

DRAFT Needs Analysis of Independence, USD 446

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).

In 2009, this model, the Kansas Learning Network (KLN), was expanded to reach 12 more Kansas districts not making AYP, and subsequently in 2010, to reach 11 more, including USD 446, Independence Public Schools. Since that time, one district has left the Network because it demonstrated AYP two consecutive years.¹ Seven additional districts demonstrated AYP in the area(s) identified for improvement, and they will continue to remain in the Network for at least one more year.

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

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

One of the first activities in pursuit of this goal is to conduct a needs assessment of KSDE and all participating districts, focused on their ability to foster and sustain a school improvement process. The needs analysis encompasses an analysis of student achievement and other data; surveys of teachers, principals, and district administrators; and three-day site visits² that include interviews and focus groups with students, parents, civic leaders, teachers, academic coaches, principals, district administrators, and board members as well as classroom observations using a process designed by Cross & Jofus called the Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success (K-PALSS). All needs assessment activities are designed both to produce findings leading to recommendations for technical assistance and to train school and state officials to do their own needs assessments and classroom observations in the future.

The site visits conclude with a debriefing conducted by Cross & Jofus for the district’s leadership that includes a presentation of some preliminary findings. This report presents all findings and represents the culmination of the needs assessment for Independence

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 Independence occurred November 17-19, 2010.

Public Schools, USD 446 (referred to throughout the report as USD 446 or Independence).

USD 446 Student Demographics

Once a thriving center of commerce in Kansas, Independence still continues to be a vibrant community. The population of Montgomery County—where Independence is located—however, declined by 5.5% from 2000-2009. During the same time, the school district’s enrollment decreased from 2,173 to 1,823, a 16.1% drop. In addition, the district and community have seen an increase in families and children living in poverty. In 2005-2006, for example, 50.6% of students were eligible for free and reduced lunch; during the 2009-2010 school year, 57.5% of students were classified as economically disadvantaged.³

Independence and the school district have a long history of racial diversity, and recently both the town and the district have become more diverse. Table I illustrates these changes in the district.

Table I—Demographic Shifts in USD 446

Race-Ethnicity	2005-2006	2009-2010
White	82.9%	75.3%
African-American	10.2%	7.5%
Hispanic	3.9%	8.2%
Other	3.0%	8.9%

Additionally, 12.2% of students are classified as students with disabilities—just below the state average of 13.5%.⁴

Student Achievement

Overall, Independence students have demonstrated relatively high levels of student achievement. All students, as a group, have exceeded state achievement benchmarks in both reading and math for the past three years (for additional detail, see Table II below). Further, Independence schools at all levels—elementary, middle, and high—received several Kansas standards of excellence awards in the 2009-2010 school year.

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

Reading – Met AYP in 2008; did not meet in 2009 or 2010. On Improvement

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2008 - 72%	2009 - 76.7%	2010 - 81.3%
All students	Met (83.7%)	Met (84.5%)	Met (83.2%)

³ District data.

⁴ See KSDE State Report Card data for Independence.

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2008 - 72%	2009 - 76.7%	2010 - 81.3%
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (77.3%)	Met (78.8%)	Met (78.4%) ⁵
Students with Disabilities	Met (65.3%) ⁵	No (60.2%)	Met (66.1%) ⁶
ELL Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
African-American Students	Met (58.6%) ⁷	Met (71.2%) ⁵	No (61.2%)
Hispanic	Met (85.7%)	N/A	Met (81%) ⁴
White	Met (87.1%)	Met (86.4%)	Met (86.4%)
Asian & Pacific*	N/A	N/A	N/A
American Indian or Alaskan*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Multi-Ethnic/Multi-Racial*	N/A	Met (76.2%) ⁵	Met (79.6%) ⁵

Mathematics – Met AYP in 2008; did not meet in 2009; met in 2010. Not on Improvement

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2008 - 64.6%	2009 - 70.5%	2010 - 76.4%
All students	Met (81.2%)	Met (80.8%)	Met (82.8%)
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (73.2%)	Met (75.9%)	Met (78.8%) ⁵
Students with Disabilities	Met (63.5%) ⁵	Met (61.8%) ⁵	Met (67.2%) ⁶
ELL Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
African-American Students	Met (56.3%) ⁵	No (55.4%)	Met (62.5%) ⁶
Hispanic	Met (66.7%)	N/A	Met (72.1%) ⁵
White	Met (85.3%)	Met (83.7%)	Met (77.2%)
Asian & Pacific*	N/A	N/A	N/A
American Indian or Alaskan*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Multi-Ethnic/Multi-Racial*	Met (66.7%)	Met (77.5%)	Met (80%)

Graduation Rate: 2008—83.8%, 2009—95.8%, 2010—90.6%

Notes:

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

Despite these accomplishments, however, USD 446 faces some achievement challenges. Students with disabilities did not meet reading benchmarks in 2009 and African-American students failed to meet reading benchmarks in 2010, placing the district on improvement in reading. Further, it appears that a number of other groups of students may also be struggling to meet benchmarks in reading and mathematics.

⁵ The percent standard or above is below the target but above the criterion percent when the hypothesis test (at the 99% level of confidence) is applied.

⁶ The group made safe harbor.

⁷ The group made safe harbor through the hypothesis test at the 75% level of confidence.

The Big Picture

Independence possesses a number of strengths. Stakeholders we met with see the board of education as committed and willing to make difficult decisions. The superintendent has a good working relationship with the board and is seen as a strong and visible leader in the community. Focus group participants also describe schools as safe and supportive of students, and staff as caring and committed; and the community is supportive of the district. With the passage of a bond issue in 2009, Independence built a new elementary school and renovated other schools, creating much better learning facilities.

Independence must draw on these strengths and others to address five key systemic challenges as it works to improve:

- 1) AYP and instructional challenges for African-American students, students with disabilities, and potentially, other groups of students as well
- 2) A need to articulate and fully implement a coherent approach to improving student achievement
- 3) A need to foster a culture of high expectations for *all* students
- 4) A need to fully implement aligned curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development to support student learning and achievement
- 5) A need to revise and fully implement a strategic improvement plan for the district.

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

II. Findings

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

Leadership

Independence displays several leadership strengths.

- The Independence Board of Education is highly respected both in the district and in the community. Board members appear to be visible in the community and work well together as a unit. They have also been willing to undertake controversial issues for the good of the district and its students and staff. The board continued to push for a much needed bond issue, for example, even after three prior bond efforts had failed—resulting in \$45.1 million to support a new elementary school (for grades 3-5), major renovations to the middle school, and enhancements and additions to the high school.

- The board and Superintendent Chuck Schmidt have a healthy, positive working relationship. Board members report that the superintendent provides needed and timely information for their discussions and decision-making. This strong relationship is a critical factor in current and future efforts to improve student achievement. The superintendent is also recognized as a strong and visible leader in both the district and the community.
- The district has had a strategic plan in place since 2007. The plan has six goals:
 1. Facilities maintenance and remodel/replacement
 2. District and building culture/climate
 3. Create and implement a program to recruit and train quality employees and provide quality training, evaluation and support, mentoring, and team-building to all staff
 4. Engage the community through district public relations
 5. Maintain a viable, flexible curriculum
 6. Remain fiscally sound.
- The relationship between the central office leadership and building principals appears to be cohesive, respecting, and trustful. Principals are expected to be more than managers of their schools—they are expected to improve instruction and curriculum.
- The board has approved early release for students each Wednesday, which provides 50 minutes of valuable professional development time for staff devoted to improving student achievement.
- Independence is on sound financial footing, even with significant funding cuts in the last couple of years. The board has made difficult choices in staffing and programs and has worked to keep budget cuts as far from the classroom as possible. The board has also increased its Supplemental General Fund levy in each of the last six years to help bridge the funding gap and protect needed staff and programs.
- USD 446 has initiated two programs—professional learning communities (PLCs) and walkthrough classroom observations—both of which have great potential to improve curriculum, instruction, and student achievement.

Independence can draw on these strengths to address a number of related challenges.

- USD 446 has a focus on improving student achievement and is well aware of the achievement challenges facing various groups of students. That said, the district has neither the necessary coherence nor a theory of action to successfully accomplish the desired achievement results.

“Out of this process, I hope the district finds a way to put proactive systems in place.”

—*Parents*

Coherence means that “the elements of a school district work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy.”⁸ The “articulated strategy” is the theory of action that a district has for improving student achievement. While the district does have some elements of coherence in place—e.g., the superintendent and board have an effective working relationship; the district has a strategic plan; and there is a focus on improving student achievement—it will need to strengthen coherence and define and implement an articulated strategy to reach achievement goals.

For the past two years the district has been deeply involved in passing the bond issue and undertaking facilities planning and construction. With the completion of construction work, district leaders are committed to becoming fully engaged in improving student achievement.

- The strategic plan is not a “living document” in the district or the community, and district leaders have not regularly reported to the board, staff, or community regarding the plan. Neither staff nor parents with whom we met had much if any awareness of the plan. At this point, Independence needs to review the plan, determine what progress has been made, and make needed adjustments.
- District leaders have managed USD 446’s financial affairs well during the recent economic downturn. The board of education has had to make a series of difficult cuts over the past few years. The challenge to the board and leadership is to weigh past and future cuts in staff and support against the impact they might have on student achievement. Leaders have to be careful not to cut critical support needed by students and teachers too deeply. Principals and teachers interviewed agreed, for example, that the loss of a curriculum director has been detrimental to the district. In the face of ongoing budget challenges, it will be difficult for leaders to determine how or if this critical position can be restored.
- Principals understand that they are to serve as building or “instructional leaders,” and as such, to improve curriculum and instruction. Neither principals nor teachers we met with, however, could articulate a clear definition of what the role of instructional leader entails, nor identify expectations for principals serving in this role. The district also appears to lack professional development and support for principals as they work to fulfill this role.
- As mentioned above, the fact that Independence has done some work regarding professional learning communities (PLCs) bodes well for the district. However, there is little evidence that PLCs are being used effectively in some schools. Though most teachers with whom we spoke see PLCs as valuable, they also describe PLCs as becoming more and more like regular faculty meetings. There is a lack of clarity, consistency, and expectations regarding the PLCs.

⁸ Childress, S., R. Elmore, A. Grossman, and Caroline King (2007). “Note on the PELP Coherence Framework.” Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University.

- The same is true of classroom observation walkthroughs. Each principal appears to use his/her own walkthrough approach, the walkthrough process varies considerably from school to school, and principals report little training or oversight in how to use walkthroughs. Moreover, the district is not collecting walkthrough data to guide instructional and staff development work. Neither the PLCs, nor the walkthroughs were described as having significant impact on improving student achievement.
- Early release time for elementary and middle schools provides valuable time for school staff, and the district is to be commended for protecting this time. The challenge facing Independence is to keep the time focused on improving student achievement. It is apparent that each school establishes its own agenda and activities for release time. We saw little evidence of any systemic attempt to ensure that time is utilized effectively. The district should establish guidelines and expectations for release time that allow schools some planning flexibility but also ensure that the focus is on improving student achievement.
- As teachers and students use more technology in classrooms, they need more training in how to use technology as an effective teaching and learning tool. Both principals and teachers reported a need for such training, along with training on how to manage and use data to make instructional and staff development decisions.

Empowering Culture and Human Capital

Independence possesses several strengths in the area of Empowering Culture and Human Capital.

“All the district has to do is ask for support and the community will respond.” —*Parent*

- All groups interviewed reported that the community of Independence is a wonderful place to live and a great place to raise a family. Importantly, the Independence School District was consistently identified as one of the key elements that make Independence a desirable place to live. While both the community and the district are experiencing population declines and economic strains, they continue to be vibrant places for families and individuals. Community support for the district is evident in a number of ways—passage of the recent bond issue, a Stuff the Bus program that provides school supplies to students before school starts, a car dealer who provides a car each month to that month’s outstanding teacher, and community support at school activities.
- All groups interviewed agreed that the district provides a safe and secure learning environment for its students and staff. This atmosphere is greatly appreciated by all stakeholders and is an important factor in student achievement.

- Students and parents see Independence staff as caring and dedicated. The district and schools are small enough that stakeholders get to know each other well, and most individuals interviewed reported that they felt the schools had a welcoming atmosphere.
- The new and enhanced school facilities are eagerly awaited by all stakeholders. Most people interviewed were supportive of the new construction and believed it will make a positive difference in school climate.
- The district has an excellent relationship with nearby community colleges. Many dual enrollment classes are available to high school students who wish to get an early start on earning college credit.
- The Kids CREW (Community Resources Encouraging Winners) afterschool program is very much appreciated by parents. The program, which is open to all students grades K-5, offers students both academic and social activities.
- Independence has a mentoring program, which provides a mentor to all new teachers to the district. Pittsburg State University (PSU) is also within an hour's drive of Independence. This supports teachers in furthering their education. Of the current 139 teachers, 75 have a masters plus. PSU also provides a pool of teacher candidates for the district.
- Ninety-five percent of staff are highly qualified and 95% of core classes are taught by a highly qualified teacher. There continues to be a need for highly qualified math and science teachers though.

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

- The welfare of African-American students in Independence became the overriding topic in many of our focus group conversations. As stated earlier, the community and the district have a long history of diversity, and African-Americans comprise a significant portion of the population.

While all focus groups expressed concern for achievement challenges facing African-American students, the emphasis in our conversations was directed more toward the community rather than the district. We did not hear comments regarding explicit discrimination against African-American students. In fact, the great majority of respondents, both African-American and White, felt the district does a good job of educating students, but those feelings did not alleviate concerns about the success of the African-American students. We also heard comments about the district needing to reach out more to the parents of the African-American students and to the African-American community as a whole.

Significantly, Superintendent Schmidt has already begun this effort by drafting a letter to African-American parents and by helping establish a diversity task force in the community. It will be important that the district also include the growing Hispanic population, as well as other ethnic groups, in these discussions.

- The lack of diversity of Independence staff was also mentioned in several focus group conversations. Currently, USD 446 has only one African-American teacher and no other minorities in the teaching or administrative staff. This lack of diverse role models for students is problematic and was seen as a barrier by some students and parents to feeling more connected to the schools.
- Related to both of these issues, parents and community members in focus groups also expressed concern that schools and the district have lower expectations for some students—specifically, minority students and low-income students. Interviewees pointed out that non-White students were not held to the same rigor and expectations as White and higher income students. With growing numbers of students coming from minority and low-income homes, this will be an ongoing challenge for the district.
- Communication with stakeholders appears to be both a strength and a challenge for the district. Parents greatly appreciated the student portal that allows them to check student data and progress, and they noted that they use the portal often. Students also reported using the portal consistently. Parents we met with also see principals and teachers as generally very responsive and communicative. Both the board and superintendent receive high marks for visibility.

Independence, however, must find ways to communicate effectively with parents and students who do not have Internet access at home. Also, there needs to be a systematic plan to educate parents about the portal and to give them some training on how to use it. The district’s website received very low marks from the parents with whom we spoke. Those who have tried to use it, noted that some information was outdated and some information previously on the site was no longer there (e.g., information about activities). Budget cuts that resulted in a loss of the district’s public relations person are seen as having a major impact on website issues.

- Parents reported that they receive little information about school and district results on Kansas’ assessments. No information or relevant links (e.g., links to the Kansas State Department of Education Web site) appear on the district’s website. While most people interviewed knew the district was “on improvement,” few had any information regarding why the district was on improvement. Parents reported that they receive information regarding their children’s performance but would like more information regarding school and district results.

- Parents with whom we met expressed great frustration with the high school’s class enrollment process. The current process is seen as unfair, particularly to those parents who work and cannot enroll their children until after work.

Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction, and Professional Development

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

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

Curriculum

Independence has some valuable curriculum strengths.

- The foundation of the curriculum, as documented in the district’s Curriculum Guide, is the state standards.
- Now in the second year of curriculum adoption, all three elementary schools are using Everyday Math in each of the elementary grades. Math Connect is used at the middle school, and a more traditional math series, Glencoe, is used at the high school.
- Both general education teachers and special education resource teachers concur that efforts are made to provide students with disabilities access to a maximum of core curricular opportunities.
- A district-wide MTSS state approved facilitator from the Greenbush Education Service Center provides monthly onsite support in all of the schools and attends instructional meetings with grade level representatives. MTSS has been fully implemented and is in a “refinement” stage at Washington Elementary. Students from two elementary schools—5th graders at Washington and 3-4th graders at Lincoln—will move into the new 3-4-5 Jefferson Elementary next year, with the principal from Lincoln. During this school year, the

“We had to get creative and use everyone we possibly could to staff the tiers...the music teacher, PE teacher, librarian, and office staff!”

—Principal

two schools, under the leadership of the Lincoln principal, are moving toward a unified MTSS model.

- There is evidence of strong collaboration between special education and regular education teachers. The resource teachers participate in all curriculum adoptions and professional development to support the curriculum. One Wednesday each month, early release time is set aside for special education staff to meet together to discuss unique needs and targeted interventions for students with disabilities.

“You couldn't tell a special education from a regular education teacher in my school. We participate in all the same activities. Special education personnel are just a part of the ‘family’.”—*Special education teacher*

- There is a formal arrangement between the district and two community colleges within the county—Independence Community College and Coffeyville Community College—to provide high school students with dual enrollment opportunities. Currently, 76 students participate in history, calculus, English, and music appreciation courses. In addition, high school students may enroll in Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) and Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA) classes at Neosho Community College. Three Advanced Placement (AP) courses are also available to high school students.

USD 446 also faces some significant curriculum challenges as well, however.

- USD 446’s curriculum is not fully aligned. Currently, the district is using an online product to thoroughly define the curriculum and map the core subjects. Independence needs to involve all teachers in active discussions—before the curriculum is written—to ensure that a comprehensive scope and sequence is articulated and linked to a timeline, skills, and a method to monitor the effectiveness of the curriculum. This may be most beneficial in the areas of reading/language arts, where different curriculum materials are used at different grade levels.
- The lack of alignment is also evident in the math curricula. There appears to be little understanding of the Everyday Math curriculum by the middle school or high school math staff. Conversely, K-5 teachers with whom we spoke did not seem to be aware of the demands of the middle school and high school math courses. Dialogue across the grade levels—especially at the critical 5th to 6th grade transition point—will help teachers understand the math curriculum and assist students as they transition from the spiraling knowledge base model of Everyday Math to the more traditional Glencoe curriculum materials.
- Even though standards are being considered when decisions are made about curriculum, the “non-tested” standards at each grade level do not appear to be considered. This becomes especially problematic as students advance—they may

have little to no instruction in the non-tested standards and bring no previous learning to the next grade level where that standard may be tested.

- With only four-five years of implementation, the ESOL program is still relatively new to the district. It appears the ESOL staff have not fully participated in curriculum alignment and adoption activities and that they have had only minimal opportunities to engage in adequate training around curriculum such Everyday Math. This points to the need for the ESOL staff to participate in all levels of curriculum development, to fully support and implement instructional programs district-wide.
- Early release time is scheduled for each Wednesday. However the curriculum work that takes place during early release appears to be inconsistent from school to school. We saw evidence of data-driven dialogue in only two schools.
- The K-2, 3-4, middle school, and high school are at different stages of implementation of MTSS, with some of the schools not fully utilizing Tier 2 or establishing a Tier 3. Each school needs to continue with efforts to implement effective tiered instruction; allocate adequate time to each tier; establish data-driven progress monitoring; and design a structure that allows for fluid grouping by establishing placement and exit strategies.

“It's not data-driven. It's not about curriculum. What we talk about is just hit and miss.”

“It looks just like a faculty meeting for house-keeping.”

—*Teachers*

Assessment

Independence possesses three key assessment strengths.

- The district uses a full range of assessments to track student achievement. Among the 17 assessments used at different grade levels and for different purpose are: Kansas State Assessments, Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), STAR, American College Testing (ACT) exams, Advanced Placement (AP) exams, alternate assessments, the Kansas Assessment of Modified Measures (KAMM), and locally developed curriculum based measures. The district assessment schedule designates which tests will be used as summative tests, screeners, and diagnostics by grade level.
- The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment is used at all elementary schools, K-3. This assessment provides valuable and consistent district-wide data for instructional decisions in literacy in the early grades.
- Through focus group conversations with educators, it is clear that the staff understand the components of state assessments. With emphasis on the tested

indicators in the curriculum guide, the regular and special education teachers are well aware of the indicators tested in their grade levels and subject areas.

Independence must also address assessment challenges.

- Given the number of students with disabilities who were “reclassified” on the Kansas Assessment of Multiple Measures (KAMM), there is a need to examine the criteria for students taking the KAMM and alternative assessment for options. The special education administrators and principals are well aware of this need and have proactively scheduled an initial meeting in December 2010 to discuss this issue.
- There is a need for a more systemic approach to assessments, with a focus on how to use data to inform curriculum modification to improve student achievement. Currently, teachers and principals use assessment data in a limited fashion to make instructional decisions. Data collection and usage efforts appear to vary greatly from school to school, and while staff members review Kansas State Assessment data, there appears to be little use of current formative assessment data to inform instruction.
- Due to budget constraints, the curriculum director position was not filled this year. This leaves the principals and teachers uncertain of who is responsible for specific tasks surrounding assessments. It appears that the assessments are primarily the responsibility of the principals, who have many other priorities.

“We have data. We don't know how to use it.”

—*Teacher*

Instruction

Table III presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 77%) and principals (response rate 90%) 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.

In general, more than 50% of principals surveyed identified a number of sound instructional strategies as strongly evident. The sound instructional strategies that *principals* believe are most ***strongly evident*** in their schools include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 89% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 0%)
- empowering students to participate in research-based instructional strategies that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments (cited as strongly evident by 78% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 0%)

- 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 by 67% of principals as strongly evident and 0% as not evident or minimally evident)
- collaboratively functioning as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources (cited by 67% of principals as strongly evident and 0% as not evident or minimally evident)
- providing equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners (cited by 67% of principals as strongly evident and 0% as not evident or minimally evident).

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

- measuring the effectiveness of staff development by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning (cited by 11% of principals as strongly evident and by 33% as minimally evident or not evident)
- providing adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions to support student learning (cited by 11% of principals as strongly evident and by 22% as minimally evident or not evident).

In general, teachers' views are slightly less optimistic than principals'. *Teachers* did, however, identify a number of strategies as *strongly evident*:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 73% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 0%)
- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment (cited as strongly evident by 61% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 7%)
- 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 61% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 13%).

The strategies *teachers* believe to be *least evident* include:

- providing adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions to support teacher and administrator learning (cited by 16% of teachers as strongly evident and by 56% as minimally evident or not evident)
- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited by 10% of teachers as strongly evident and by 40% as minimally evident or not evident)
- measuring the effectiveness of staff development by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning (cited by 17% of teachers as strongly evident and by 33% 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.	89%	0%	73%	0%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.	78%	0%	51%	7%
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.	67%	0%	50%	7%
Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	67%	0%	50%	8%
Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.	67%	0%	43%	6%
Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction.	56%	0%	61%	13%
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development.	56%	0%	59%	7%
Educators foster collegial	56%	0%	30%	16%

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^
relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well being.				
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment.	56%	11%	61%	7%
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	56%	0%	30%	20%
Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level.	44%	0%	46%	6%
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction.	44%	0%	36%	16%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students.	44%	0%	33%	13%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.	44%	22%	38%	16%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning.	33%	11%	16%	56%
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	33%	33%	10%	40%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	22%	0%	32%	23%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives,	11%	22%	21%	31%

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^
and interventions are provided to support student learning.				
The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning.	11%	33%	17%	33%

Teacher Response Rate = 107/139

Principal Response Rate = 9/10

Source: Cross & Joftus survey of Independence principals and teachers November 2010.

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

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

Survey results only tell part of the story. Classroom observations, reviews of assessment data, and conversations with focus group participants suggest some important instructional strengths in USD 446.

- 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 met or exceeded state benchmarks in reading and math for the past three years.
- During observations of 51 classrooms in Independence using PALSS (Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success), the majority of classrooms at all levels of schooling demonstrated orderly, well-managed environments that were conducive to learning. Additionally, teachers were regularly checking student understanding throughout the lesson. (See Appendix for specific percentages of these and other practices that contribute to accelerating student learning.)
- Classroom observations also demonstrated that students were actively engaged in the lesson 70%-100% of the time by asking and answering questions, participating in practice opportunities, and demonstrating expected learning independently through verbal linguistic or visual learning styles.
- The district is implementing an academic intervention model using the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. The Education Service Center at Greenbush serves as the district’s state approved facilitator—supporting the district in their implementation of MTSS—and a consultant from Greenbush works in Independence schools on a monthly basis. Observations and focus group conversations indicate that the MTSS implementation process at Washington Elementary could serve as a model for other buildings as they work to implement MTSS.

- Teachers in USD 446 have access to a great deal of technology to support the integration of curriculum and instruction. Promethean interactive whiteboards have been installed in elementary classrooms, and once secondary school remodeling is complete, interactive whiteboards will be installed in the middle and high school as well. Document cameras, clickers, and laptop computer carts are also available for teachers' use.
- Inclusion of students with disabilities is the norm throughout the system at all levels. The district has been successful in breaking down the separation between general education students and students with disabilities. Based on data from the Kansas IDEA State Performance Plan related to least restrictive environment (LRE), the district has met the state targets for least restrictive environment for student learning.

There are some clear instructional challenges, as well, however.

- PALSS observations identified the need to increase the following teaching practices, which were observed to be minimally evident in classrooms visited (see Appendix for specific percentages related to these and other strategies):
 - Adjusting presentations of information to accommodate for kinesthetic learning styles
 - Incorporating culturally responsive readings/perspectives and practices to support language needs
 - Providing instruction and opportunities for learning at higher levels of thinking aligned to state assessment questions that require cognitive levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
- The following instructional strategies (e.g., Marzano's, Bloom's, and Gardner's) that are predictably linked to increased student achievement were observed to be minimally evident in classrooms visited (see Appendix for specific percentages):
 - Identifying similarities and differences
 - Summarizing and taking notes
 - Representing knowledge in linguistic and non-linguistic forms
 - Setting objectives & providing immediate/continuous feedback
 - Generating & testing hypotheses.
- Effective learning practices strategies allow students to demonstrate their learning in multiple ways and adjust for different learning styles. Though the Cross & Joftus teacher and principal surveys indicate that the majority of educators believe they are providing differentiated instruction, the following learning practices strategies were observed to be minimally evident in the classrooms visited (see Appendix for specific percentages):

- Interpersonal (this was observed in 60% of classrooms visited at the high school level)
 - Intrapersonal
 - Logistical Mathematical
 - Visual Spatial
 - Bodily-Kinesthetic
 - Musical-Rhythmic
 - Differentiated instruction with modified content, processes/activities and/or products/assignments.
- Currently, USD 446 lacks a common classroom observation protocol and system to monitor instruction; determine the extent to which all students are engaged in rigorous, differentiated, and research-based learning practices; and provide timely and relevant feedback to teachers so that they can improve their instructional practices.
 - Moreover, teachers are receiving very little, if any, feedback and coaching on their performance. There are no instructional coaches and there appears to be very little instructional support.

Professional Development

USD 446 has three clear professional development strengths.

- The district has used Title I, Title IIA, a Technology Rich Classroom Grant, and a Fund for the Implementation of Education Technology Grant to fund professional development support. USD 446 educators noted in focus groups that they have attended conferences and trainings, and the district has also brought consultants in to work with all staff.
- Early release Wednesdays allow teachers time for professional development to strengthen lessons and teaching practices.
- Special education leadership works with special education teachers to target needed strategies for professional development. Special education teachers are also included in district-wide staff development activities.

To capitalize on these strengths, however, Independence must also address some important professional development challenges.

- Currently, the district lacks a data-driven approach to professional development. Systematic procedures for conducting classroom visits would enable the district to gather and use data to inform instruction and future professional development based on the extent of implementation of research-based effective teaching practices.

- Student learning and achievement data, along with classroom observation data, should serve as criteria for developing a data-driven, long-range professional development plan.
- As mentioned earlier, teachers from the high school indicated that Wednesday early release meetings often lack focus on how to improve student achievement. Leadership at the high school should review how Wednesday early release time could be used more effectively to support teachers’ collective professional learning and development.
- The district has invested a great deal of resources in technology. Teachers noted in focus groups, however, that they need additional professional development to integrate the technology as an effective teaching and learning tool.

“We need more training on the use of the interactive whiteboards.”—*Teacher*

III. Recommendations for Technical Assistance

One of the primary goals of this needs assessment is to identify areas in which the district could most benefit from technical assistance. 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:

- 1) AYP and instructional challenges for African-American students, students with disabilities, and potentially, other groups of students as well
- 2) A need to articulate and fully implement a coherent approach to improving student achievement
- 3) A need to foster a culture of high expectations for *all* students
- 4) A need to fully implement aligned curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development to support student learning and achievement
- 5) A need to revise and fully implement a strategic improvement plan for the district.

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

- 1) Identify a clear theory of action designed to improve student achievement.
- 2) Review and update the strategic plan to reflect the district’s theory of action and to build and support a coherent approach to improvement.
- 3) Define the role of “principal as instructional leader”; establish expectations and provide support for principals to serve in this role.

- 4) Continue the district's outreach to the African-American community, particularly parents of students. Continue the district's participation and leadership in the community's diversity task force. Review current district recruitment activities and set a goal for increasing the number of minority staff members in the district. Contact other districts that have significant minority populations to discuss other possible recruitment activities.
- 5) Articulate, align, and fully implement curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development, with the goal of improving student learning and achievement. This process should include a framework for monitoring accountability and address the following:
 - a. Implementation of an aligned curriculum and student assessment system across the district. The system should include frequent, common assessments that explicitly relate to what has been taught. This tight alignment between curriculum and assessment will provide a common context for instructional planning among teachers.
 - b. Implementation of a system-wide instructional model tied to rigorous standards. This model should draw on an analysis of student achievement data and identify research-based instructional practices that will have the greatest impact on increasing achievement.
 - c. Systematization of PLCs and classroom observations as catalysts for implementing research-based effective educational practices, by:
 - conducting classroom visits using common criteria and providing feedback to educators
 - analyzing data using a consistent protocol to determine the extent of implementation of effective teaching/learning practices
 - determining future professional development practices using observation data
 - creating parameters for use of the structured Wednesday time to maximize the use of time to focus on instructional practice and student formative and summative data.
 - d. Consistent implementation of MTSS across the district.
- 6) Review staffing needs regarding a curriculum director and instructional support; look for ways to collaborate with another district or districts within KLN to provide support.
- 7) Develop and implement a plan to increase technology training for all staff. This is particularly important for teachers and principals so that they have the knowledge and skills to utilize student learning and achievement data to influence teaching and learning strategies, and professional development.
- 8) Continue to strengthen the district's parent portal as a major tool for communication, while continuing to utilize other communication tools and

strategies to reach students and families in homes without computers or Internet service. Review and update the district website. Information related to student assessment results should be included on the website and easily accessible. Define who will be responsible for district communication activities.

- 9) With input from parents, review the high school enrollment process to determine if there is a better method for enrolling students.

Once district leadership has had an opportunity to review this report, a representative from Cross & Joftus will contact the Independence superintendent to finalize a technical assistance plan that includes 24 days of external support for the time period January through October of 2011. This plan, developed in collaboration between the senior leadership of the district and Cross & Joftus will describe in detail the goals, objectives, activities, service provider, and timeline of the technical assistance.

**NOTES ON APPENDIX (See attached PDF)
Findings from Classroom Observations
INDEPENDENCE SCHOOL DISTRICT**

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

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

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