over the last three years. The district has developed a K-12 scope and sequence for both reading and math, which is being utilized by teaching staff.
- The reading programs Fort Larned is implementing at the elementary level—Linda Mood-Bell, which has a strong emphasis in phonemic awareness, and Guided Reading—appear to be having a positive impact on student reading comprehension. Teachers and administrators in focus groups highlighted the impact of these programs, which is reflected in students' reading scores on the state assessment. The district is implementing Guided Reading K-4, 5th and 6th grade teachers are developing their Guided Reading format, and 7th and 8th grade teachers employ a modified reading approach using differentiated instruction. Teachers and administrators seem to be very knowledgeable about and comfortable with the reading programs and appear to be implementing them effectively.
- The percentage of students with disabilities' meeting proficiency benchmarks on the Kansas State Reading Assessment rose from 69.2% in 2010 to 81.2% in 2011. This dramatic increase is connected to well-defined curriculum and strong instructional support.
- There is evidence that there is alignment between the written, taught, and assessed curriculum in reading. This alignment is reflected in overall student achievement results on the state assessment.

- Students at Larned High School have the opportunity to participate in three state-approved Career and Technical Education Pathways. Production, Family and Consumer Science, and Construction Pathways provide students with a wide variety of hands-on experiences and opportunities to apply their knowledge in real world situations.
- K-1 teachers have begun to implement the new Common Core learning standards. This is a positive step, and the district and teachers should be commended for this effort to move forward with 21st Century learning opportunities.
- The district has a well defined assessments map for grades K-8. State Assessments and NWEA MAPs (Measures of Academic Progress) are used district-wide. Additional reading assessments include PAST (Phonological Awareness Screening Tool), EVT/PPVT (Expressive Vocabulary Tool and Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test), Benchmark Readers, STAR Words, and LAC (Linda-Mood Auditory Conception), CRI (Comprehensive Reading Inventory) and Word Attack (WJRM). Kansas' formative assessments are used to provide additional data in math. District and building administrators and teachers use student assessment data to monitor student mastery of the written and taught curriculum and to provide tiered instructional support to students who have not achieved mastery.

Fort Larned must address some important curriculum and assessment challenges as well.

- The district does not seem to have a process in place to support curriculum management, revision, and implementation. Though Fort Larned recently aligned reading and math curricula to current state standards, the district has not articulated a clearly defined plan to continue the process and align curricula with the new Common Core standards in grades 2-12.
- District math assessments are limited. NWEA and State Assessments are used K-12. Though these assessments provide quality feedback, the question arises as to whether either assessment provides enough diagnostic information to place students in needed tiered instruction at the K-2 or high school levels.
- The middle school has replaced five math teachers in the past four years. This turnover has resulted in real learning gaps for students, affecting their knowledge and understanding of the math curriculum. The district is challenged to close those learning gaps for students and retain highly qualified teaching staff in mathematics.
- It is not clear that teachers have access to—or know how to access—student achievement data to guide instructional decisions. Some of the teachers

interviewed indicated that administrators made decisions to place students into tiered intervention or remedial classes and teachers did not have access to relevant student data.

- Data analysis and data dialogue do not appear to be strength areas at this time. Many of the teachers interviewed said they had not been trained in data analysis or data-driven dialogue. This training is critical for the full implementation of MTSS. Some teachers we interviewed said that they had received little to no training around the MTSS framework and how to use data to support the effective implementation of MTSS.¹⁰
- Currently, many students identified as economically disadvantaged are not meeting state benchmarks in mathematics and are meeting state benchmarks in reading through criterion or safe harbor designations. The district would benefit from determining why students aren't performing as expected and implementing strategies to improve achievement. The challenge is to identify gaps in student learning through analysis of student achievement data and provide curriculum supports to students who need them, with appropriate use of tiered instructional strategies, from the most highly qualified staff.
- The district has begun implementing the Common Core curriculum at the K-2 level. The challenge is to continue that process through the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Instruction

Table III presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 86%) 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.

Generally, respondents—both principals and teachers—are optimistic about the presence of sound instructional strategies in Fort Larned schools. The strategies that *principals and teachers* cited as most *strongly evident* include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 83% of principals and 73% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 0% of principals and 1% of teachers)

¹⁰ According to district administrators, the district is “implementing MTSS in reading.” All building principals (except for the current elementary principal), the assistant superintendent, and two teachers from each building have participated in MTSS structuring and implementation training, with a state-approved facilitator from the ESSDACK service center. Though the district does not have an official MTSS leadership team, administrators reported that they discuss the MTSS process at their regular administrative meetings. Very few teachers, however, used the language of MTSS to describe the tiered intervention work they were doing; they simply described it as tiered intervention.

- identifying students who are struggling to master content and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction (cited as strongly evident by 50% of principals and 62% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 17% of principals and 7% of teachers)

At least fifty percent *principals* identified two additional strategies as most *strongly evident*:

- facilitating, monitoring, and guiding the continuous improvement of instruction (cited as strongly evident by 67% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 0% of principals)
- participating in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation (cited as strongly evident by 50% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 0% of principals).

Principals were *evenly divided* on the following strategy:

- 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 50% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 50% of principals).

More than 50% of *teachers surveyed* also identified the following strategies as *strongly evident*:

- providing equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners (cited as strongly evident by 59% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 3% of teachers)
- using data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development (cited as strongly evident by 54% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 4% of teachers)
- using 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 (cited as strongly evident by 52% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 4% of teachers).

The sound instructional strategies that *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 18% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 39% of teachers)

- providing adequate resources to support teacher and administrator learning (cited as strongly evident by 13% of teachers as not evident or minimally evident by 30% of teachers)
- providing adequate resources to support student learning (cited as strongly evident by 14% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 18% of teachers)

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. | 83% | 0% | 73% | 1% |
| School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction. | 67% | 0% | 35% | 7% |
| Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction. | 50% | 17% | 62% | 7% |
| Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation. | 50% | 17% | 38% | 8% |
| Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities. | 50% | 50% | 18% | 39% |
| Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners. | 33% | 0% | 59% | 3% |
| Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress. | 33% | 0% | 27% | 17% |
| Teachers and administrators use | 33% | 17% | 54% | 4% |

| 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^ |
| data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development. | | | | |
| 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. | 33% | 17% | 52% | 4% |
| Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level. | 33% | 17% | 38% | 8% |
| Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources. | 33% | 17% | 31% | 18% |
| Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment. | 33% | 17% | 35% | 35% |
| Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning. | 33% | 17% | 14% | 18% |
| Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning. | 33% | 17% | 13% | 30% |
| Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments. | 17% | 0% | 46% | 3% |
| Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers. | 17% | 0% | 34% | 17% |

| 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^ |
| The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning. | 17% | 0% | 17% | 11% |
| Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well-being. | 17% | 17% | 45% | 15% |
| Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students. | 17% | 17% | 32% | 8% |

Teacher Response Rate = 71/83

Principal Response Rate = 6/6

Source: Cross & Joftus survey of Fort Larned principals and teachers November 2011.

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

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

In addition to survey responses, classroom observations, reviews of district and state assessment data, and conversations with focus group participants point toward some valuable instructional strengths in Fort Larned.

- One indicator of effective instructional practice is the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the Kansas State Assessment. The group "all students" has exceeded state benchmarks in reading for the past three years.
- During observations of 65 classrooms using the Cross & Joftus' Focused Classroom Walkthrough observation protocol, the following effective *teaching* and *learning* practices were evident in classrooms visited.
 - Classrooms were orderly, well-managed, and adaptable to the learning task, with clear expectations for student behavior and participation in the learning process.
 - Ninety-seven percent of students were actively engaged 85%-100% of the time at all school levels.
 - Positive "student to teacher" and "teacher to student" interactions were consistently observed.
 - Teachers consistently used instructional planning strategies to activate prior knowledge and academic vocabulary. They also checked for understanding to assess and inform instruction and consistently employed

the following strategy that research has shown to accelerate learning: reinforcing efforts and providing recognition. (See Appendix for specific percentages related to these and other strategies).

- The district is guided by a number of research-based effective instructional practices. Elementary educators are successfully using the Linda Mood-Bell model for reading, and most teachers have received professional development around Kagan Cooperative Learning, differentiated instruction, and Marzano strategies to address the learning needs of all students.
- The district has developed a classroom observation instrument and is implementing a process for data collection. Building principals conduct walkthroughs and enter data into an electronic system. Data reports can be generated with ease and shared with teachers for individual reflection. The data collected can be used to guide professional development and foster a vision of high expectations and learning for all.
- Instructional technology is available for students with disabilities. The director of special education has purchased Live scribe pens, IPADS, IPODS, laptops, and specialized software to differentiate the learning process for students with disabilities.

“We now have a way to collect data around instruction and really do something with it, instead of just collecting paper.”

—*Principal*

Despite its attention to effective instructional practices, however, Fort Larned does have some clear instructional challenges.

- Focused Classroom Walkthrough observations indicate that instruction is delivered at overwhelmingly at low levels of thinking—levels range from remembering, to understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and finally creating. Of the 65 classrooms observed district wide, only remembering and understanding were evident in over 40% of the classrooms. Likewise the following student learning activities that lead to higher levels of thinking were observed in less than 50% of the classrooms observed.
 - Asks/answers higher level questions (defined as above application).
 - Investigates and solves problems.
 - Engages in active reading, note taking, and constructed response.
 - Participates in individual reflection (metacognition).
 - Uses technology in the learning process.
- Principal and teacher focus groups pointed out that the district has not focused on mathematics instruction. They noted several possible reasons for this lack of attention, including: a greater focus on reading instruction, few diagnostic

materials to support mathematics instruction, and several administrators who are simply more comfortable with reading instruction. The issue of administrators' comfort levels is noteworthy, because principals provide considerable professional development to teachers during Wednesday "Early Out" days. This challenge is compounded by the fact that there is a lack of vertical alignment in mathematics instruction. Students and teacher focus groups report that students who take Algebra at the middle school, for example, must often repeat it at the high school because there is not enough time to cover key concepts.

- The need for a more focused and integrated instructional framework is clear. The district has begun implementing MTSS alongside a large number of instructional initiatives, including: differentiated instruction, Kagan strategies, and Marzano strategies. Teacher focus groups, however, describe a high level of frustration and fatigue trying to learn and effectively implement the district's many instructional initiatives. They report a minimal amount of time to learn and implement prior to another initiative being added.
- Classroom walkthrough data also underscore the need for more supportive professional development and instructional coaching to ensure deep implementation of effective instructional strategies.
 - Differentiation to match student learning needs and strengths was observed in only 21% of classrooms visited.
 - Student demonstration of learning through differentiation in activities/materials and products/assignments was observed in only 10% of the classrooms visited.
 - Of Marzano's nine research-based practices for engaging students in instructional activities that are predictably linked to gains in student achievement¹¹ only one, "reinforce effort and provide recognition" was evident in over 70% of the 65 classrooms observed. The following were observed less than 50% of the time: 1) identify similarities and differences; 2) summarize and take notes; 3) represent knowledge using linguistic/non-linguistic forms of information; 4) organize learning in groups; cooperative learning 'pairs/small groups; 5) generate and test hypotheses; 6) use cues, questions and advance organizers.
- Some educators in focus groups expressed concern about the relatively high percentage of students that have been identified for special education services—currently 23.3% of Fort Larned students have been identified as students with disabilities, almost 10 percentage points above the state average of 13.5%.

"Every kid who has trouble is placed in Special Education."

—Teacher

¹¹ Marzano, R. (2001). *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

- While district and building administrators noted that, “MTSS is being implemented,” it appears that MTSS is not being implemented with fidelity.

Many general and special education teachers and paraprofessionals reported a lack of understanding and training necessary for effective implementation.

The following description was provided as an example of how MTSS is being implemented at the middle school level. Students receive instruction in the core curriculum, some receive tier 2 support in the classroom, and some go on to a third math placement, Impact Math. This class provides students additional support but without flexible grouping. Students remain in the class for the entire semester. In another example, low performing students and students with disabilities are placed together in math and reading/language arts classes. These practices, however, are *not* consistent with Kansas MTSS principles.

“In the regular class my kids are broken up by ability and stay together the biggest part of the day.”

—*Paraprofessional*

Professional Development

Fort Larned exhibits a number of professional development strengths.

- The district has invested in professional development for all staff. The board of education approved a calendar that includes time for professional development each Wednesday, and these “Early Out” days provide opportunities for both building- and district-led staff development. In addition, teachers can participate in professional learning opportunities through ESSDACK Service Center.
- Paraprofessionals participate in district professional development along with special education and regular education teachers. This is extremely important, as the district employs 70 paraprofessionals to support the learning of students with disabilities and students at risk of not meeting achievement targets.
- Fort Larned appears to have a well-developed professional development council (PDC) with representation from across the district. The PDC can provide guidance to support the development of a data-driven professional development plan for the district.

To capitalize fully on these strengths, USD 495 must also address a number of challenges related to professional development.

- Teacher and principal focus groups noted that Fort Larned does not have a data-driven professional development plan. They could not explain how

professional development topics were selected, who made selections, or how long various professional development initiatives would be implemented.

“Our professional development is like throwing spaghetti at a wall – if it sticks we do it. If not, we move on to something else”

—*Teacher*

- While district staff members participate in a wide variety of professional development activities, and the district plans to use classroom walkthrough data to support professional development, the district would benefit from establishing a clear process to support teachers as they absorb new learning and move it to application and impact. The district does not currently have measurable goals for professional development.
- According to principals’ and teachers’ responses to the Cross & Joftus Survey, educators would benefit from more collaboration time—time to meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities. While the Wednesday “Early Out” days carve out time for professional learning, teachers report that topics are typically decided by either the district or the building principal. Teachers lack the opportunity for vertical or horizontal communication during this time.

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.

- As the student population diversifies, the number of students identified as economically challenged increases, and state education funding continues to tighten, the district will be challenged to serve *all* students well and ensure that *all* students receive a high quality education.
- Fort Larned is also faced with a high student mobility rate, especially at the secondary level. District data indicate that those students who are more mobile are not doing as well academically as students who are more stable. Moreover, this challenge has repercussions for all students and the broader community, as the school system and teachers struggle to educate all students effectively.
- Though Fort Larned decision-making is guided by goals and priorities, the district lacks a long-range plan with measurable objectives, timelines, and accountability structures to ensure that it can track progress and meet its goals.
- USD 495 has developed and implemented a number of initiatives to improve curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development. The

district is challenged, however, to ensure that initiatives are implemented with fidelity, and integrated to ensure rigor and support student learning and achievement. Fort Larned would benefit from putting systems and processes in place to support continual improvement.

- In 2010-11, more than 23% of Fort Larned students were identified as students with disabilities. Fort Larned may want to look at why this percentage is so much higher than the state average and take steps to ensure that students are not being “over identified.”

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—and parent/community stakeholders where possible—to develop a long-range plan based on the district’s goals and priorities, with measurable objectives, timelines, and accountability structures. A key focus of this planning should be how the district will meet the academic and social needs of *all* its students, including a large percentage of economically disadvantaged students and students who are highly mobile. This process should also address questions such as: Where can resources be leveraged? How can community resources be brought to bear to address challenges? How can building and leadership issues be addressed at the elementary level? Can/should the district share staff with nearby districts? How can committee work be restructured to better meet the needs of students and staff members? How can the district address stakeholders’ concerns through better communication?
2. The district should develop processes and systems to support implementation and integration of research-based effective curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development initiatives, with the goal of continually improving student learning and achievement to support high expectations for *all* students. This effort should include:
 - a. Identifying how PLCs can be used to support teacher-administrator decision-making and collaboration, to improve student learning and achievement.
 - b. Developing and implementing a curriculum management plan—with clear timelines and responsibilities—which will help Fort Larned transition to the Common Core, implement appropriate formative assessments, and continually improve curriculum and assessment. The district may consider contracting with an outside math consultant to help assess math curriculum, textbooks, and supporting materials.
 - c. Building a common instructional framework, tied to rigorous standards, that helps teachers and administrators integrate research-based effective

instructional practices. This framework should draw on an analysis of student achievement data and prioritize research-based instructional practices that will have the *greatest impact* on increasing achievement for *all* students, including economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and other groups of students at risk of school failure. As part of this process, the superintendent should work with building principals and teacher leaders to review and prioritize district instructional and professional development initiatives.

- d. Examining what supports the district needs to implement MTSS with fidelity in reading—and look carefully at tiered instruction in mathematics as well. In this review process, the district should work with a state approved MTSS facilitator to determine who should participate in structuring and implementation training and look at the feasibility of establishing an official MTSS Leadership Team. The district should also look more broadly at how tiered instruction is being implemented.
 - e. Reviewing data management and usage, and discussing how PLCs can be used to regularly review and act on student assessment and other data. This process should include:
 - Ensuring that there is sufficient time for educators to collaborate and plan together; developing and implementing common PLC protocols; monitoring the effectiveness of PLCs.
 - Using classroom observation data systematically to provide regular and helpful feedback to educators.
 - 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.
 - f. Developing a monitoring system to measure the implementation and impact of professional development on changes in teacher behaviors.¹² In addition to classroom walkthroughs, the district may consider the use of tools such as the Innovation Configuration Matrix (ICM).¹³ 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.
3. Based on the recommendations above, Fort Larned should work collaboratively with Fort Larned USD 495 Tri-County Special Education Cooperative to examine how students are referred for special education

¹² Reeves, D.B. *Transforming Professional Development Into Student Learning Results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2010.

¹³ 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.

services. This effort may help the district understand why such a large percentage of students have been identified as students with disabilities and ensure that the district is not “over-identifying” students.

4. As it works to address mobility challenges and to ensure that students are college and career ready, the district should look at counseling efforts and work to strengthen relationships with parents, community-based social service agencies, and other community groups to help ensure that all students have the supports they need to be successful. A concerted community-wide effort around this issue is especially important given high student mobility rates in Fort Larned.

Next Steps

1. Based on the findings and the recommendations in this needs appraisal, Cross & Jofstus recommends that the district participate in the following KLN Communities of Practice (CoPs):
 - Curriculum and Assessment, Stage 1
 - Tiered Instruction, Stage 1
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.

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.¹⁴

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.

¹⁴ 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.

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.