

Needs Analysis of Atchison School District, USD 409

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 409, Atchison. Since 2008, four districts have left the Network because they demonstrated AYP for two consecutive years.¹

The rationale for the Kansas 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 KLN 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 409 took place December 1-2, 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 Atchison, USD 409 (referred to throughout the report as USD 409 or Atchison).

Atchison Student Demographics

In the 2010-11 school year, approximately 1737 students attended Atchison schools, a slight increase in enrollment from 2006-07, when 1674 students were enrolled. The district employs approximately 320 certified and classified full- and part-time employees—more than 148 of which are teachers—and houses four schools: Atchison Elementary, Atchison Middle School, Atchison High School, and Atchison Alternative School.

Atchison has become more racially and ethnically diverse over the past five years. Though the percentage of students identified as African-American has declined somewhat, the percentage of students identified as Hispanic/Latino has almost doubled, and the percentage of students identified as Multiracial has climbed from zero to more than six percent. The percentage of students identified as English language learners (ELLs)—less than one percent—remains very small.

Table I—Demographic Shifts in USD 409

Race-Ethnicity	2006-07	2010-11
American Indian/Alaska Native	.5%	.7%
African-American	13.3%	12.7%
Hispanic/Latino	2.6%	4.8%
Asian/ Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander	.9%	1.0%
Multiracial	0.0%	6.1%
White	79.7%	74.8%

While it has not experienced as large of a percentage increase as many other districts in the KLN have, Atchison has seen the number of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals climb almost five percentage points over the last five years, from 59.2% in 2006-07 to 64.9% in 2010-11.

The percentage of students with disabilities has also climbed over the past five years, from 20% to 23%, and is almost 10 percentage points above the Kansas average of 13.5%.³

Student Achievement

Overall, Atchison students have performed fairly well on state assessment tests. The group “all students” has exceeded state assessment benchmarks for proficiency in

³ KSDE and district data.

math, for example, for the past three years (for additional detail, see Table II below). Moreover, Atchison Middle School received eight Standards of Excellence Awards in 2011, including building-wide awards in math and reading. Atchison Elementary received a Standard of Excellence award for reading in grade five, and Atchison High School also received a building-wide Standard of Excellence award for mathematics.

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

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

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2009 - 76.7%	2010 - 81.3%	2011 - 86%
All students	Met (84.1%)	Met (82%)	Met (84.1%) ⁴
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (79.4%)	Met (77.9%) ⁴	Met (81.3%) ⁵
Students with Disabilities	Met (70.6%) ⁴	No (60.1%)	No (58.5%)
ELL Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
African-American Students	Met (83.9%)	Met (76.8%) ⁴	Met (78.6%) ⁴
Hispanic	N/A	Met (78.4%) ⁴	Met (88.1%)
White	Met (84.8%)	Met (82.2%)	Met (84.6%) ⁴
Asian*	N/A	N/A	N/A
American Indian or Alaskan*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Multi-Racial*	N/A	Met (97.5%)	Met (85.7%) ⁴
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Is.*	N/A	N/A	N/A

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

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2009 - 70.5%	2010 - 76.4%	2011 – 82.3%
All students	Met (80.2%)	Met (78.1%)	Met (84.4%)
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (74.8%)	Met (73.4%) ⁴	Met (82.2%) ⁴
Students with Disabilities	Met (70.1%) ⁴	No (59.6%) ⁴	Met (69.2%) ⁵
ELL Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
African-American Students	Met (70.3%) ⁴	Met (74.1%) ⁴	Met (79.7%) ⁴
Hispanic	N/A	Met (72.5%) ⁴	Met (75.6%) ⁴
White	Met (82.7%)	Met (78.8%)	Met (85.7%)
Asian*	N/A	N/A	N/A
American Indian or Alaskan*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Multi-Racial*	N/A	Met (81%)	Met (89.8%)
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Is.*	N/A	N/A	N/A

Overall Graduation Rate: 2009—70.4%, 2010—73.5%, 2011—79.6[^]

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.

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

⁵ The group made Safe Harbor.

[^]This percentage represents the four-year graduation rate. 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, USD 409 faces some clear achievement challenges. Students with disabilities failed to meet proficiency benchmarks on state reading assessments in 2010 and 2011, placing the district on improvement in reading. Additionally, several groups of students met benchmarks on the state reading and math assessments in 2010 and 2011 through safe harbor or confidence interval designations. Finally, the district's overall graduation rate was 79.6% in 2011, and for some groups of student—African American students, students eligible for free and reduced priced meals, and students with disabilities—rates were even lower.⁶ While most districts' graduation rates declined as the new method of calculating graduation rates went into effect, these rates should still be cause for concern.

The Big Picture

Atchison lies on the Missouri border, about a half an hour north of Leavenworth and just over an hour northeast of Kansas City. The town has a rich historical heritage and is justifiably proud of its important role in United States and Kansas history. Atchison has long been vibrant and diverse, with an active African American community.

According to the latest US Census data, Atchison has more than 10,000 residents, approximately 86.5% of which identify as White; 9.5% as African American; 2.5% as Hispanic or Latino; 2.5% as multiracial; and less than 1% as other, Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, or American Indian.⁷

The median household income in Atchison is just over \$41,000—well below the Kansas median of approximately \$50,000—and approximately 10% of families in Atchison live below the poverty line.⁸ Like most districts across Kansas, USD 409 has seen an increase in the number of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals over the last several years; now, approximately 65% of students are identified as economically disadvantaged.

To meet this challenge and others, the school district has taken a number of proactive steps. Over the past four years, district leaders have worked hard to improve communication, build a culture of transparency, and operate in a concerted, strategic way to meet the needs of students and improve student learning and achievement.

⁶ For additional detail, see the 2011 AYP and Graduation Reports for USD 409.

⁷ Hispanic/Latino is not considered a "racial category" in the US Census; persons from all racial backgrounds are asked to identify as Hispanic/Latino or non-Hispanic/Latino. Thus, percentages do not add to 100%.

⁸ According to 2010 US Census data.

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

- The superintendent, leadership team, and board of education appear to be well liked and respected by all stakeholders.
- District leaders have developed and implemented a strong strategic plan, with a clear focus on improving student outcomes.
- Parents, community members, board members, and students report that teachers and principals care about students' well-being, and parents and community members perceive that schools provide safe learning environments for students.
- To ensure that everyone is working together to improve student outcomes, USD 409 has invested deeply in building professional learning communities (PLCs) at every level of the system, and educators receive time, professional development, and support to use PLCs as the primary vehicle for positive change in the district.

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.
- Currently, the district's overall four-year graduation rate is 79.6%, and graduation rates for some groups of students are even lower. The district is challenged to improve graduation rates and prepare all students for success in life after high school.
- While USD 409 has a cohesive strategic plan and a clear theory of action, based on building effective PLCs at all levels in the educational system, the challenge lies in implementing the plan and strategy with fidelity, and fundamentally improving outcomes for all students.
- Currently, Atchison's elementary reading curriculum appears to be lacking. Atchison would also benefit from implementing an effective classroom walkthrough process and a coherent student assessment system, both of which would allow it to observe, track, and improve teaching and learning more reliably and effectively.
- For the past two years, students with disabilities have not met proficiency benchmarks on the Kansas State Reading Assessment. Moreover, in 2010-11, more than 23% of Atchison students were identified as students with disabilities. As it works to improve achievement for students with disabilities, Atchison would also benefit from examining why the percentage of students with disabilities is so much higher than the state average.

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 Atchison are summarized below in the areas of Leadership; Empowering Culture and Human Capital; Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction, and Professional Development.

Leadership

Atchison displays a number of important leadership strengths.

- District leaders have worked hard to establish a culture of transparency in the Atchison. Four years ago, the board of education—reacting to feedback from various stakeholders in the district—set out to ensure that transparency was present in their work and in the work of the district generally. The results of this initiative are impressive. Every leadership focus group, with the exception of the student group, mentioned transparency during our conversations. Participants expressed great appreciation for the board and district leaders’ commitment to creating a culture of transparency; they noted that it has dramatically changed the climate of the Atchison school district for the better.
- The board of education appears to be strong and has the support and respect of the community. The Atchison school district underwent a significant transformation four years ago, with the election of new board members who were concerned about the direction of the district and the negative climate that existed at the time. The seven members of the current board seem to be cohesive, strategic, and thoughtful in their planning and decision-making. The board completes a self-evaluation every year, using the Kansas Association of School Boards’ evaluation tool. The results of the self-evaluation are then used by the board to establish goals for the coming year and beyond. The evaluation last June resulted in a goal to improve communication and engagement with the community. The board also understands its role in the leadership of the district and does not appear to micromanage district staff.
- Superintendent Susan Myers and the board of education have a strong relationship. Board members report having complete trust and respect for the superintendent and credit her with many initiatives and improvements in the district.
- The district has a strong administrative team, headed by Superintendent Myers. The superintendent is in her fifth year in Atchison and seems to be having a very positive impact on the district and the community. All focus groups spoke highly of her leadership and communication skills. The

superintendent has built a strong leadership team of central office staff and building principals, which meets twice monthly to address district issues, with much of the focus on improving student achievement.

- The district’s theory of action is based on the premise that student achievement will improve by building effective professional learning communities (PLCs) in every school. PLCs have been created and are in various levels of development at different schools. Focus group conversations with teachers, principals, central office staff, and board members indicate that staff and board members are all very knowledgeable about the district’s focus on PLCs.
- This focus on using professional learning communities to support student achievement enables the district to function coherently. Coherence means that the elements of the school district work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy. Even the Director of Food Service was able to articulate how her department supported the efforts of the PLCs.
- Atchison has a strong strategic plan, developed four years ago by a group of approximately 50 committee members from the district and the community. The plan drives planning and decision-making at all levels in the district. The board receives periodic progress updates on the plan from staff, and the plan is reviewed by the board and administration each year and changed as needed—the Facilities pillar was added this year, for example. The plan’s six Pillars of Progress are:

- Student performance
- Educate the whole child
- Technology
- Communication
- Human Resources
- Facilities

“The strategic plan is a living document that we use constantly.”

—*Board Member*

- Principals understand their roles as instructional leaders and have their own PLC, which they manage themselves. Their meetings focus on improving PLCs and student achievement. The principals appear to be a cohesive group that communicates and collaborates well.
- Each building also uses the NEA (National Education Association) KEYS (Keys to Excellence for Your Schools) survey for planning.⁹ Schools administer the survey yearly to their staff members, and then use the results for discussion and planning for the following year. Each building principal also gives a report to the board of education on the results of the survey and the school’s plan for improvement.

⁹ For more information, see <http://www.keysonline.org/>.

Atchison can draw on these strengths and others to address a few key leadership challenges as it works to improve.

- The district has a clear focus and direction, and the strategic planning process seems to work well. The challenge, however, lies in implementing positive initiatives district-wide—to meet the goals articulated in the strategic plan, and most important, to improve student outcomes. This will require continued focus and deliberate communication among all stakeholders, so that everyone implements initiatives in a persistent and coherent fashion creating a cycle of continuous improvement.
- The PLCS are a good example of the challenge mentioned above. Atchison has worked hard to establish PLCs in every school, but it's clear from our conversations with teachers and administrators that the level of implementation and understanding of PLCs in the schools is uneven. The district will need to continue to provide consistent messages, clear expectations, and professional development to support and nurture effective PLCs.
- Budget challenges will continue to be an issue for Atchison. The district has managed its resources well over the past few years, and the board has taken a strategic approach to planning, using a three-year planning cycle. Despite these efforts, however, the board and leadership know that they will have to make difficult decisions regarding instructional programs and staff if the financial picture does not improve.
- Atchison could greatly benefit from having instructional coaches work in classrooms with teachers on teaching practices. The financial situation of the district makes this challenging, but USD 409 should not lose sight of the value of instructional coaches in terms of improving student outcomes.
- The district has made good strides in using data to support decision-making; this work could be greatly enhanced if the district had a data warehouse that would enable staff to easily store, access, track, and use student data.

Empowering Culture and Human Capital

USD 409 possesses several strengths in the area of Empowering Culture and Human Capital.

- Parents and students in focus groups generally gave the Atchison School District high marks. Parents who have had children graduate from the district indicated that their children were well prepared for life after high school. Community members with whom we met also reported that they felt students in the Atchison district were receiving a quality education.

- All of the focus groups noted that the schools were safe and secure, and that the teachers, administrators, and staff care for students and their welfare. One middle school student who started in Atchison this year reported that he had been welcomed at his new school and felt very comfortable there.
- Parents and community members reported that the district does a good job of communicating with them. Focus group participants especially appreciate the PowerSchool and texting communication programs. The district’s website and newsletters were also given high marks. Several teachers, administrators, and community members mentioned the Atchison Globe—the local newspaper—as a good source of information about the district and the schools as well.
- Participants in all focus groups also pointed out that the district has positive relationships with, and receives considerable support from, the Atchison community. Several community programs were mentioned, including:
 - The Atchison Child Care program, which serves about 180 children of all ages
 - The Boys and Girls Club
 - Big Brothers/Big Sisters
 - The YMCA
 - The Atchison Recreation Commission
 - Theater Atchison
 - Public Library
 - The Chamber of Commerce

Dr. Myers and her leadership team have worked hard to foster these positive relationships.

- There are also strong relationships between the district and Benedictine College and the local technical college.

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

- The district has a relatively high percentage of students identified as “economically disadvantaged,” many of which may need additional services and supports to succeed in school. This percentage will likely continue to grow, posing additional program and resource challenges for the district.
- While the district received praise for its communications with parents and community members, the board and administrative leaders know that there are still communication issues that need to be addressed, thus the board’s decision to focus on communication this year.

The communication challenge relates to a number of issues:

- Leaders expressed a need to communicate effectively with all parents, particularly parents who are not as involved in their children’s education as the district would like.
 - While teachers generally received high marks for their responsiveness and communication, we heard about instances of frustration among some parents.
 - Participants in focus groups reported that there is still a perception among some inside and outside of Atchison that the Atchison School District is not a high quality district. Community members noted that this perception was often an issue when trying to entice new people to the community. The district is challenged to address this perception and to utilize the many assets of the district to enhance its image. The community focus group reported that there is a community-wide initiative to improve the image of the Atchison community and that the district is a strong partner in that effort.
- “I tried to get information about Success For All, and it was like it was a secret.”

—*Parent*
- Though students, staff, and parents we met with noted that schools were safe and secure, each group also reported concerns. High school students in focus groups remarked that students talking in class often interrupted their learning. The district would benefit from using PLCs to build a culture of positive behavior supports, as educators look at teaching practices and student engagement.
 - The district has a high percentage of students with disabilities, especially at the elementary school (where approximately 31% of students have been identified as students with disabilities) and the alternative high school (where 46% of students have been identified).¹⁰ The percentages of identified students at Atchison Middle School and Atchison High School are similar to the state average, but the high number of students assigned to the alternative high school could be the reason for lower percentages at the secondary level.
 - Atchison would benefit from employing a more racially and ethnically diverse staff, to better reflect the ethnic composition of the student body.¹¹ This is an issue facing a number of districts in Kansas and is a difficult task, but the district needs to be purposeful about diversifying its staff.

¹⁰ 2010-2011 KSDE data for USD 409.

¹¹ According to the district, 169 staff members out of 178 total certified personnel, including contracted staff, are identified as white, four as African American, four as American Indian, and one as Hispanic.

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 Atchison 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

Atchison has several valuable curriculum and assessment strengths.

- Teachers have begun to use professional learning communities to discuss curriculum issues. Educators at Atchison High and Atchison Alternative School noted that this framework has been very helpful, supporting communication between the two buildings.
- The district has a five-year curriculum and textbook adoption cycle, and summer curriculum work provided Atchison with the opportunity to create “essential standards” at each grade level.
- The district has begun to plan for the Common Core transition. The Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade staffs have begun learning about and implementing Common Core standards, for example, and several staff members attended the Common Core Summer Academies sponsored by KSDE.
- High school students have access to dual credit courses through Highland Community College and can attend classes at Benedictine College, enabling students to earn college credit while still in high school.
- Teachers appear to have a deep understanding of the “tested indicators” on the Kansas State Assessment and, as scores indicate, have done relatively well preparing most students for the state assessments.
- Virtual Prescriptive Learning, a computerized intervention program, is available at all levels to support students in need of intervention. This option is flexible and fluid, allowing students access at multiple times during the year as needed.

- Teachers we met with indicated that common assessments have been created and implemented at the elementary school, and to a certain extent, at the middle school. At the elementary level, teachers discuss data from these assessments in PLCs and use it to help group students flexibly at each grade level.
- The district utilizes CETE (Center for Educational Testing and Evaluation) interim assessments, along with SRI (Scholastic Reading Inventory), and DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) at the elementary level to help assess student progress and determine appropriate interventions.

Atchison must address a number of curriculum and assessment challenges as well.

- The current elementary reading curriculum appears to be lacking. Teachers with whom we spoke indicated that they had to rely on supplemental programs and teacher-created materials to give students the individual support they needed, that Success for All was not adequately meeting teachers' and students' needs.
- There is a heavy reliance on tested indicators in the district's current core curriculum, and interventions for students appear to be based largely on indicators from the Kansas State Assessment. This focus can lead to curricular gaps for students.
- Teachers in focus groups noted that there were too few electives offered at the high school and middle school levels, and that some students were pulled out of electives to receive extra support. They also pointed out that this practice might be leading to lower student engagement.
- Teachers in focus groups expressed concerns about students with disabilities receiving access to the core curriculum in general education classrooms, especially in the upper grades. Both teachers and administrators seem to be aware of this challenge and are making strides to ensure that students have access to the core curriculum in the general education setting. Teachers and administrators report that co-teaching occurs in some classrooms, for example.
- The district would benefit from instituting a process to monitor curriculum implementation. While Atchison has begun to do classroom walkthroughs, educators report that data are not being used consistently to make curriculum and instructional decisions at a deep level, and that classroom observation data have not been shared with staff.

- The district would benefit from implementing a more coherent assessment system. Though the district has and uses a number of student assessments, some teachers in focus groups noted that they did not use data systematically to inform their teaching and use of interventions. This lack of a systemic approach to assessment makes it difficult for the district to analyze the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction, and track student data over time.
- Teachers, administrators and central office staff indicated that data protocols are being utilized during PLC time. Teachers, however, reported that there are disconnects between the protocols and student achievement.
- Staff members at all buildings participated in MTSS structuring training in reading, mathematics, and behavior a number of years ago with state approved facilitators at the Greenbush Education Service Center. MTSS implementation was put on hold, however, to establish the PLC culture in the district. High School teachers and administrators in focus groups indicated that they have implemented DuFour's Pyramid of Interventions as an alternative to MTSS.

Instruction

Table III presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 86%) and principals (response rate 88%) 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.

Principals are very optimistic about the presence of sound instructional strategies in Atchison schools. The strategies that *principals* cited as most *strongly evident* include:

- using data from class, school, district, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development (cited by 86% of principals as strongly evident and by 14% as evident)
- collaboratively functioning as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources (cited by 86% of principals as strongly evident and by 14% as evident)
- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment (cited by 86% of the principals as strongly evident and 14% as evident)
- facilitating, monitoring, and guiding the continuous improvement of instruction (cited by 86% of principals as strongly evident and 14% as evident)
- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited by 71% of principals as strongly evident and by 29% as evident)
- identifying students struggling to master content and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction

- (cited by 71% of principals as strongly evident and by 29% as evident)
- providing adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions to support teacher and administrator learning (cited by 71% of principals as strongly evident and by 29% as evident).

The instructional strategy that *principals* found to be *least evident* was:

- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited as strongly evident by 29% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 43% of principals).

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

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited by 75% of teachers as strongly evident and by 2% as minimally evident or not evident.)
- 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 59% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 7% of teachers).
- 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 53% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 4% of teachers).

Thirty percent or more of *teachers* found the following sound instructional strategies to be *minimally evident* or *not evident*:

- providing adequate resources to support teacher and administrator learning (cited as strongly evident by 14% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 38% of teachers)
- measuring the effectiveness of staff development by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning (cited as strongly evident by 12% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 36% of teachers)
- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited as strongly evident by 25% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 36% of teachers)
- providing adequate resources to support student learning (cited as strongly evident by 16% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 30% 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 meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment.	86%	0%	68%	4%
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development.	86%	0%	48%	11%
Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	86%	0%	45%	5%
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction.	86%	0%	35%	19%
Educators create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments.	71%	0%	75%	2%
Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction.	71%	0%	49%	16%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning.	71%	0%	14%	38%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.	57%	0%	46%	12%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of	57%	0%	33%	10%

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^
students.				
Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well-being.	57%	0%	26%	12%
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	57%	0%	22%	27%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning.	57%	0%	16%	30%
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.	43%	0%	59%	7%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.	43%	0%	44%	5%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	43%	14%	25%	28%
Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.	29%	0%	53%	4%
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	29%	43%	25%	36%
Subject matter is delivered to	14%	0%	42%	6%

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^
students at an appropriately rigorous level.				
The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning.	14%	0%	12%	36%

Teacher Response Rate = 130/155

Principal Response Rate = 7/8

Source: Cross & Joftus survey of Atchison principals and teachers November-December 2011.

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

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

Survey responses only tell part of the story. Observations of 93 classrooms, reviews of district and state assessment data, and conversations with focus group participants point toward some important instructional strengths in Atchison.

- 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 math for the past three years.
- Atchison maintains safe, orderly, and clean schools conducive to student learning. This was not only evident in the principal and teacher surveys, but was confirmed during school and classroom visits as well.
- During classroom observations, using the Focused Classroom Walkthrough protocol, the following effective *teaching* and *learning* practices were evident in classrooms visited.
 - We observed high levels of engagement (85-100% of the students) in all middle school classrooms visited.
 - More than 95% of all classrooms visited at all levels were orderly, well-managed, and adaptable to the learning task; and, had clear expectations for student behavior and participation in the learning process.
 - Positive student-to-teacher and teacher-to-student interactions were consistently observed.
 - Teachers consistently used instructional planning strategies to check for understanding and to activate prior knowledge and academic vocabulary.
 - They also consistently employed the following strategies that research has shown to accelerate learning: 1) reinforcing efforts and providing

recognition; 2) using homework and practice opportunities. (See Appendix for specific percentages related to these and other strategies).

- Over the last three years, 86 certified staff members have attended the PLC Summer Institute in St. Charles, Missouri. The PLCs have a strong focus on instruction, and two early release days are set aside each month for teachers to meet together to discuss the instructional needs of students, and how to deliver instructional services more effectively.

Atchison faces some clear instructional challenges as well, however.

- Though survey results suggest that teachers and principals believe they are using effective instructional practices to meet rigorous academic standards, observations of 93 classrooms identified the need to increase the following *teaching practices*, which were “minimally evident” in the classrooms visited:
 - The strategy of asking and answering higher-level questions was observed in 29% of the classes or less.
 - Generating and testing hypotheses, as well as identifying similarities and differences, both highly effective research-based instructional strategies, were observed in less than 25% of all classes.
 - Differentiation was evident in activities/materials and products/assignments in 36% or less of the classrooms observed.
 - Teacher modeling of the thinking process was observed in 12% of the classes at the middle school level and in a high of 53% of classes observed at the primary level.
- Though the district is “implementing tiered interventions,” Atchison currently lacks a clearly defined instructional framework to support development and implementation of tiered interventions. Interviews with district leadership and building principals indicated that though the district had begun the MTSS structuring process, Atchison decided not to formally implement MTSS until PLCs were up and running effectively. The rationale was that the simultaneous implementation of PLCs and MTSS was more than district staff had the capacity to handle, and that when PLCs were fully implemented, the MTSS process would be more effective.
- In focus group conversations with principals and teachers (both general and special education) educators could not reach a consensus on the extent to which students with disabilities were receiving instruction in the core curriculum from classroom teachers.

“We made the choice not to implement MTSS & PLCs at the same time.”

—*District Leader*

- Related to this and particularly noteworthy are data from the Kansas IDEA State Performance Plan related to “least restrictive environment” (LRE). This past year (with the most recent data for FY 2009-10 reported in March 2011), the district did not meet the state target for Indicator 5 for Least Restrictive Environment for student learning—2010 data indicate that approximately *53.7% of students with disabilities spend 80% or more of their school day in the regular classroom, receiving 20% or less of their daily instruction outside the regular classroom.* This percentage (53.7%) is approximately six percentage points below the state target (59.5%).
- Atchison has made it a priority to implement PLCs throughout the district. Elementary teachers we spoke with appreciate PLC time and report using it effectively. Secondary teachers, however, were not as enthusiastic about the use of PLCs. Some felt that teachers had little control over how PLC time was used and how agendas for PLC meetings were developed—their concern was that PLCs were not yet serving as true “learning communities.”
- Though Title I teachers are assigned to work with students at the elementary schools, there are no instructional coaches to support the teaching of reading at the elementary school.

Professional Development

Atchison exhibits some clear professional development strengths.

- The board of education has established the following goal: By May 2012, district schools will implement the professional learning communities model for school improvement. To reach this goal, the district’s action plan is to provide ongoing, job embedded professional development on using PLCs to identify and support the implementation of essential standards, common formative assessments, instructional strategies, and technology integration. In the focus groups we spoke with, it is apparent this goal and plan have been communicated to all stakeholders.

“We have focused on PLCs, and it has helped us a great deal.”

—Teacher

- The district has focused on PLC training for the past two years, and PLCs are active in all schools. The PLCs serve as a forum for teachers to discuss curriculum, instruction, and alignment issues. Teachers also use PLC time to collaboratively assess student learning and plan appropriate instruction.
- The district has created a culture of professional development. Professionals at all levels appear to have many professional learning opportunities available to

them.

- Special education teachers can participate in the same professional learning opportunities available to general education teachers.

To capitalize fully on these strengths, USD 409 must also address challenges related to professional development.

“I made the best move in my career when I came here. We are well supported here.”

—*Special Education Teacher*

- The district currently utilizes a classroom observation process to observe teaching and learning. The current process, however, does not enable Atchison to gather observation data so that it can be used and shared to improve teaching and learning. USD 409 would benefit from implementing a classroom observation protocol that allows the district to reliably track the extent to which research-based effective teaching practices are being implemented, and to use the data to inform future professional development.
- Though professional development is a part of the district’s culture, many of the professional development examples discussed appeared to focus on events, not ongoing, job-embedded professional learning. One exception is the consistent focus on PLCs.

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.
- Currently, the district’s overall four-year graduation rate is 79.6%, and graduation rates for some groups of students are even lower. The district is challenged to improve graduation rates and prepare all students for success in life after high school.
- While USD 409 has a cohesive strategic plan and a clear theory of action, based on building effective PLCs at all levels in the educational system, the challenge lies in implementing the plan and strategy with fidelity, and fundamentally improving outcomes for all students.
- Currently, Atchison’s elementary reading curriculum appears to be lacking. Atchison would also benefit from implementing an effective classroom walkthrough process and a coherent student assessment system, both of which

would allow it to observe, track, and improve teaching and learning more reliably and effectively.

- For the past two years, students with disabilities have not met proficiency benchmarks on the Kansas State Reading Assessment. Moreover, in 2010-11, more than 23% of Atchison students were identified as students with disabilities. As it works to improve achievement for students with disabilities, Atchison would also benefit from examining why the percentage of students with disabilities is so much higher than the state average.

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

1. The board and leadership should follow through on their goal for improving communication with parents and community. The district should also continue its work with community groups to enhance the image of both the district and the community.
2. The district should develop processes and systems to support implementation and integration of research-based effective curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development, with the goal of continually improving student learning and achievement to support high expectations for *all* students. This effort should include:
 - a. Continuing the focus on PLCs as the main mechanism for work in the schools. Ensure that there is a consistent approach to training for and implementation of PLCs, and challenge PLCs to refine the way they work to meet the needs of *all* Atchison students.
 - b. Developing and implementing a curriculum and assessment plan—with clear timelines and responsibilities—which will help Atchison improve the reading curriculum, successfully transition to the Common Core, implement appropriate assessments, and continually improve curriculum and assessment.
 - 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 district should also look at how it might employ instructional coaches.
 - d. Examining what supports the district needs to begin to implement MTSS with fidelity in reading, and mathematics if appropriate. 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 currently, to ensure that students are not being “tracked” by ability.

- e. Reviewing data management and usage, and discussing how PLCs can be used to regularly evaluate and act on student assessment and other data. This process should include:
 - Implementing a classroom observation protocol and system that allows data to be used systematically, to provide regular and helpful feedback to educators.
 - Building a data warehouse to store, manage, and use data.
 - 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, Atchison should undertake a self-assessment—with help from KSDE’s Technical Assistance System Network, if appropriate—to:
 - a. Examine how students are referred and identified for special education services. This effort may help the district understand why such a large percentage of students—especially at the elementary level and in the alternative school—have been identified as students with disabilities and ensure that the district is not “over-identifying” students;
 - b. Look at the extent to which students with disabilities are being educated in the regular classroom setting;
 - c. And, develop and implement a plan for boosting achievement for students with disabilities.

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.

4. As it works to improve graduation rates and ensure that students are college and career ready, the district should look at what courses are available to students, review 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.

Next Steps

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

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

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.

& Jofus 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.