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# Needs Analysis of Ulysses Unified School District – USD 214

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 Learning Network, was expanded to reach all 17 Kansas districts not making AYP, including Ulysses Unified School District, USD 214.

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 visits<sup>1</sup> 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 Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success (K-PALSS). All needs assessment activities are designed to both 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 Ulysses Unified School District, USD 214 (referred to throughout the report as the district or Ulysses).

Located in the southwestern part of Kansas, Ulysses has a population of approximately 5,550 (a 6.8% decline since 2000). The culture and the economy of the town are based on agriculture, gas, and cattle. The people of Ulysses express great pride in their community

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<sup>1</sup> The site visit for Ulysses occurred November 3-5, 2009.

and describe it as “a wonderful place to raise a family.” The community is also very diverse, with an almost equal mix of Anglos and Latinos.

Ulysses Unified is a reflection of the community in many ways. The district enrolled 1,713 students in 2008-2009, and, like some other districts in western Kansas, has seen a steady decline in enrollment over the past few years. The majority of students are Hispanic (58%), with White students (37%), students identifying as “other” (3.7%), and African-American students (less than 1%) comprising the rest of the student population. Approximately 27% of the district’s students are enrolled in the English Language Learner (ELL) program, and the district is challenged to find qualified teachers for these students—though Ulysses has taken proactive steps to ensure that more teachers receive ELL endorsement through a program with Kansas State University. Fifty-five percent of students are classified as economically disadvantaged, a figure that has climbed in recent years.

Bill Hall has been the district superintendent for 11 years, and during the last few years, the district has taken several positive steps to meet student needs and increase achievement. All students, for example, now have Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), and teachers are encouraged to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of individual students. The district has also begun a walk-through program to gather data on instructional practice. And, Ulysses has established partnerships with a number of community organizations to provide expanded learning opportunities, extending learning beyond the normal school day.

Despite these steps, however, Ulysses faces significant challenges. Though, on average, students are exceeding state goals for proficiency—in 2008-09, for example, 79.9% of students were proficient in reading (exceeding the state goal of 76.7%), and 79.4% of students were proficient in math (exceeding the state goal of 70.5%)—there are significant gaps in achievement. Ulysses continues to score below the state average in both reading and math, and students with disabilities score significantly below the state’s reading and math targets. In 2008-2009, for example, only 43.1% of students with disabilities met state targets in reading, and 44% met state targets in math. Hispanic students in Ulysses failed to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) in reading as well, with only 71.6% of students meeting state targets, compared to 91.3% of White students. As a result, the district continues on Corrective Action status with the Kansas State Department of Education.

Additionally, while it appears that most people in Ulysses are very pleased with the quality of life in their community, the location also presents major challenges for the community and the district. Many students perceive that there is “nothing for them to do” in Ulysses after they complete high school or attend college. Though some community members pointed out that lately they have seen more young people return for the quality of life and to raise their families, the location of the community has made it very difficult for the school district to attract and retain highly qualified teachers.

And, though the district has been able to maintain an enviable mill levy and a sound financial basis mainly due to the gas industry, the recent economic downturn has affected Ulysses as it has all Kansas districts. The latest school funding cuts have meant a loss of nine teachers, as well as the postponement of needed personnel additions and technology purchases.

To meet these challenges, Ulysses must develop and fully implement a coherent approach to improvement. Though the district has initiated a number of potentially positive efforts, it has not yet tied improvements to a theory of change or set clear priorities for action. Further, many programs have only just begun to be implemented.

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

### Leadership

One of the main, overarching findings of the district needs analysis is that Ulysses is attempting to put many important reforms in place to benefit students without fully implementing any of the reforms or sufficiently empowering principals to ensure that the reforms take hold in the schools. It appears that the district is attempting to implement more programs than it has the capacity to support effectively.

Instructional improvements must be implemented fully to have the intended effect on student achievement in Ulysses. In a meta-analysis of implementation research, Fixsen et. al (2005)<sup>2</sup> define three levels of implementation:

- *Paper implementation* means simply putting new policies and procedures in place to support change. One study estimates that 80-90% of people-dependent innovations in business stop at paper implementation.
- *Process implementation* means putting new *operating* procedures in place—e.g. conducting training workshops, providing supervision, and changing reporting forms. The activities related to an innovation are occurring, events are being counted, and innovation-related languages are adopted. Fixsen et. al (2005) note, however, that not much of what goes on is necessarily functionally related to the new practice. For example, training might consist of merely didactic orientation

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<sup>2</sup> Fixsen, D., Naoom, S., Blase, K., Friedman, R., and Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature*. University of South Florida.

the new practice or program, supervision might be unrelated to and uninformed by what was taught in training, information might be collected and stored without affecting decision making, and the terms used in the new language may be devoid of *real* meaning and impact. In business, this form of implementation has been called the “Fallacy of Programmatic Change.”

- *Performance implementation* means putting procedures and processes in place in such a way that the identified components of change are used with good effect, in this case, for students.

The goal, of course, is to implement improvement at the performance level. Though there are some exceptions, for the most part the district appears to be at the “paper” stage of implementation. A number of programs have been introduced, and yet there appears to be very little planning or follow through. As a result, there is varying quality in the district’s programs across schools and a lack of impact on students. Additionally, many staff in the system report feeling overwhelmed by the pace and magnitude of change. Ulysses needs to define an instructionally oriented theory of change and then develop, implement, and monitor policies, systems, and practices that support that theory.<sup>3</sup>

Many of the findings throughout this report are related to the need to develop and fully implement an instructionally focused theory of change. Several important examples from the standpoint of leadership include the following:

- The district has designated building principals as instructional leaders of their buildings. Research is clear that the building principal’s leadership is critical in establishing a positive learning climate in a school and in improving student achievement. The building principals in Ulysses express a desire and willingness to fulfill this role. That said, there is a lack of clear understanding in the district as to what an instructional leader is. Further, it appears that principals are rarely treated as if they are expected to serve as instructional leaders. In addition, principals have received little training and support from the district to meet this expectation.
- The district has attempted to organize the schools into professional learning committees (PLCs). This is a promising practice and should be continued and strengthened. PLCs allow teachers to meet on a consistent basis to discuss student progress, curriculum issues, and teaching practices. However, district leadership has not yet clarified what PLCs are, how they are to operate, or what expectations should guide them.

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of theory of change and the need to focus on the instructional core, see City, E., Elmore, R., Fiarman, S., and Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*. Harvard Education Press. Also, Childress, S., Elmore, R., Grossman, A., and King, C. (2007). *Note on the PELP Coherence Framework*. Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University.

- The district has also initiated the practice of classroom walk-throughs. Walk-throughs can be extremely valuable to a district and a school in helping to assess instructional practices and determine needed professional development. District leadership, however, has not yet defined, supported, or monitored the walk-throughs. Some teachers reported that principals visited their classrooms, while others said no one had visited. Teachers did not have a clear understanding of the purpose of the visits, and none reported any data being shared from the walk-throughs. At this time, the walk-throughs appear to be having little to no impact on instruction or professional development.
- The Board has committed to developing a much needed strategic plan for the district. The plan will be developed this spring with assistance from the Kansas School Board Association. Input from community members is being solicited and should play a vital role in developing the plan. Moreover, the plan should provide a roadmap for the district to follow for the next several years. It is critical, however, that the strategic planning process truly engage all district stakeholders and include buy-in from staff and community members. The plan should also include benchmarks for assessing progress toward goals and a schedule for reporting progress to the Board and community. The plan will only have the desired impact if it becomes a “living” document.
- The administrative team is small, which provides the opportunity for constructive collaboration. Importantly, building principals are part of the leadership team, which meets twice a month. District leadership, however, must work to build a cohesive, collaborative, respectful leadership team to carry out the district’s programs and plans. Currently, the twice-monthly leadership team meetings are generally not seen as productive, and principals are concerned about the amount of time they are out of their buildings for meetings. There is a feeling among some members of the leadership team that they have no real input into district decisions.
- Many staff members are beginning to recognize the importance of using data as a decision-making tool for improving instruction and increasing academic achievement, and much data are available to staff regarding students and their academic progress. While some staff members are meeting the district’s expectation to make data-driven decisions, some have not received adequate training or have chosen not to use it. If data use is a priority, district leadership needs to establish clear expectations and provide professional development to ensure that all are actively and effectively using data to shape instruction.
- Important strides have been taken to provide technology to the schools. The district has initiated a plan that provides technology to those teachers who request it, and technology use has increased in classrooms. Further, a technology committee has been established and is a key component to future planning and implementation of technology in classrooms. However, the current deployment and implementation of technology in classrooms appears inconsistent and limited

only to those teachers who wish to have it. While this practice increases the likelihood that technology will be used, district leadership must determine whether technology is so beneficial to student learning that all teachers will be expected to employ it. The issues of expectations, training, and accountability will need to be addressed if technology is going to become a part of teachers' instructional methods.

Other key findings in the area of leadership include the following:

- The Board of Education—which has a valuable mix of veteran and new members and a productive relationship with the superintendent—is focused on improving student outcomes and is committed to providing high-quality education to students. The Board meets annually to establish goals for the year. The goals for 2009-2010 are:
  - Keep the public well informed
  - Enhance and maintain quality programs
  - Recruit, retain, and retrain quality teachers
  - Develop a plan to ensure board, administration and staff are continually trained
  - Enhance and maintain school facilities.
- The district leadership has done a good job of financial planning. The mill levy continues to remain relatively low due to the high assessed valuation in the district. In spite of the recent significant cuts in school funding, the district has been able to maintain a sound financial footing. The district was able to provide teachers with a 2.5% salary increase, among the largest increases in the state, for the 2009-2010 school year.
- The district and the High Plains Cooperative appear to have a strong, positive relationship focused on “problem solving” with regard to serving students with disabilities.
- A Teacher Leadership Team has been established and offers great promise for the future. Distributed leadership is a key driver of improvement in any district, and this team provides leadership at the teacher level. The district should continue to foster this group of teachers and create ways to utilize their talents fully.
- The board and administration have emphasized low class sizes, but such a practice is expensive and can prohibit meeting other needs. For example, the district would benefit greatly from instructional coaches, but these positions are currently unaffordable.

## Empowering Culture

The needs assessment uncovered several strengths related to Ulysses culture:

- Community members in focus groups described Ulysses as a good place to live and raise their families. They recognize the importance of having a good school system.
- The district receives significant community support. Many examples were provided of volunteers working in and with schools on a variety of programs and projects. The district's Communities in Schools program plays an important role in establishing links between the community and the schools. The district also partners with the community recreation department to provide an afterschool program that serves over 200 youth. A summer program is also provided. Additionally, the district offers a senior interview day each year during which representatives from businesses come to the high school and conduct mock interviews with seniors to help prepare them for life after high school, and businesses provide about 25 internships to high school students. There were also numerous references to parent and community volunteer work at athletic events, school carnivals, and special occasions.
- The district has excellent facilities. This is due in large part to the community's willingness to pass bond issues that allow the building of new facilities or the upgrading of old. The district also makes facilities available to community members. An example is the opening of the high school's excellent gymnasium complex for residents to walk and exercise.
- Community members in focus groups expressed the perception that the district is doing a good job of educating most students and that the staff truly care about their students.
- Parents and community members appreciate the formal communication efforts of the district. The PowerSchool computer program received very high marks from everyone who used it. Parents in particular report that the program is very helpful and informative. The district's Web site and newsletters also were well received and appreciated.
- The Ulysses Career Learning Academy (UCLA) received many compliments for its work in helping students who struggle in the traditional school setting. This program was given credit for keeping many students in school and saving them from dropping out.

- The diversity of the community, with its almost equal White and Hispanic populations, is seen as a strength in the district. Students in focus groups reported that they relate well to each other and that there is little racial tension.

Despite these strengths, however, Ulysses faces a number of challenges connected to culture, some of which are related directly to the pace and scope of change in the district and to the need to fully implement a coherent approach to improvement:

- There is a perception among staff, parents, and students that the students are not being exposed to a challenging curriculum that prepares them for college or careers. There is also a concern that high-performing students are not being challenged, as the district works hard to bring its lower performing students up to “proficiency” on state exams in order to make adequate yearly progress. The district has no advanced placement (AP) classes, and students expressed a desire to have them while acknowledging that small numbers of students may prevent AP courses from being a viable option.
- When discussing the issue of challenging courses for students with focus groups, there appeared to be a feeling of low expectations for some Hispanic and poor students. While everyone expressed the desire to have all students succeed, it was apparent that there was a feeling that not all students needed to be exposed to a challenging curriculum, because they would be going right from high school to some type of work.
- There is also a concern among some staff, community members, and students that athletics, particularly football, are being emphasized to the detriment of other programs, especially the fine arts. Everyone is very proud of the accomplishments of the Ulysses athletic programs, and no one expressed a desire to see the programs downgraded because they mean so much to the community. There is concern about the fine arts programs, however, especially music—that the quality was not at the level it had been at in prior years. Focus group participants also expressed concern about some athletes in the high school receiving special privileges from educators.
- Staff indicated that there are low morale issues in the schools. Much of this was attributed to the many demands currently being made of staff regarding new programs, and a lack of clarity on roles and expectations.
- While student diversity is seen as a strength in the district, the lack of staff diversity is a challenge that the district continues to try to address. Though the student population is approximately 58% Hispanic, there are few Hispanic professional staff members. In the long run, the district’s new “grow-your-own” program may provide a good avenue to address this issue.

## Human Capital

Ulysses displays several strengths related to human capital:

- The district appears to have a qualified staff with the great majority meeting the requirements of “highly qualified.”
- The district has a comprehensive recruiting and hiring process, enabling applicants to apply online. The district also uses the Kansas statewide system for posting vacancies and contacting candidates. In turn, candidates can use the system to contact the district to gain more information or to apply.
- Principals are able to choose their own teaching staff. This is extremely important in building a cohesive, effective team in a school.
- The district has a good salary and benefits package for its employees, one that is very favorable to comparable districts in Kansas. The district was able to give professional staff a 2.5% salary increase for this school year, despite significant funding cuts from the state.
- The district has established new evaluation procedures for teachers and administrators. Focus groups expressed respect for the Employee Evaluation System, which was collaboratively developed with district representatives. The system uses Charlotte Danielson’s four domains<sup>4</sup> as the framework for the performance evaluation rubric, which focus group participants felt contributed to broad-based acceptance of the evaluation tool as an “objective measure.”
- The Teacher Leader Team (which includes 18 members) is newly formed within the last 18 months and charged with the responsibility of building a cadre of teacher leaders. This team is composed of staff members from each school.

Along with these strengths, the district also faces two key human capital challenges:

- Like other improvement efforts, the evaluation process must be fully implemented in order to become an integral part of the district’s professional improvement practices. It must also serve as a critical element in the district’s accountability procedures. The district must work to create an environment of “pressure and support,” in which leadership sets expectations, provides needed support to allow all staff to grow and develop, and holds staff accountable for carrying out responsibilities.
- One of the greatest challenges facing the Ulysses district is the ability to attract, hire, and retain a high-quality teaching and administrative staff. The location of

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<sup>4</sup> Danielson, C. (2007). *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. ASCD.

the district is seen as both a strength and a weakness in this effort—there are people who are looking for communities with the values and assets of Ulysses, but the district is finding that the remoteness of the community can also be a detriment to attracting staff. This issue is one facing most if not all of the districts in the rural areas of the state, especially the western sector. A new grow-your-own program may offer some relief to this problem, but it will be several years before the program has any significant impact.

## **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 Ulysses’ 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***

Major findings related to curriculum include the following:

- District staff and focus group representatives describe the written core curriculum as aligned with the state standards and collaboratively developed for all grade levels.
- Some work has been initiated to start the conversation about vertical alignment of curriculum from grade-to-grade and between schools. The district has also evaluated the curriculum with three questions in mind: 1) what curriculum is essential; 2) where are there opportunities to enhance the curriculum; and 3) what portions of the curriculum should be abandoned? There appears, however, to have been little follow-up to this initial work. This is problematic since students who attend all 13 years of school in Ulysses will move between four different schools, and there is a lack of coordination between the schools around the delivery of curriculum.
- Technology is becoming an embedded part of various curricular areas in the district. As noted in the Leadership section, if implemented coherently to aid instruction, technology can serve as a valuable tool for delivering curriculum.

- Student Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) provide a structure to ensure that each student’s learning needs are being met. When fully developed and universally applied, the ILP structure has important ramifications for curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development.
- There is consistency in the math curriculum at the elementary level due to the implementation of Everyday Math. Everyday Math, however, is not universally supported by teaching staff at every grade level.
- The reading curriculum at the primary level appears to be well articulated and implemented. Identifying the focus of reading instruction in the intermediate grades, however, was difficult. Representatives from the special education cooperative, who have also worked to support reading at this level, reported a lack of clarity in regard to the intermediate reading curriculum as well. Part of the challenge may be related to the fact that the fifth grade was previously departmentalized with very few individuals teaching reading; now all fifth grade teachers are expected to work with the reading curriculum and teach reading within their own classrooms.
- The district receives good support from the special education cooperative. Because the cooperative and the district have a solid partnership, there is continuity in delivering the curriculum to students.

## **Assessment**

Overall, the Ulysses assessment system appears to be producing a variety of usable data for the district as a whole, as well as for individual classroom teachers. Teachers should be able to use data to make instructional decisions for their students. Teachers in focus groups, however, consistently stated that there was not enough time to meet with colleagues, interpret data, and use data effectively.

Major findings in the area of assessment include the following:

- Multiple assessments are administered to provide meaningful feedback on student learning for instructional purposes. For example, the district administers MAPS (Measures of Academic Progress) formative “readiness” assessments of student learning three times a year for students in grades 3-11. In addition to MAPS, teachers have developed formative tests to accompany the Compass Learning System for grades K-12. Moreover, teachers are responsible for ensuring that every student has an Individualized Learning Plan.
- On the other hand, there are challenges with the formative assessment system in Ulysses. For example, teachers reported difficulty in accessing the MAPS data. In addition, there is no district-wide math assessment in primary classrooms. As a result, teachers use whatever they deem appropriate to assess the progress of their students, preventing schools and the district from analyzing data effectively to

support instructional improvement. Finally, without providing staff with the time and “know-how” to manage and use data to inform instruction, the data collected from assessments will have little impact on teaching and learning, thus limiting the potential of a good assessment program in the district.

- School and district leaders coordinate the implementation of the state required assessment tests. Teachers, parents, and students have access to PowerSchool, the district’s student information system, in order to retrieve certain kinds of longitudinal data.
- Another form of “assessment” that is providing information to classroom teachers and the district as a whole—one that holds great promise for enhancing family and parent engagement—is the practice of home visits. Teachers are being trained on how to conduct an effective home visit. In the beginning of the program, a small number of individuals were trained. More teachers would like to be trained. The results of the visits are starting to demonstrate more involvement by families that received home visits from school personnel.

## ***Instruction***

Table 1 presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 68%) and principals (response rate 71%) administered online by Cross & Jofus. 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, principals 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 by 100% of principals as strongly evident and 0% as not evident or minimally evident)
- using data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development (cited as strongly evident by 80% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 0%)
- 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 60% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 0%)
- delivering subject matter to students at an appropriately rigorous level (cited as strongly evident by 60% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 0%)
- facilitating, monitoring, and guiding the continuous improvement of instruction (cited as strongly evident by 60% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 0%)

- administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers (cited as strongly evident by 60% principals and as minimally evident or not evident by 0%).

The sound instructional strategy that *principals* indicated was *least evident* was:

- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited by 20% of principals as strongly evident and by 40% as minimally evident or not evident).

Principals were *evenly divided* on three strategies:

- 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 20% of principals as strongly evident and by 20% as minimally evident or not evident)
- identifying students who are struggling to master content and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction (cited by 20% of principals as strongly evident and by 20% as minimally evident or not evident)
- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities (cited by 20% of principals as strongly evident and by 20% as minimally evident or not evident).

In general, teachers' views are not significantly different from principals'. On the whole, however, teachers are less optimistic about the use of sound instructional practices. The sound instructional strategies that *teachers* believe are most *strongly evident* in their schools include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 76% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 4%)
- 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 51% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 5%)
- 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 49% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 8%)
- using data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development (cited as strongly evident by 49% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 13%).

Interestingly, teachers were fairly divided on the prevalence of sound instructional strategies. Below are just a few examples:

- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited by 23% of teachers as strongly evident and by 36% as minimally evident or not evident)
- providing adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions to support teacher and administrator learning (cited by 20% of teachers as strongly evident and by 31% as minimally evident or not evident)
- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities (cited by 24% of teachers as strongly evident and by 31% as minimally evident or not evident).

**Table 1. Extent to Which Principals and Teachers Believe that Sound Instructional Strategies Are Present in Their Schools**

Please rate the extent to which you believe the following instructional practices are evident in your school.	Principals		Teachers	
	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^
Educators create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments.	100%	0%	76%	4%
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development.	80%	0%	49%	13%
Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.	60%	0%	49%	8%
Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level.	60%	0%	35%	7%
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction.	60%	0%	28%	33%
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	60%	0%	28%	36%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.	40%	0%	43%	6%
Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well being.	40%	0%	25%	17%
The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning.	40%	0%	20%	25%

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 collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	40%	20%	34%	21%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students.	40%	20%	30%	18%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	40%	20%	31%	32%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning.	40%	20%	21%	26%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning.	40%	20%	20%	31%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment.	20%	0%	43%	23%
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.	20%	20%	51%	5%
Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction.	20%	20%	42%	15%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.	20%	20%	24%	31%
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	20%	40%	23%	36%

Teacher Response Rate = 96/142

Principal Response Rate = 5/7

Source: Cross & Jofthus survey of Ulysses principals and teachers October 2009.

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

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

Survey responses only tell part of the story. Classroom observations, reviews of assessment data, and conversations with focus group participants suggest several instructional strengths in Ulysses:

- One indicator of effective instructional practices is the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the Kansas State Assessment. Spring 2009 data indicate that 79.9% of Ulysses students were proficient in reading and 79.4% were proficient in math. Generally, this represents an increase at all grade levels from the previous year, with the exception of math scores at the middle school level—math scores in 2007 and 2008 for middle school were 79.4% and 75.4 % respectively.
- During observations of 43 classrooms in Ulysses 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, at all levels, the majority of students were actively involved in learning, and 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.)
- There are processes in place for the early identification and determination of appropriate support for low-performing students. At the start of each school year, schools are responsible for ensuring that each student either has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students with disabilities, or an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) for all other students. Contained within the ILP is an At-Risk Screening Intervention form, which identifies specific support each student would benefit from receiving. Following identification of needed supports based upon achievement scores, grades, attendance, behavioral concerns, socio-economic issues, English language learning needs, and/or teacher referrals, students are provided the following types of support in addition to in-class “tiered” learning experiences:
  - Academic support activities provided as part of after-school activities
  - Communities in Schools program offerings such as Tools-4-School, Book Buddies, Career Fair, Reality Check, Youth Friends, and Job Interview Day for Senior High School Students
  - Parent/Teacher building activities involving home visits. Last year, 18 teachers were trained to conduct both porch and home visits. The impact of this program was evident when 100% of parents/families who received a home visit attended open houses. The goal is to train all teachers, in order to build a stronger base of support for students—a base that connects schools and families. Ulysses should look at the possibility of using the initial 18 teachers to mentor and provide support for future colleagues, so

that others may benefit from the successes of those initially involved in the program.

Significant challenges remain, however:

- All focus groups agreed that Ulysses would benefit from fully implementing systematic procedures to conduct classroom observations, provide substantive feedback to teachers, and use observation data to inform a professional development program that identifies research-based instructional practices needed to accelerate student learning.
- PALSS observations identified the need to increase the following teaching practices, which were “minimally evident” in 50% or less of the classrooms visited (see Appendix for specific percentages related to these and other strategies):
  - Designing lessons based upon data from formal and informal assessments
  - 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.

“We share the same goal—we are just NOT all on the same page for determining how to get there.” –*Ulysses Teacher*

- There was agreement among all focus groups that in order to address the Kansas State Department of Education’s expectation that “teachers incorporate the use of technology,” teachers need additional training. Even though over 80% of the teachers were trained after being given technological equipment (including LCDs, document cameras, etc.),

additional support is needed for teachers to build their skills and confidence in using technology to support student learning. Based upon focus groups and visits to 43 classrooms, teachers could benefit from additional support in using technology.

- Principals and administrators identified the need to develop a district-wide homework policy. It was suggested that forming a representative group to develop such a policy would result in broad-based support and full implementation. Given the research that supports the value of homework being used appropriately to produce gains in student achievement, both central office staff and the middle

school principal suggested expanding the current framework for addressing homework by using Cathy Vatterott's *Rethinking Homework*.<sup>5</sup>

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Ulysses has several professional development strengths:

- The district provides access to many opportunities for teachers to participate in conferences outside of Ulysses and to take college courses.
- Ulysses is currently working on a system-wide plan for using MTSS as the “umbrella” for all professional development. The goal is to promote the universality the MTSS approach, and the umbrella will include contributing practices that support the MTSS model: differentiated instruction, Thinking Maps, and Individual Learning Plans.
- The district identified and trained 18 Teacher Leadership Team members to build support at each school site for advancing more “successful teaching and learning.”
- Special education teachers report that they participate fully in all district professional development, a practice strongly supported by the administration of the High Plains Cooperative.

Many of the challenges related to professional development are also connected the need for the district to fully implement a coherent approach to improvement.

- While professional development is seen as a priority in the district, and there are many opportunities for staff to participate in activities, there is a lack of focus in the district's planning of professional development.
- All focus group participants unanimously agreed that professional development sessions need to have systematic follow-up procedures—regarding opportunities to receive feedback during regularly scheduled classroom visits, guidance as to how teachers are expected to use what is presented, and what collegial conversations are expected. These procedures should build on the follow-up practice initiated by Assistant Superintendent Bonnie Deiter at the October 23, 2009 differentiated learning training. Educators were given explicit guidelines and responsibility for using their professional development practice within a week after the training, and in follow-up to the training they were expected to provide feedback to Ms. Deiter on their implementation efforts.

“What we need is ‘professional development curriculum alignment’—there is no connection between all the unrelated topics presented to us.” –  
*Focus Group Teacher*

<sup>5</sup> Vatterott, C. (2009). *Rethinking Homework: Best Practices that Support Diverse Needs*. ASCD.

- Focus groups of teachers and administrators felt that the selection of professional development topics is arbitrary and needs to be explicitly linked to practices that research validates predictably result in the continuous improvement of student achievement.
- Currently, professional development sessions are evaluated based upon anecdotal and informal feedback from teachers and administrators. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of all professional development experiences with consistent criteria, the standards from the National Staff Development Council could be used.
- Focus-group respondents agreed that additional on-site/job-embedded support is needed for teachers to implement professional development practices with fidelity and to receive continuous feedback using a systematic classroom observation protocol. Redirection of federal Title II and state At-Risk funds could be used to provide consistent and systematic support from either the 18 Teachers Leaders or additional literacy and math coaches at each school site.
- All focus groups agreed that the lack of sufficient time to meet regularly with colleagues in professional learning communities is the greatest handicap to improving instruction. According to the professional development calendar, one hour a month and three days a year are set aside for professional development. However, this does not reflect the other professional development opportunities held within and outside the district for individual teachers and departments.

“Our biggest frustration as teachers is that there is NOT enough time for us to work together in grade levels on a continuous basis to look at the results from student work and collaborate on how to improve instruction.”—  
*Teacher*

- To provide adequate time for teachers to work collaboratively on developing lessons based on analysis of student achievement data, focus groups of teachers and principals suggested that the district continue to promote teacher participation in Summer Academies. This added time would enable teachers to work together to improve instruction—to more systematically implement strategies designed to produce gains in student achievement.

- There is significant variability in the functioning of Student Improvement Teams (SITs) at each school.

### 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 and to design that technical assistance in a way that will have the greatest impact on the district’s school quality and student achievement. Based on this needs assessment, Cross & Joftus, LLC recommends that the

technical assistance provided to Ulysses address one or more of the following general recommendations:

- 1) Complete the strategic planning process in a way that ensures staff and community engagement and buy-in from all stakeholders. Ensure that the strategic plan includes agreed-upon benchmarks for success.
- 2) As part of the strategic planning process, develop a coherent framework to support and ensure improvement in curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development. This framework should:
  - Identify and fully implement priorities—including data-based decision-making—with the assistance of teachers and principals. Reform efforts that cannot be fully supported through comprehensive professional development and monitoring should be put on hold. Priorities should be communicated widely to all stakeholders.
  - Continue to centralize key elements such as professional development, curriculum, effective instructional practices, and data and technology use.
  - Systematize PLCs and classroom observations as catalysts for implementing research-based effective educational practices by:
    - creating structured time for teachers and administrators to work together
    - 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.
  - Use systematic procedures to ensure vertical communication related to developing curricular alignment from elementary to middle and middle to high school, and to evaluate the impact of curriculum on a continuous basis.
  - Continue to develop a comprehensive data system to link assessment data and track student performance over time, and develop procedures to ensure data-based decision making on all district initiatives.
  - Support implementation of effective instructional practices by funding literacy and mathematics coaches to work in all schools.
  - Develop a district-wide homework plan/policy and procedures for monitoring and evaluating teachers' use of homework.

- Determine the district's expectations regarding technology and data use to improve student achievement, and clarify with staff the expectations and plan to provide full support for implementation.
  - Continue to emphasize the role of principal as instructional leader. Clarify the district's expectations of principals in that role and provide the necessary support to enable them to meet expectations.
- 3) Seek to establish an atmosphere of collaboration, mutual trust, and respect among leadership team members. Team meetings should be reviewed and discussed by the team in order to make future meetings more productive and valued. The roles of the non-instructional directors in these meetings should be discussed and determined.
  - 4) Redirect federal and/or state funds to hire instructional coaches to assist in the implementation of programs and professional development.
  - 5) Strengthen the PowerSchool program by establishing expectations for teachers inputting student grades in a timely and consistent manner.
  - 6) To promote rigor and high expectations for all students, consider adding AP or IB programs to the high school and/or making use of virtual schools to expand academic options for students. Ensure that all students (including Hispanic and poor students) are exposed to rigorous coursework and expected to achieve at high levels. Virtual schooling can also be used to address the challenge of recruiting and retaining high-quality staff.
  - 7) To increase parent engagement, and to bridge cultural and racial differences, build upon and expand the home visits program.
  - 8) Implement fully the evaluation systems for administrators and teachers with proper training of evaluators and evaluatees. The evaluations should be a tool for focusing on improvement and accountability.

Once district leadership has had an opportunity to review this report, a representative from Cross & Joftus will contact the Ulysses Unified superintendent to finalize a technical assistance plan that includes 24 days of external support for the time period January through September of 2010. 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.

**APPENDIX**  
**Findings from Classroom Observations**  
**ULYSSES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT**

Using the K-PALSS (Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success) process, Cross & Jofus staff in collaboration with representatives from the Kansas State Department of Education and 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 below 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.

**Elementary Schools (14 Classrooms)**

<b>OBSERVED PRACTICES</b> <b>+</b>	<b>TEACHING</b>	<b>PD RECOMMENDATIONS</b> <b>Δ</b>	
<b>Learning Environment</b>			
100% Orderly/Clean/Well-Managed 100% Safe/Conductive to Learning 21% Evidence of Learning/Displays student work			Support for high expectations for learning needs to be more visible in the classroom.
<b>Instructional Design</b>			
43% Standards-based lesson 7% Data-based instruction is explicit 50% Modeling 86% Checking understanding  21% Guided Practice 29% Independent Practice 7% Teacher/Student Evaluation/Summary		Using formal and informal assessments of standards to drive instruction should be a priority in lesson development. Use of guided and independent practice needs to increase to support students' successful demonstration of learning. Formal and informal evaluations by both teachers and students should be used to improve instruction.	
<b>Strategies Used</b>			
Adjust for multiple learning styles: 64% visual 79% auditory 29% kinesthetic 0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 0% Address diverse language needs 7% Identify similarities & differences 7% Summarize & take notes 57% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 7% Use homework & practice opportunities  21% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 36% Organize learning in groups 29% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 0% Generate & test hypotheses 14% Use cues, questions & advance organizers		Adjustments for kinesthetic learning styles need to be included in classroom instruction.  A larger repertoire of instructional strategies is necessary to provide educators with the skills for differentiating teaching to address culturally responsive teaching and diverse language/learning styles.  More emphasis should be made on identifying similarities and differences, summarizing and taking notes, effectively using homework & practice opportunities, and generating & testing hypotheses. Additional professional development in the form of coaching, mentoring, and guiding the practice of teachers as they demonstrate Marzano's nine instructional strategies would strengthen implementation.	

**Elementary Schools (14 Classrooms)**

<b>OBSERVED PRACTICES</b> <b>+</b>	<b>LEARNING</b>	<b>PD RECOMMENDATIONS</b> <b>Δ</b>	
<b>Cognitive Level</b>			
57% Knowledge 21% Comprehension 7% Application 14% Analysis 0% Synthesis 0% Evaluation			Need to provide instruction and opportunities for students to practice higher-level thinking skills.
<b>Environment/Resources</b>			
14% Textbooks 29% Supplemental materials 14% Manipulatives 7% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity  43% Worksheets: Open-ended/Fill-in/Multiple choice			Student use of textbooks, technology, and manipulatives should be increased to address diverse learning needs; the use of resources needs to be extended beyond worksheets.
<b>Interactive Behaviors</b>			
64% Active involvement in classwork 86% Asks/answers questions 7% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)		Students need to be provided opportunities for self-evaluation and reflection and take responsibility for their future learning.	
<b>Strategies Demonstrated</b>			
0% Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways: 29% interpersonal 7% intrapersonal 64% verbal-linguistic 36% logistical-mathematical 29% visual-spatial 21% bodily-kinesthetic 14% musical-rhythmic		Students need to be able to demonstrate their learning using a variety of multiple intelligences, especially those that were not evident in at least 50% of the classes visited.	

**Middle Schools (14 Classrooms)**

<b>OBSERVED PRACTICES</b> <b>+</b>	<b>TEACHING</b>	<b>PD RECOMMENDATIONS</b> <b>Δ</b>
<p align="center"><b>Learning Environment</b></p> <p>100% Orderly/Clean/Well-Managed 100% Safe/Conductive to Learning 86% Evidence of Learning/Displays student work</p> <p align="center"><b>Instructional Design</b></p> <p>0% Standards-based lesson</p> <p>7% Data-based instruction is explicit 36% Modeling 64% Checking understanding 43% Guided Practice 43% Independent Practice</p> <p>14% Teacher/Student Evaluation/Summary</p> <p align="center"><b>Strategies Used</b></p> <p>Adjust for multiple learning styles: 86% visual 79% auditory 36% kinesthetic</p> <p>0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 36% Address diverse language needs 14% Identify similarities &amp; differences 14% Summarize &amp; take notes 57% Reinforce efforts &amp; provide recognition 57% Use homework &amp; practice opportunities 14% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 29% Organize learning in groups 29% Set objectives &amp; provide immediate/continuous feedback 0% Generate &amp; test hypotheses 29% Use cues, questions &amp; advance organizers</p>		

**Middle School (14 Classrooms)**

<b>OBSERVED PRACTICES</b> <b>+</b>	<b>LEARNING</b>	<b>PD RECOMMENDATIONS</b> <b>Δ</b>	
<b>Cognitive Level</b>			
14% Knowledge 36% Comprehension 43% Application 0% Analysis 0% Synthesis 0% Evaluation			Need to provide instruction and opportunities for students to practice higher-level thinking skills.
<b>Environment/Resources</b>			
29% Textbooks 71% Supplemental materials 0% Manipulatives 43% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 21% Worksheets: Open-ended/Fill-in/Multiple choice			Student use of manipulatives and technology should be increased to address diverse learning needs; the use of resources needs to be extended beyond worksheets.
<b>Interactive Behaviors</b>			
79% Active involvement in classwork 64% Asks/answers questions 50% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)		Students need to be provided opportunities for self-evaluation and reflection and take responsibility for their future learning.	
<b>Strategies Demonstrated</b>			
Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways: 29% interpersonal 0% intrapersonal 50% verbal-linguistic 43% logistical-mathematical 50% visual-spatial 36% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic		Students need to be provided multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning using those practices evident in less than 50% of the classes visited.	

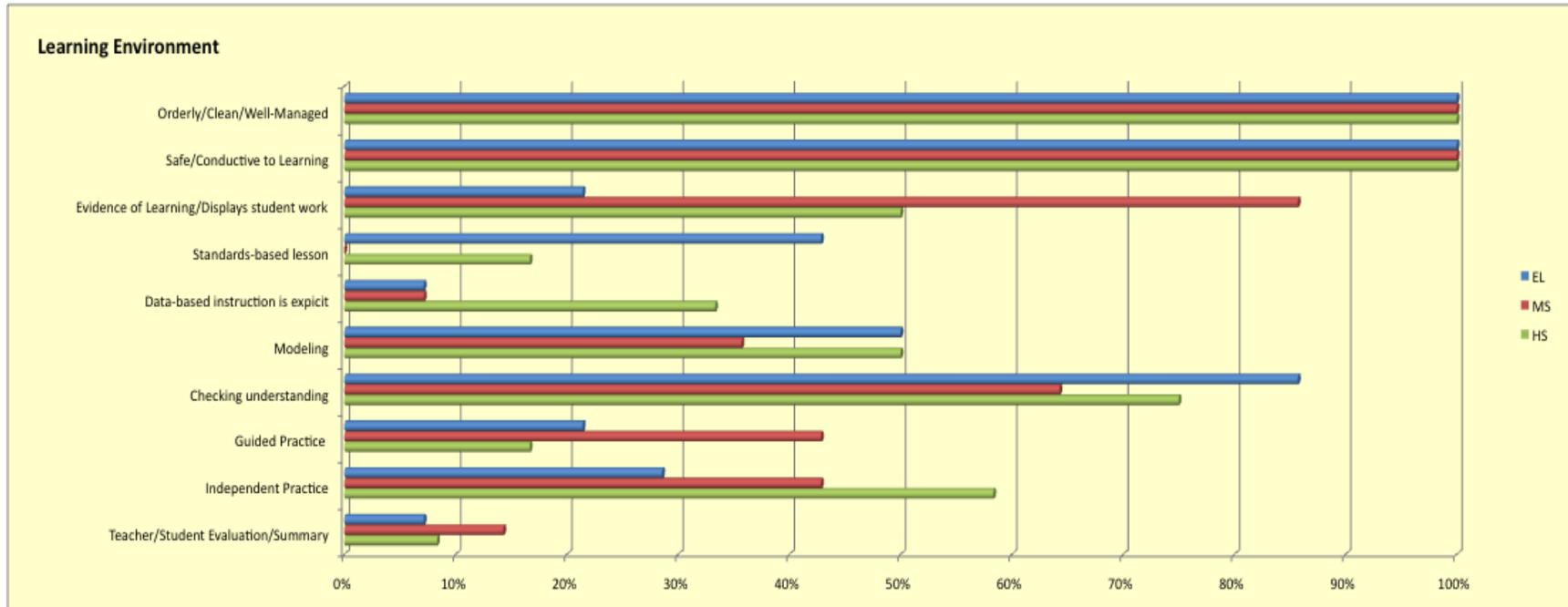
### High Schools (12 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +		PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
<p><b>Learning Environment</b></p> <p>100% Orderly/Clean/Well-Managed 100% Safe/Conductive to Learning 50% Evidence of Learning/Displays student work</p>	<b>TEACHING</b>	<p>Displaying student work with rubrics is needed to reinforce expectations for learning.</p>
<p><b>Instructional Design</b></p> <p>17% Standards-based lesson</p> <p>33% Data-based instruction is explicit 50% Modeling 75% Checking understanding 17% Guided Practice 58% Independent Practice 8% Teacher/Student Evaluation/Summary</p>		<p>Using formal and informal assessments of standards to drive instruction should be a priority in lesson development. Active engagement of students in the learning process would be strengthened by using inquiry-based, student-led learning and opportunities to guide practice during learning and prior to providing feedback during independent practice.</p>
<p><b>Strategies Used</b></p> <p>Adjust for multiple learning styles:</p> <p>83% visual 100% auditory 25% kinesthetic 0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 8% Address diverse language needs 25% Identify similarities &amp; differences 17% Summarize &amp; take notes 42% Reinforce efforts &amp; provide recognition 33% Use homework &amp; practice opportunities 0% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 25% Organize learning in groups 42% Set objectives &amp; provide immediate/continuous feedback 8% Generate &amp; test hypotheses 25% Use cues, questions &amp; advance organizers</p>		<p>A larger repertoire of instructional strategies is necessary to provide educators with skills to scaffold instruction for all tiers of learning, address culturally responsive teaching and diverse learning/language needs (e.g., using Marzano's nine effective research-based strategies).</p>

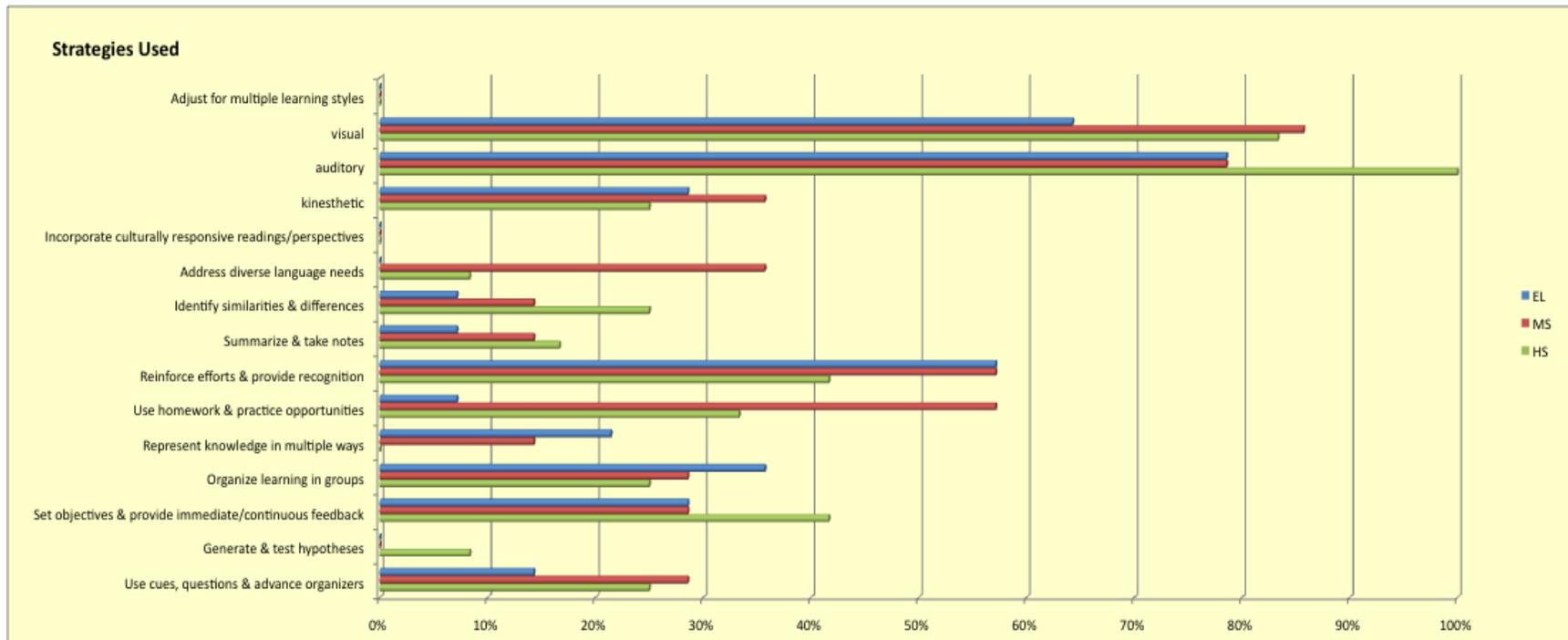
High Schools (12 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +		PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
<p><b>Cognitive Level</b></p> <p>25% Knowledge 33% Comprehension 33% Application 8% Analysis 0% Synthesis 0% Evaluation</p>	<b>LEARNING</b>	<p>Students need to be provided opportunities to demonstrate higher-level thinking skills.</p>
<p><b>Environment/Resources</b></p> <p>25% Textbooks 50% Supplemental materials 50% Manipulatives 33% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 42% Worksheets: Open-ended/Fill-in/Multiple choice</p>		<p>Student use of technology and materials that reflect diversity should be increased. Use of resources should be extended beyond worksheets.</p>
<p><b>Interactive Behaviors</b></p> <p>75% Active involvement in classwork 75% Asks/answers questions 25% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)</p>		<p>Students need to be provided opportunities for self-evaluation and reflection in order to take responsibility for their future learning.</p>
<p><b>Strategies Demonstrated</b></p> <p>Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways:</p> <p>17% interpersonal 0% intrapersonal 100% verbal-linguistic 42% logistical-mathematical 75% visual-spatial 33% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic</p>		<p>Students need to be able to demonstrate their knowledge using a variety of multiple intelligences by increasing the strategies that were evident in 50% or less of the classes visited.</p>

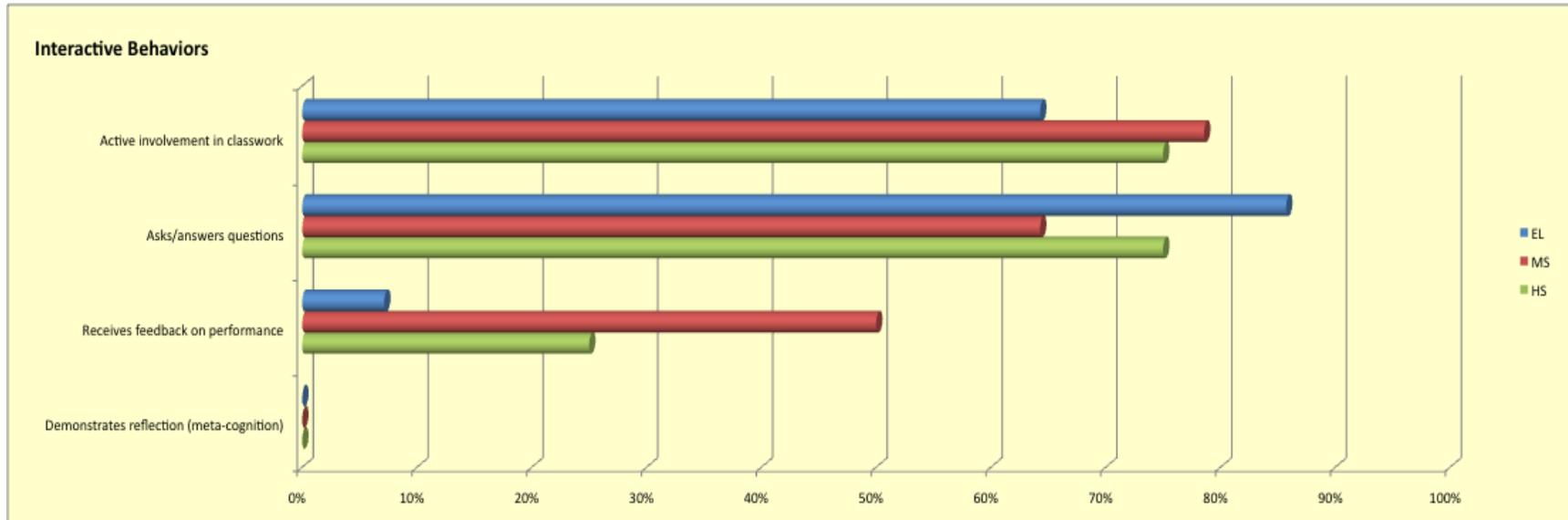
## TEACHING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN ULYSSES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT – USD 214



**TEACHING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN ULYSSES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT – USD 214 (continued)**



## LEARNING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN ULYSSES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT – USD 214



**LEARNING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN ULYSSES UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT – USD 214 (continued)**

