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Needs Analysis of the Kansas Department of Education

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

I. Introduction

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

The rationale for this model, called the Learning Network, was that districts struggling to demonstrate AYP need a combination of support and pressure to make difficult changes that will result in higher overall levels of student achievement and a narrowing of achievement gaps. Unfortunately, there is no “silver bullet” for making improvements and the KSDE has finite capacity to help. Districts and the KSDE, however, can make significant progress if they think and act systemically, focus resources and energy on improving the teaching and learning process, and work collaboratively with support from an external “critical friend.” The goal, then, of the Learning Network is to improve school and district quality and increase student achievement through a collaborative, organization-development approach focused on applying systems theory and using data effectively.

One of the first activities in pursuit of this goal is to conduct a needs assessment of KSDE and all five participating districts focused on their ability to foster and sustain a school improvement process. This included an analysis of issues such as organization structure, communication, collaboration, community perception and relationships, and human resources and other critical systems. The needs analysis for KSDE comprised analysis of student achievement and other data, a survey of all agency staff, and a two-day site visit¹ that included interviews and focus groups with agency staff as well as with state representatives, governor’s staff, state board members, Board of Regents staff, and representatives of state education associations and service centers. All needs assessment activities were designed to produce findings leading to recommendations for improving the state’s support for schools and districts struggling to demonstrate AYP.

The site visit concluded with a debriefing conducted by Cross & Jofus for all staff at the KSDE that included a presentation of some preliminary findings. This report presents all findings and represents the culmination of the needs assessment for the KSDE.

KSDE has a great deal with which to be proud. Student test scores in every subject and for every subgroup have increased significantly. For example, the percentage of students reading at or above the proficient level has increased from 59% in 2000 to 84% in 2008. Math has risen from 50% to 81% in the same time period. In addition, Kansas students continue to outperform much of the United States on nationwide assessments such as the ACT and SAT (college entrance exams) and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

¹ The site visit for KSDE occurred January 15-16, 2009.

Despite these accomplishments, KSDE is not, and should not be, satisfied. Agency staff and educators from across the state acknowledge that performance of all students—but especially those representing subgroups (minority, low income, English language learner, and special education) most likely to struggle—can and must perform at much higher levels if the state is to remain economically and educationally competitive.

II. Findings

Findings from the needs assessment of KSDE are summarized below in the areas of leadership, empowering culture, human resources, and district and school support.

Leadership

One of the main findings of the KSDE needs analysis is that the agency lacks systemic coherence. Coherence means “the elements of (an organization) work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy.”²

The goal of the Kansas State Board of Education through 2009 is to “ensure that all students meet or exceed high academic standards and are prepared for their next steps after completing high school.” To accomplish this goal, the Board identified four aligned objectives:

- 1) Redesigning the delivery system to meet students’ changing needs;
- 2) Providing an effective educator in every classroom;
- 3) Ensuring a visionary and effective leader in every school; and
- 4) Improving communication with all constituent groups and policy partners.

In addition, the Board adopted appropriate measures for each objective, and the KSDE has implemented several initiatives—including the Kansas Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS), Kansas System of Support, Teaching in Kansas Commission, Kansas Educational Leadership Commission, and Profiles of 21st Century Learner and 21st Century Learning Environment—aligned with and supportive of the Board objectives and goal.

Therefore, the challenge with coherence does not stem from a lack of clarity or misalignment between goal, objectives, and initiatives. Rather, the problem arises from the capacity, organization, and systems of the KSDE in implementation. For example:

- The KSDE does not have a strategic plan.

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

- Program staff, including directors, do not help to create program or agency budgets, do not receive budgets for their programs, and have no authority over spending or resource allocation.
- Although the survey found that most KSDE staff understand that the agency’s goal is to support district and school success (see Table 1 below), interviews and focus groups found that staff question the appropriate role that the agency should play.

“What is this agency supposed to be about? We haven’t really determined that. We have the five initiatives, but what is it that we want to integrate? Are we compliance and monitoring or promising practices? We need to know.” *KSDE staff member*

- The skills and attention of KSDE staff are focused on ensuring school and district compliance with state and federal laws and regulations.
- Interviews and focus groups with district administrators found that they believe that KSDE staff lack the experience and skills necessary for improvement and are much more interested in compliance.
- Interviews and focus groups suggest that KSDE staff most likely enforce state and federal laws and regulations more than is necessary to fulfill its role as a compliance auditor.
- KSDE’s organizational structure exacerbates program isolation and its compliance orientation.
 - Some teams—such as Special Education Services, Title Programs and Services, and Innovation & Improvement (Perkins)—are organized around federal programs.
 - The Innovation & Improvement team’s portfolio appears to unnecessarily isolate some programs such as career and technical education, the QPA accreditation process, leadership, and charter schools.
 - Despite a few PhD-level consultants, the Research & Evaluation team currently neither conducts nor manages research and evaluation. It has been assigned other tasks, including collecting data from districts for the Information Technology team (an assignment that team members have strongly resisted, leaving the IT team to collect the data).
 - The Communications team appears to be misplaced in the Fiscal & Administrative Services Division.

“If we are going to have MTSS work, we need special education and general education to join hands.” *KSDE staff member*

- Agency directors are not included on the leadership team and do not feel empowered to provide leadership to their staff.
- According to interviews and focus groups, many of the agency’s consultants feel they are not valued or included in decision making, do not have a clear understanding of how decisions are made, have no input in the agency’s strategic direction, and are not making good use of their skills. These findings appear to contradict those from the survey (see Table 2) and thus may need to be explored further.

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

- The agency needs to cut its budget by approximately 7.5% or about \$1.3 million and could be facing additional budget cuts in subsequent years.
- The agency has little focus on high school improvement, other than some support for career and technical education.
- According to a survey of staff (see Table 1), agency staff believe the following elements of KSDE leadership are ***most obviously present*** in the agency (it should be noted that these findings contradict findings from the interviews with staff):
 - The goal of the agency is to support district and school success (85% of staff agreed or strongly agreed with this statement).
 - Agency leadership has articulated a vision (65%).
 - The team vision is consistent with and supportive of the agency vision (64%).

“We are like one of those (LEAs) that are on improvement. We don’t know the vision and mission, we need buy-in, stakeholders, a chance to disagree, and the knowledge that collective wisdom gets us farther.” *KSDE staff member*

- According to the survey, agency staff believe the following elements of KSDE leadership are ***least obviously present*** (these findings are consistent with interviews of staff):
 - There is equity in the assigned work (30% of staff agreed or strongly agreed with this statement).

- Structures are in place for shared leadership (40%)
- The agency as a whole operates efficiently and effectively (42%)
- Agency leadership invites diverse opinions and suggestions for agency improvement (43%).
- Agency use of materials, time, money, and people are used to support the vision (45%).

Table 1. Degree to Which KSDE Staff Agree that Key Elements of Leadership are Present in the Agency#

Please rate the degree to which you agree with the following statements about leadership at the KSDE.	Agree/Strongly Agree*
The goal of this agency is to support district and school success.	85%
Agency leadership has articulated a vision.	65%
The team vision is consistent with and supportive of the agency vision.	64%
Agency decisions are data-driven and facilitate student achievement across the state.	59%
The vision of the agency is clear.	53%
Agency vision guides actions and decision-making among leadership and staff.	50%
Leadership roles and responsibilities within the agency are clearly defined.	50%
The agency vision supports high performance expectations for every staff member.	49%
Leadership seeks input as part of the decision-making process when possible.	47%
Leadership work and travel schedules facilitate discussion and planning around agency work.	46%
Agency use of materials, time, money, and people are used to support the vision.	45%
Agency leadership invites diverse opinions and suggestions for agency improvement.	43%
The agency as a whole operates efficiently and effectively.	42%
Structures are in place for shared leadership.	40%

There is equity in the assigned work.	30%
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Source: Cross & Joftus survey of KSDE staff January 2009.

*Response options “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” were combined and the response options “Don’t Agree” and “Somewhat Agree” were deleted for this presentation. Items were ordered from greatest to least agreement.

#Response rate was 67.6%.

Empowering Culture

A big-picture analysis of the surveys, focus groups, and interviews suggests that KSDE embodies the strengths and challenges that most State Education Agencies share: a commitment to all children receiving a high-quality education, a focus on compliance with state and federal laws and regulations, and a relative disconnect to schools and school districts, including a lack of understanding of the myriad challenges placed upon those entities.

All that being said, KSDE does have dedicated and passionate staff and leadership as well as a renewed focus on helping all children in Kansas achieve. In addition, the survey of KSDE staff found that a significant majority agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements about agency culture (see Table 2 below):

- I understand how my work supports the work of the agency (83% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement).
- I am clear about the expectations about my work (75%).
- I am allowed to take action and make decisions regarding my work (72%).

As a result of these strengths, KSDE is well poised to transform itself into a much more streamlined and focused broker of improvement support for schools, districts, and the communities they serve. To do so, however, KSDE must address some challenges relative to an empowering culture:

- There is little evidence of effective collaboration or teaming across the Department. Only 42% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Time for collaboration is scheduled in my workweek,” and only 48% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Integrated work is supported and communicated throughout the agency” (see Table 2). Rather, the culture appears to be one of entrenchment, with individuals working as “independent contractors,” with no real accountability only 48% of staff agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Team members are held accountable for their actions/work”). Indeed, silos are firmly in place and evident between and across teams, divisions, and the Department as a whole. In addition, there is a lack of collaboration, or it is seen as “collaboration for collaboration sake.” Finally, individuals from across the agency report feeling left out of decisions and interesting work and feeling “sabotaged” by other staff members. For example,

the survey found that only 56% of staff agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Team members support the collective decision of the group.”

“Reorganization is one of the biggest challenges in this culture. The agency runs on tradition and unspoken tradition. There is a lot of entrenchment in the culture.”
KSDE staff member

“An example is the use of the word ‘collaborative.’ You have to talk to everybody (to make a decision). If you don’t, some people will say you didn’t ask my opinion so I’m not going to do that.” Another *KSDE staff member*

- There is a need for improved communication within the agency and out to the field. Only 45% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “Systems of communication support timely interaction inside and outside the agency,” only 57% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Timely and clear communication is common practice to address district and school needs,” and only 48% agreed or strong agreed with the statement “Team meetings are purposeful, compelling, and engaging” (see Table 2). Individuals in the agency voiced frustration and concern over not knowing what the work of their team or division is and how that related to other teams’ and divisions’ work. A theme from all groups was a need for consistent communication from the leadership of the agency, particularly regarding how agency priorities affected individuals’ work. Perhaps as a result of ineffective communication systems, rumors appear to run rampant in the agency, according to both interviews and the survey of KSDE staff. For example, only 25% of staff agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “Gossip is not tolerated at the agency.”

“I know who’s going to be late today, but I don’t know who does what.” *KSDE staff member*

- Duplicative work is evident across teams and divisions leading to frustration. Agency staff discussed the need for an alignment or analysis of the work being done to avoid duplication and to focus the work of the agency.
- The physical environment of the agency, which leads to reported lack of morale and in some instances suspected illnesses, is a concern repeated across the agency.

Table 2. Degree to Which KSDE Staff Agree that Key Elements of an Empowering Culture are Present in the Agency#

Please rate the degree to which you agree with the following statements about leadership at the KSDE.	Agree/Strongly Agree*
I understand how my work supports the work of the agency.	83%
I am clear about the expectations about my work.	75%
I am allowed to take action and make decisions regarding my work.	72%
People on my team work together productively.	67%
I trust members on my team and they trust me.	67%
I am satisfied with my work and feel good about my workplace.	66%
Timely and clear communication is common practice to address district and school needs.	57%
Team members support the collective decision of the group.	56%
Team members are held accountable for their actions/work.	48%
Integrated work is supported and communicated throughout the agency.	48%
Team meetings are purposeful, compelling, and engaging.	48%
Systems of communication support timely interaction inside and outside the agency.	45%
Celebration occurs when results are realized.	44%
Time for collaboration is scheduled in my workweek.	42%
Gossip is not tolerated at the agency.	25%

Source: Cross & Jofus survey of KSDE staff January 2009.

*Response options “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” were combined and the response options “Don’t Agree” and “Somewhat Agree” were deleted for this presentation. Items were ordered from greatest to least agreement.

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Human Resources

Human resources—the key to the quality of any organization—at KSDE has some strengths. First and foremost, staff at the agency have a variety of backgrounds and perspectives, hope to contribute to improving education in the state and generally believe that they do, and, according to the survey of staff (see Table 3):³

- believe their job matches their abilities
- feel engaged and passionate about their work
- feel their work is valued
- enjoy coming to work.

Moreover, after years without them, KSDE has begun to develop human-resource policies and procedures that should help the agency more effectively support staff and more consistently apply rules and expectations for all staff.

To fully realize the potential of the staff to meet KSDE’s mission, the following human-resource challenges need to be addressed:

- KSDE, like many state bureaucracies, is limited in its ability to use pay to incentivize or reward performance. Similarly, staff members are placed on the beginning salary range for their classification upon hiring regardless of educational attainment or years of experience (making recruitment difficult), and the absence of a career ladder in the agency leads to reported frustration and the need for self-initiation and exacerbates the retention of excellent, highly motivated staff.
- In contrast to the survey results, staff from across the agency reported feeling not valued as an individual or member of a team. This feeling is exemplified by two cases in which KSDE submitted paperwork in an attempt to promote an employee and the Department of Administration actually demoted the employee, a decision that could not be reversed. In addition, it was consistently reported that there was a “lack of respect” for decisions made, particularly when counter to past practices or when staff feel that they were not asked for their input.
- The application of human-resource policies and procedures was reported as inconsistent. Groups reported the need for clear policies and currently there is uneven application across classified and unclassified groups and between teams. The biggest issues voiced revolved around application of rules regarding length of work day and holiday and leave time between the two groups. Job descriptions for unclassified staff need to be completed and contain job expectations and work responsibilities, along with required competencies. Classified staff job descriptions need to be revisited. Finally, data from exit interviews need to

³ Note that some of the survey findings contradict some findings from the interviews.

inform the policy and procedure development, evaluation planning, and rules of the organization.

“Team rules are different from team to team so it looks like there are inconsistent rules and that leads to hard feelings.” *KSDE staff member*

- As a result of the demotion of staff, inconsistent application of policies and procedures, and the perception that the human resources team does not completely represent staff members’ interest, many staff members report a mistrust of the human resources team.
- There is a need for an informed and consistently implemented process for evaluating all staff and for high-quality professional development that supports new staff at all levels, makes use of technology, and supports general agency needs and specific job training. The way in which under-performing staff are dealt with and current KSDE professional development received the least support of all key human-resource elements on the KSDE staff survey (see Table 3).

Table 3. Degree to Which KSDE Staff Agree that Key Elements of Human Resources are Present in the Agency#

Please rate the degree to which you agree with the following statements about leadership at the KSDE.	Agree/Strongly Agree*
My job matches my interest abilities.	76%
I feel engaged and passionate about the work I do.	74%
I feel like my work is valued.	73%
I like to come to work.	73%
I am familiar with the process used to evaluate my work.	73%
I have access to professional development that I need to do my job.	70%
I have the resources to do my job.	69%
The agency benefits support employee retention (e.g., health care, retirement, and work schedules).	69%
Employee retention is directly affected by agency culture and leadership.	68%
The professional development available to me meets my needs.	64%

I am acknowledged for positive outcomes.	64%
My job responsibilities are clearly defined in my job description.	62%
My opinion is valued and matters to agency work.	57%
Someone in my workplace encourages my development as an employee.	56%
I receive feedback on my work on a regular basis.	52%
Procedures to guide my work are clear.	52%
Agency policies are reviewed and updated as needed and communicated to staff.	52%
Team members are held accountable for their actions/work.	46%
Job orientation to the agency and the team is effective.	43%
Under-performing team members are dealt with appropriately, fairly, and in a timely manner.	25%

Source: Cross & Jofus survey of KSDE staff January 2009.

*Response options “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” were combined and the response options “Don’t Agree” and “Somewhat Agree” were deleted for this presentation. Items were ordered from greatest to least agreement.

#Response rate was 67.6%.

School and District Improvement

The entire review of KSDE addressed the overarching question “How can KSDE more effectively support school and district improvement?” Therefore, all of the findings in the previous sections are focused on this issue. The following findings, however, are particularly focused on the KSDE’s role in the school and district improvement process:

- Under the leadership of Commissioner Posny, according to senior staff of the Learning Network districts, KSDE has been placing an increased emphasis on school and district improvement. Indeed, the Learning Network—which produced this report—represents this new emphasis. That said, since the implementation of NCLB in 2002, research has found that KSDE has actually played a *diminished role* in helping schools improve as the agency has worked frantically to meet the compliance requirements of the law.⁴ Moreover, in our

⁴ Mass Insight (2007). *The Turnaround Challenge: Why America’s Best Opportunity to Dramatically Improve Student Achievement Lies in Our Worst-Performing Schools*. Author.

interviews, KSDE staff acknowledge and the leadership of the Learning Network districts confirm that the agency—which has a small staff by SEA standards and addresses a large number of initiatives—would be well served to limit and prioritize the number of initiatives and to maintain a laser-like focus on helping schools and districts improve, especially “low-performing” ones and those serving large percentages of low-income and special-needs students.

“What’s gone around has come around. After a decade or so spent largely on setting academic standards against which to hold schools accountable, states are themselves being held accountable for helping schools figure out how to meet them. The result is a huge leadership challenge.” *Jeff Archer, “Leading the Learning,” Education Week,*

- KSDE has typically not sought, in a consistent and authentic way, the input of schools and districts concerning the types of services that the agency could provide to support them most effectively.
- The state has not had good experiences with virtual schools, which, if implemented effectively (see the Georgia Department of Education for an excellent example⁵) could help schools and districts to address current and future teacher shortages, especially in the western part of the state and in urban districts.
- KSDE has a nationally recognized data system and process for ensuring high-quality data but lacks participation from key staff for the Data Governance Board.

III. Recommendations

The following recommendations address the findings above but cut across the areas of leadership, culture, human resources, and school and district improvement. The recommendations are intended to help the KSDE operate more effectively and efficiently and to support the improvement process of schools and districts, especially the lowest performing ones and those serving the highest percentage of needy students.

⁵ Unpublished evaluation of the National Governor Association’s Honor States Grant (Phase II) conducted by Cross & Jofus, LLC in 2007.

- 1) “Re-vision” the role of the KSDE and develop a strategic plan with input from agency staff and other key stakeholders, including board members, school and district administrators, and business and other civic leaders. The re-visioned role of the KSDE should focus on several elements:
 - Federal and State grant administration, including ensuring school and district “substantial” compliance with laws and regulations⁶ and evaluation of program implementation and impact
 - Standards and assessments that comply with federal law and describe and measure what all students in the state are expected to know and be able to do
 - Data systems,⁷ including the use of data for multiple purposes and as a monitoring tool that does not require site visits
 - Innovative solutions for addressing statewide challenges, such as developing a viable virtual learning program that helps to address the looming teacher and administrator shortage
 - Identifying, disseminating, supporting, and engaging stakeholders around the statewide implementation of promising practices for school and district improvement
 - Partnerships with external groups that work directly with schools and districts on the improvement process, including high school redesign

“For that is what’s needed to tackle the challenge posed by failing schools: an initiative that looks less like compliance with state and federal accountability mandates, and more like an inclusive, high-visibility, entrepreneurial partnership aimed at solving an urgent public dilemma.” *Mass Insight (2007). The Turnaround Challenge*

- 2) Reorganize the teams and divisions of the KSDE based on the strategic plan and with the expectation of budget cuts to ensure most effective and efficient use of the skills of staff.
- 3) Make senior leadership more available and visible to staff during the transition period to the “new” KSDE.
- 4) Include agency directors on the senior leadership team and hold them accountable for meeting clearly defined goals and communicating with and managing staff.

⁶ SEAs are legally required to ensure compliance with laws and regulations, but there is generally significant latitude in interpreting compliance. For example, there are 755 compliance items in IDEA. There is no way for schools and districts to comply with all items to the letter of the law or regulation and no way for KSDE to monitor all items in all schools and districts. The point of “substantial” compliance is to determine which items are easily monitored through data analysis (such as achievement, inclusion, etc.) and most critical (such as those pertaining to human rights and student performance) and focus on those items, especially in schools and districts that are not demonstrating significant progress with student achievement.

⁷ KSDE leadership should ensure full participation in the Data Governance Board.

- 5) Create budget transparency by engaging KSDE senior staff, including directors, in the development of the budget, providing program budgets and expenditure reports to program directors, and granting them some authority to expend and reallocate funds within certain parameter.
- 6) Work to ensure a singular “voice” and communication system for both external and internal stakeholders and develop systems that systematically collect and respond to concerns from the field.
- 7) Finalize a human-resources manual and work to ensure staff buy-in and implementation consistency.
- 8) Finalize job descriptions of all staff, including minimum job qualifications. To the extent possible, create a career ladder for agency staff.
- 9) Develop a systematic orientation and training program that makes use of technology and includes modules for general agency as well as team- and position-specific expectations.
- 10) PD2 should be reorganized with the help of staff to include components that focus on individuals’ and teams’ role with regard to school and district improvement and acknowledge cross-team responsibilities.
- 11) Design a meaningful staff evaluation system that is aligned to the prioritized work of the agency and is consistently utilized by all levels of the organization
- 12) Develop training for districts that is designed around most frequently asked questions and that would provide positive PR for the agency and much needed resources and information for districts around critical issues such as licensing, report completion, etc.

Cross & Jofus, LLC applauds the KSDE for its willingness to assess its strengths and weaknesses and for considering recommendations that aim to help the agency support the school and district improvement process and become the most effective SEA in the nation.