

Needs Analysis of Geary County Schools, USD 475

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 & Joftus, LLC to implement a model for working with KSDE and five Kansas districts—Garden City, Kansas City, Topeka, Turner, and Wichita—struggling to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP).

In 2009, this model, the Kansas Learning Network (KLN), was expanded to reach 12 more Kansas districts not making AYP, and subsequently in 2010, to reach 11 more, including USD 475, Geary County Schools. Since that time, one district has left the Network because it demonstrated AYP two consecutive years.¹ Seven additional districts demonstrated AYP in the area(s) identified for improvement, and they will continue to remain in the Network for at least one more year. It should be noted that USD 475 is not on improvement and chose to join the Network voluntarily to continue to improve.

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

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

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

The site visits conclude with a debriefing conducted by Cross & Joftus for the district’s leadership that includes a presentation of some preliminary findings. This report presents

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 475 occurred December 7-9, 2010.

all findings and represents the culmination of the needs assessment for Geary County Schools, USD 475 (referred to throughout the report as USD 475 or Geary County).

Student Demographics

The Geary County Unified School District is unique in that it encompasses a major military installation, Fort Riley, and provides preK-12 educational services to the children of Army personnel assigned to the base. More than 65% of the district's students are linked to the military, and more than 35% of the district's staff members are military spouses.

As a result, Geary County has a very diverse and highly mobile student population. Of the approximately 7500 students in the school system, 49.4% are identified as White, 20.3% as African American, 16.9% as Hispanic, and 13.4% as other.³

There are also significant numbers of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the district—more than 8% of students are identified as ELLs—and more than 30 languages are spoken in students' homes.

Approximately 13.2% of students are classified as students with disabilities, similar to the statewide average in Kansas.

Student Achievement

Overall, Geary County students have demonstrated high levels of student achievement in many areas. All students, as a group, have exceeded state achievement benchmarks in both reading and math for the past three years (for additional detail, see Table I below). In 2010, Geary County schools received 79 Kansas standards of excellence awards, and three schools earned challenge awards. Seven elementary schools have received National Blue Ribbon Schools' recognition from the US Department of Education, and four elementary schools were named National Distinguished Title I Schools.

Table I—Geary County—Summary Adequate Yearly Progress Data

Reading – Met AYP in 2008 and 2009; did not meet in 2010. Not yet on Improvement

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2008 - 72%	2009 - 76.7%	2010 - 81.3%
All students	Met (89.8%)	Met (88.7%)	Met (89.1%)
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (86.8%)	Met (86.2%)	Met (85.9%)
Students with Disabilities	Met (76.4%)	Met (76.5%)	No (74.3%)
ELL Students	Met (92.4%)	Met (81.7%)	Met (83.1%)
African-American Students	Met (83.8%)	Met (79.3%)	Met (83.2%)
Hispanic	Met (92.2%)	Met (88.7%)	Met (87.3%)
White	Met (91.2%)	Met (92.4%)	Met (91.3%)

³ Most recent district data available, September 2009.

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2008 - 72%	2009 - 76.7%	2010 - 81.3%
Asian & Pacific*	Met (97.8%)	Met (90.2%)	Met (92.9%)
American Indian or Alaskan*	N/A	N/A	Met (94.1%)
Multi-Ethnic/Multi-Racial*	Met (91.3%)	Met (90.1%)	Met (91.8%)

Mathematics – Met AYP in 2008, 2009, and 2010. Not on Improvement

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2008 - 64.6%	2009 - 70.5%	2010 - 76.4%
All students	Met (87.4%)	Met (88.6%)	Met (86.6%)
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (83.7%)	Met (85.4%)	Met (83%)
Students with Disabilities	Met (77.8%)	Met (77%)	Met (72.5%) ⁴
ELL Students	Met (92.9%)	Met (86.7%)	Met (86.3%)
African-American Students	Met (78.5%)	Met (80.3%)	Met (78%)
Hispanic	Met (92.2%)	Met (89.5%)	Met (86%)
White	Met (90.5%)	Met (91.5%)	Met (89.6%)
Asian & Pacific*	Met (96.7%)	Met (92.6%)	Met (94.1%)
American Indian or Alaskan*	N/A	N/A	Met (97.2%)
Multi-Ethnic/Multi-Racial*	Met (86.6%)	Met (90.4%)	Met (87.2%)

Graduation Rate: 2008 – 76.5%; 2009 – 87.7%; 2010 – 83.8%

Notes:

Data are from 2008, 2009, and 2010 Kansas AYP Reports for Geary County Schools. Footnotes are drawn directly from the state AYP reports as well.

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

Despite these accomplishments, however, USD 475 faces some achievement challenges. Students with disabilities did not meet reading benchmarks in 2010, and it appears that they may be struggling to meet mathematics benchmarks as well. The percentage of students meeting state assessment benchmarks declined in some areas last year as well, and this is cause for concern in the district. Moreover, Junction City Middle School has not made AYP and is on improvement. As a result, the school is working with a KLN Implementation Coach, Jim Lentz, who provides coaching support for explicitly for improvement efforts.

The Big Picture

USD 475 has a number of strengths. In addition to generally high levels of student achievement, the district enjoys considerable community support and has established partnerships with the military, Kansas State University, and various community groups, which provide extensive resources for students. Schools offer students safe and secure

⁴ The percent standard or above is below the target but above the criterion percent when the hypothesis test (at a 99% level of confidence) is applied.

learning environments, and curriculum and instructional programs are generally intentional and rigorous. There are also plentiful opportunities for teachers and administrators to experience professional learning and growth in the district.

To continue to improve, Geary County must draw on these strengths and others to address four key systemic challenges:

- 1) AYP and instructional challenges for students with disabilities, and a need to provide supports that will strengthen special education services within the district
- 1) High student and staff mobility rates, and other challenges connected to serving a military institution
- 2) A need to fully implement the new strategic plan, to articulate a clear theory of action in support of the plan, and to build systemic coherence across the school system
- 3) A need to fully implement aligned curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development to support student learning and achievement.

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 USD 475 are summarized below in the areas of Leadership; Empowering Culture and Human Capital; and Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction, and Professional Development.

Leadership

USD 475 displays a number of leadership strengths.

- The fact that Geary County schools encompass a military installation provides both opportunities and challenges to the district's leadership. Everyone interviewed in focus groups agreed that the opportunities far outweigh the challenges, however, and the leadership for both the district and the fort are to be commended for building positive communication and collaboration to the benefit of all the students in the Geary County district.
- Focus group conversations with parents and community members indicate that the community respects the board of education and the superintendent. The board appears to operate in an effective, efficient, and open manner and seeks input from stakeholders to assist in long range planning and decision-making. The board also includes a non-voting member from Fort Riley who provides valuable input from the fort. The board/superintendent relationship appears to be positive, and the board appreciates Superintendent Ron Walker's communication skills and relationship with the community.

- In August 2010, the board approved a new strategic plan for the next five years, which focuses on improving educational opportunities for all students in the district. The plan was developed by a committee and involved input from over 80 members of the community and the district.
- There is an understanding in the district that principals are to serve as the instructional leaders of their buildings. District leadership provides support to principals in this role, through the Curriculum and Instruction Department and professional development. The monthly principals' meeting is seen as a positive opportunity for principals to share learning and practices.
- There are multiple opportunities for teachers to assume leadership roles, including serving on committees focused on planning and implementation of professional development, curriculum, and technology. Teachers can also apply to be a part of the leadership training program offered in cooperation with Kansas State University.
- USD 475 has been aggressive in partnering with Kansas State University to support a number of initiatives in the district—including a National Science Foundation Grant at the high school, research on district ELL performance, and professional development at school sites.
- District leaders have developed good tools and programs for communicating with stakeholders. This has resulted in positive partnerships with key stakeholders in the community.

Geary County can draw on these strengths to address a number of challenges.

- While USD 475 has a new strategic plan in place, the district will need to address several concerns in order to implement the plan successfully. First, the plan appears to lack a clear theory of action to improve achievement for all students. The plan includes mission and vision statements, but these lack the specificity of a strong theory of action. Second, the district lacks systemic coherence. Coherence means that “the elements of a school district work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy,” or theory of action.⁵ The lack of coherence can be seen in several instances, i.e. the Special Education Department reports to the superintendent rather than the Curriculum and Instruction Department; there is a lack of systemic planning and support for professional development; there is an apparent lack of communication between technology and instructional staff; there appears to be a lack of direction regarding the role of instructional coaches in the district, as well. In order for the plan to be implemented successfully, USD 475

⁵ Childress, S., R. Elmore, A. Grossman, and Caroline King (2007). “Note on the PELP Coherence Framework.” Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University.

will need to articulate a clear theory of action and use the theory to build coherence across the district.

- Moreover, in order to make the strategic plan a “living document,” the district will need to implement a process and schedule for periodic review and progress reports on various components of the plan. Reports to the board by the superintendent should take place on a yearly basis, at a minimum, and should be part of a comprehensive reporting process made public to all stakeholders. Currently, the strategic plan includes a timeline for completion of objectives but does not identify who is responsible for accomplishing particular objectives.
- The district is in the process of determining where it wants to be in regard to a more centralized vs. a more school-based approach to management. While there is no right or wrong answer to this question, the district’s leadership needs to determine which programs it wants to centralize and which it wants to leave under school discretion. Many of the objectives in the strategic plan seem to call for a more centralized approach to ensuring full and consistent implementation across the district.
- There is a lack of structure and clarification regarding the role of principals as instructional leaders and the role of the instructional coaches. While administrators and teachers understand that principals are to be instructional leaders, they appear to lack a shared understanding of what this role entails and what is expected of principals in this role. Additionally, principals are left to determine what roles instructional coaches play. District leaders would like to see coaches provide support to teachers by helping them to develop and enhance effective instructional practices. In reality, however, it appears that some of the principals have coaches fulfilling this role, while others are using coaches as classroom tutors for students.
- Currently, USD 475 lacks a district-wide program for classroom observations, and there is little consistency across the district regarding classroom observations. Some principals are doing walkthroughs, but they are at the principal’s discretion, and the frequency and purpose of the walkthroughs seem to vary considerably. Teachers report that observations have little or no impact on their teaching and student achievement.
- The district has made great strides in terms of making technology available in the classroom, but teachers appear to lack training and support in how to use technology as an effective teaching and learning tool. In addition, both teachers and principals reported a need to have tools to allow them better access to student assessment data in order to make good decisions related to professional development and instructional practices.

- The district’s facilities are generally good but a growing student population, resulting from an increase in military personnel assigned to Ft. Riley, is creating overcrowded conditions in some schools.
- Administrative staff members we met with noted that monthly principals meetings are productive, but they do not feel the same about the monthly administrator council meetings. There is a strong feeling that these could be held less frequently or not at all, as most of the information can be distributed by email.

Empowering Culture and Human Capital

USD 475 can build on several strengths in the area of Empowering Culture and Human Capital.

- The district appears to provide a safe and secure learning environment for its students and staff. Focus group participants we met with also see the surrounding community as a good place to raise a family, and they often mentioned the wide range of outdoor activities as a real asset. The diversity of the community is seen as a plus as well—it gives students the opportunity to learn from, accept, and interact with other students from many different backgrounds.
- USD 475 has developed good community supports and built effective district-community partnerships. Stakeholders praised Superintendent Walters for his communication skills and strategies. The Community Coalition, for instance, is a district initiative that brings together community leaders to learn about district programs and needs and gives leaders the opportunity to engage in discussions with district leaders. We heard about a variety of other examples of community support and partnerships, as well—the community supported an important bond issue to upgrade district facilities; the programs at Spin City, a recreation center, are a result of a cooperative effort between the district and the city government; the Schools in Review week, a weeklong annual event, encourages the community to visit the schools; and the August backpack supplies program provides community-purchased supplies to needy students.

“The police, city, and district work together to solve problems with youth rather than arresting them.”

—Community member

preschool children. The Army has generously allowed non-military students to participate in these programs.

- USD 475 appears to communicate effectively with parents. The district’s Infinite Campus Internet portal received high compliments from parents and students. Teachers and principals we met with also saw the portal as an important tool for communicating with parents. The district’s Web site received generally good reviews as well
- Historically district leaders have had a good working relationship with the local National Education Association leadership. Superintendent Walters meets periodically with teachers to discuss district issues.

Geary County Schools also faces several challenges in the area of Empowering Culture and Human Capital.

- The high rate of student mobility continues to be a major challenge for the district. To its credit, the district has worked hard to create an atmosphere that helps alleviate the challenge for the parents and students. The issue remains a challenge, however, for teachers and principals.
- Despite all of the district’s positive programs and results, the Geary County school system appears to suffer from a historically lingering negative image in some parts of the community and outside the area. Military families we met with reported that they are advised to enroll their children in other area districts when they are assigned to Fort Riley. Local stakeholders in focus groups also noted that people looking to move into the area are advised not to move to Junction City. While respondents we met with noted that the public view of the district has improved considerably over the past decade, there is still concern about image problems. Ironically, military families we spoke with conveyed that they found a very positive educational setting in the district and know of families who have subsequently transferred to the district after enrolling in other districts. They also reported that the school district has a very positive image among Army leadership. The issue remains, however.
- While the district’s external communication efforts were generally viewed positively, focus group participants expressed concerns about internal communication between central office administration and building staff. Staff noted that it is sometimes difficult to get answers to questions, and that they are often referred to several different offices to get the information they need.

“When I need something from the district office, I get different answers from district administrators.”

—Principal

- Principals and teachers we met with do not see USD 475's current staff evaluation program as effective or having any impact on improving student achievement.
- For a district as diverse as the Geary County district, there is a significant shortage of minority staff members, particularly professional staff. While this is an issue facing school districts across the country, the district needs to continue to make recruitment and hiring of minority staff a key focus of its work.
- Moreover, given the amount of staff turnover in the district, and the continual need for special education and ESOL personnel, there appears to be considerable red tape involved in hiring new staff. The district would benefit from faster and more flexible hiring practices.

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 Geary County 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 and Assessment

USD 475 has some important curriculum and assessment strengths.

- The curriculum is generally rigorous, intentional, and aligned with state standards. The district uses the state standards as the curriculum, augmented by detailed pacing guides and other support materials. Textbooks are reviewed and adopted on a five-year cycle, using a rigorous process. The math curriculum, reviewed last year, will not be finalized until the state has fully implemented the new common core standards.
- A substantial three-year Honor Challenge grant by the Department of Defense Education Agency (DoDEA), implemented in 2009-2010, has supported the planning and implementation of strategies for MTSS (the Kansas Multi-Tiered System of Supports) for all three tiers, as well as professional development to support implementation. They are currently implementing MTSS at schools across the district, and a year-one evaluation of the program shows promising results.

- Through support from a variety of sources, USD 475 provides substantial early childhood and full-day kindergarten support for many children in the community.
- The high school provides Advance Placement (AP) Courses in calculus, statistics, language, and literature, and dual enrollment opportunities in collaboration with Cloud County Community College in intermediate and college algebra, college trigonometry, and college speech.
- The AVID (Advance Via Individual Determination) program is also available to eligible students in grades 8-12. This program, designed to encourage college going among students who may not otherwise attend college, provides rigorous coursework and support for reading and literacy skills. AVID is in second year at the high school, and in its first year in 8th grade. Currently, 108 students participate at the high school level, 28 at Junction City Middle School, and 24 at Fort Riley Middle School.
- English Language Learners (ELLs) are supported by newcomer classes and a growing cadre of ELL certified regular education teachers and bilingual aides, who work with students in Spanish, Tagalog, Korean, and German, with computer translations for other languages.
- Multiple evaluation and assessment strategies are used to continually modify instruction to meet student needs and support proficient student work. According to the assistant director of special education and the ELL coordinator, the district takes pride in its ability to get to know and assess new students quickly—especially ELLs and students with disabilities—given the high turnover of students and the fact that students speak 30 primary languages (other than English) at home.
- Data-based decision-making processes are used to integrate and sustain academic discussions on instruction, curriculum, and assessment. Indicator reports are assessed each year, and pacing guides are revised accordingly. Communications with parents also appear to be detailed. For example, the Grade Card Guide for 1st Grade provides explanations of a four-point scale used to assess each student in relation to each of 14 skills in reading and literature, 24 skills in math, and two skill areas in writing. The summer curriculum review process, during which four days are devoted to reviewing curriculum for math and language arts based on data, is also exemplary of the district's data-based decision-making approach.

Despite this generally strong picture, pockets of challenge exist in both the curriculum and assessment areas.

- Currently, students with disabilities are not meeting state assessment benchmarks. Several specific issues were uncovered in focus groups with special education teachers that may be affecting achievement for this group of students.

- According to teachers, Everyday Math is very confusing for some students with disabilities. A highly structured program that focuses on one way to solve problems, such as Saxon math, would likely work better for some students.
 - Some students with disabilities would likely have higher Kansas State Assessment scores if they were allowed to take paper-and-pencil, rather than computerized, tests.
 - Teachers need to carefully align teaching vocabulary with tested vocabulary. Currently teachers are not allowed to give synonyms during testing.
- “A student who transferred from another school had learned the word ‘times.’ When asked to ‘multiply’ two numbers on the state assessment test, he didn’t answer the question. [I later found out that] he did know how to ‘times’ the two numbers.”

– *Special education teacher*
- In the past, it appears that curriculum adoptions were sometimes made at administrators’ discretion. Since that time, district leaders have learned that they need to seek input from teachers, principals, and others, to ensure that the curriculum adoption process is a rigorous one and that new curricula will have buy-in and support.
 - Conversations with instructional coaches and principals indicate that the reading curriculum at the elementary level is not consistent across schools or within some schools. Three of the elementary schools use the Success for All (SFA) approach, and others use Houghton-Mifflin materials. This year, some of the Houghton-Mifflin schools have also begun using some SFA materials. In these schools, however, the SFA support is not equal to the support provided to SFA-only schools; they are not equivalent programs. This inequity in resources is frustrating to teachers and principals and may ultimately compromise the effectiveness of the SFA approach.
 - It appears that curriculum maps are currently developed school-by-school, not district-wide. Additionally, there is no district-wide place to store teacher resources. New teachers especially could save time producing supplementary materials for a lesson or even lesson plans for a unit, if teachers shared what they had in a “materials bank.”
 - We also heard from some teachers that scope and sequence guides are not necessarily keyed to materials, in fourth grade math for example, and that vertical articulation between grades five and six and grades eight and nine could be strengthened substantially as well.
 - Additionally, it appears that students, teachers, and principals are concerned about too much testing. Teacher and principal focus groups report that interim assessments are very frustrating for students. As participants put it, “the kids are burned out by testing.”

- Civic leaders we met with were extremely pleased with the small number of students they have had as interns. They also expressed concerns, however, about the district preparing for the many higher-level math and science jobs possibly coming to the area as part of the National Bio and Agro Defense Facility (NBAF) in Manhattan.
- Finally, focus group conversations indicate that student intervention teams (SIT) could be strengthened at the high school level. As teachers we spoke with noted, “although the SIT process works well at the elementary level, in grades 10-12, with 50 students on SIT plan and so many core teachers, there has been no time to coordinate implementation and the plans are really not being implemented.”

Instruction

Table II presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 55%) 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.

In general, while teachers were somewhat more optimistic than principals, principals’ and teachers’ views are largely consistent.

Principals and teachers identified a number of sound instructional strategies as strongly evident in schools. The sound instructional strategies that ***principals and teachers*** believe are most ***strongly evident*** in their schools include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 68% of principals and 72% of teachers, and as minimally or not evident by 0% of principals and 1% of teachers)
- identifying students who are struggling to master content and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction (cited as strongly evident by 55% of principals and 56% of teachers, and as minimally or not evident by 9% of principals and 9% of teachers)
- using data from class, school, district, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development (cited as strongly evident by 50% of principals and 55% of teachers, and as minimally or not evident by 9% of principals and 12% of teachers).

The sound instructional practices that ***both groups*** believe to be ***least evident*** include:

- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited as strongly evident by 14% of principals and 15% of teachers, and as minimally or not evident by 46% of principals and 33% 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 14% of principals and 23% of teachers, and as minimally or not evident by 37% of principals and 29% of teachers).

Table II—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.	68%	0%	72%	1%
Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction.	55%	9%	56%	9%
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, district, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development.	50%	9%	55%	12%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.	45%	9%	45%	6%
Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.	36%	9%	53%	5%
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.	36%	18%	51%	7%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to	36%	23%	19%	33%

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^
support teacher and administrator learning.				
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment.	32%	9%	50%	19%
Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	32%	14%	40%	15%
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	32%	14%	34%	23%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	32%	32%	34%	20%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning.	27%	19%	25%	31%
Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level.	23%	14%	41%	8%
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction.	18%	14%	35%	17%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students.	18%	18%	30%	14%
Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well being.	18%	19%	36%	11%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and	18%	55%	35%	22%

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^
identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.				
The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning.	14%	37%	23%	29%
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	14%	46%	15%	33%

Teacher Response Rate = 321/587

Principal Response Rate = 22/25

Source: Cross & Jofus survey of Geary County principals and teachers December 2010.

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

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

Survey results only tell part of the story. Classroom observations, reviews of assessment data, and conversations with focus group participants suggest some important instructional strengths in USD 475.

- One indicator of effective instructional practice is the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the Kansas State Assessment. All students, as a group, have exceeded state benchmarks in reading and math for the past three years, and many groups of students have well-exceeded benchmarks.
- Interviews and focus group conversations indicate that there is consistent collaboration between principals and district curriculum and instruction directors. There appears to be trust and respect between leadership at various levels, focused on the curriculum and instructional needs of the schools. The professional development presented by the directors for the principals appears to be top quality, and as principals noted, serves their "go-to" reference in the district.
- Based on Charlotte Danielson's research, the district's Critical Elements of Instruction document defines what good teaching should look like in all classrooms and provides an instructional model for the district. Given the amount of staff turnover in the district, the document, dated 2007, bears revisiting and discussing. It offers a concise description of what teachers should be doing to communicate with students, how to use questioning and discussion techniques, how to engage students in learning, how to use assessment in instruction, and how to demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness in instructional planning.

- This year, the district has embarked on a cross-curricular focus in reading and math for students with disabilities. This focus could prove to be very valuable for students.
- Findings from a Kansas State University (KSU) study of Geary County teachers who received ELL endorsement from KSU, indicate that the amount of time students spend with KSU ELL trained teachers in Geary County makes a difference in terms of concrete achievement gains for students. KSU has encouraged other districts to follow Geary County's ELL instructional model.
- During observations of 152 classrooms using the Cross & Jofthus protocol, PALSS (Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success), all levels of schooling demonstrated orderly and well-managed environments conducive to learning 99-100% of the time. Teachers and principals' survey responses are consistent with this finding as well.
- Several other sound instructional practices were also observed in classrooms visited:
 - Standards based lessons were communicated to students and students received explicit instruction/teacher input in 60% of observed classrooms.
 - Checking understanding to assess skills and guided practice under supervision were observed in 77% of classrooms visited.
 - Auditory and visual methods were used by teachers with students in over 90% of observed classrooms.
 - Students were engaged in the learning process in 93% of the observed classrooms.

To capitalize on these strengths, however, Geary County must also address several instructional challenges.

- Though the district's curriculum and instruction leaders provide effective support for principals and instructional coaches, principals in focus groups noted that teachers need more support. The district would benefit from having literacy and math coaches as well as tutors in all (not just Title I) schools. One principal also suggested using summer school funds to provide support for tutoring during the year.
- A number of instructional challenges are evident in the special education area.
 - Special education is supported through team teaching at the high school, and paraprofessionals are used in classes with fewer special education students. But high turnover, not enough co-planning time, and large caseloads all appear to be undercutting the provision of special education services there.
 - High caseloads are also a problem at the elementary level. According

to principals in focus groups, for example, the special education teacher at one elementary school is responsible for the IEPs of 26 students in addition to supervising 11 paraprofessionals.

- At the middle school level, the content area meetings are all at the same time, so that the special education teachers cannot get to all of them. At Fort Riley Middle School, teachers report that there is not enough co-planning time, and because of scheduling, paraprofessionals can only help in literacy, not math classes.
 - Special education teachers we met with noted that they have so many responsibilities that they don't get time to observe students included in regular classes, to see what modifications are needed.
- With more than 620 identified ELL students and over 30 languages spoken in district schools, students would benefit from exposure to culturally responsive readings and perspectives and additional support for language needs (see Appendix for detailed classroom observation data relating to this and other findings).
 - Classroom observations indicate that students would also benefit from identifying similarities/differences and summarizing and taking notes (see Appendix for detailed observation data). AVID has a focus on using the Cornell notes format to strengthen student learning skills. This approach could be expanded to other classroom environments as well.
 - Students would benefit from increased opportunities to use the technology rich environment available in most classrooms. In classroom observations, we saw evidence of teachers using technology but minimal evidence of students using technology (see Appendix).
 - Differentiated instruction through modifying content, process/activities, or assignments meets the needs of at-risk learners. In observations, we saw minimal evidence of modified content being used in classrooms (see Appendix).
 - Further, student opportunities to display learning using multiple intelligences (e.g., interpersonal; logistical-mathematical; visual-spatial; musical-rhythmic) were observed to be minimally evident as well (see Appendix).
 - Classroom observations also show that generally students are not being asked to think critically and/or at higher levels. Instruction at higher levels of thinking including application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation were observed in less than 50% of the classrooms visited. Teachers need to take instruction and activities to the next level, by engaging students in learning that requires them to explain, create, compare, evaluate, and judge.

Professional Development

“I’ve never been in a district that supports professional development as much as this one.”—*Principal*

There is clearly a culture of support for professional development (PD) in the Geary County schools, and the needs assessment uncovered a number of professional development strengths in the school system.

- The culture of professional development appears to have a long history in the district and is strongly supported by district administrators, especially in the curriculum and instruction department, as well as principals.
- Teachers who are new to the district receive significant training. USD 475 also sets aside a number of days in the calendar to support teachers’ transitions to the new district. Teachers receive support from principals and instructional coaches in the buildings, as well as administrators in the district office.
- Other significant professional development examples include:
 - The elementary schools hold elementary learning labs, which provide opportunities for groups of teachers in a school to meet together to plan instruction and look at student data. The instructional coaches play an important role in this. The district supports these meeting by providing substitute teachers to cover classrooms, while teachers are out for their learning labs. This essentially adds PD time to the calendar.
 - Similar PD time is accomplished at the secondary level through “focus meetings.” These meetings enable teachers who instruct classes within a curricular area to meet in the same way elementary teachers do in the learning labs.
 - A number of summer PD experiences are also available for teachers, like the Summer Literacy Institute for all teachers preK-12. The institute hosts 300 teachers during the summer for the purpose of professional development focused on literacy.
- In schools where Success for All is implemented on a school-wide basis, teachers participate in extensive PD to ensure appropriate implementation.

“I feel valued – I’m making a difference.”

“The best thing about this job [coaching] is seeing the teachers get excited.”

—*Instructional coaches*

- Instructional coaches play an essential role in supporting PD in Geary County. The challenge lies in how to get the most impact from this valuable resource.

To continue to deepen and enhance the culture of professional development in USD 475, the district must address some important challenges as well.

- Despite extensive support for PD in the district, we saw no evidence of a data-driven, long-range professional development plan that would help guide a district wide PD focus. A professional development plan could shape the district’s PD focus and limit topics being studied, learned, and practiced by the professional teaching staff. In turn, this would enable the district to go deeper with professional development and do in-depth coaching to support thorough implementation.

“We have good professional development. There is just not enough emphasis on implementation and coaching.”

—Principal

- Professional development is not linked to classroom observation data in a systematic way. Implementation of an agreed upon classroom observation protocol would enable the district to monitor instruction and provide support for research-based instructional practices that accelerate achievement.
- While instructional coaches play an essential role in some schools, the coaching function is not clearly defined and supported by the district. Some coaches are demonstrating lessons and providing feedback to teachers about their practices. Some are serving as tutors to students. Some coaches fill in as substitutes when needed and fulfill other administrative responsibilities, as well.
- Paraprofessionals provide a great deal of instruction to students with disabilities. Conversations with various focus group participants indicate that paraprofessionals do not have enough training to perform their responsibilities at the appropriate level. PD for paraprofessionals that includes time to plan together with special education teachers who supervise their work, and with regular education teachers in whose rooms they work, would be beneficial, as would time in PD sessions to learn needed strategies and skills.

III. Recommendations for Technical Assistance

One of the primary goals of this needs assessment is to identify areas in which the district could most benefit from technical assistance. Building on the district’s current capacities and strengths, technical support should help increase the quality of individual schools and the achievement of all their students.

At the outset of this report, four key systemic challenges were identified:

- 1) AYP and instructional challenges for students with disabilities, and a need to provide supports that will strengthen special education services within the district
- 2) High student and staff mobility rates and other challenges connected to serving a military institution
- 3) A need to fully implement the new strategic plan, to articulate a clear theory of action in support of the plan, and to build systemic coherence across the school system
- 4) A need to fully implement aligned curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development to support student learning and achievement.

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

- 1) Identify a strong theory of action that will bring coherence to district work and engender a focus on improving student achievement. The theory of action should be shared widely with district stakeholders.
- 2) Establish a progress monitoring and reporting system, so that the superintendent provides the board of education with regular reports on how the strategic plan is being implemented, and so that results are shared with stakeholders. The strategic plan should also identify persons responsible for meeting objectives.
- 3) Clarify the role of principal as instructional leader. Establish expectations and support for principals to fulfill this role successfully.
- 4) Clearly define the coaching function, so that instructional coaches provide professional development support for teachers; ensure that coaches do not play a quasi-administrative role, a tutor role, or a substitute teacher role. The district has made a commendable commitment to having coaches in all Title I schools. With appropriate clarity and focus, coaches can serve as essential levers for continued school and district improvement in all schools. Consider adding one or more instructional coaching positions at the high school.
- 5) As part of building a more coherent, district-wide effort that supports student achievement, fully implement aligned curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development. This process should include:
 - a. Implementation of an aligned curriculum across the district, with a focus on key transition points, and on building supports for successful curriculum implementation.
 - b. A review of student assessments to determine their fit and appropriateness, and to help alleviate student burnout. The system should include frequent, common assessments that explicitly relate to what has been taught. This tight alignment between curriculum and assessment will provide a common context for instructional planning among teachers.

- c. Review and renewal of the district's instructional model. This process should draw on an analysis of student achievement data and identify research-based instructional practices that will have the greatest impact on increasing achievement.
 - d. Development and implementation of common classroom observations and protocols to use classroom observation data to inform instruction and professional development.
 - e. Development and implementation of a professional development plan to guide professional development priorities across the district. Professional development priorities should be taught, supported, coached for, and consistent over time. The district should go deep with fewer priorities to achieve quality implementation. Professional development should also provide support for the effective use of technology as an instructional tool.
- 6) To address the learning and achievement challenges facing students with disabilities, take a number of steps to improve the delivery of special education services. This effort should include:
- a. Moving the Special Education Department within the Department of Curriculum and Instruction.
 - b. Providing professional development to regular education teachers, so that they understand the various needs of students with disabilities and how to meet needs.
 - c. Changing hiring policies/practices to enable central office directors, assistant directors, and coordinators to quickly hire qualified staff.
 - d. Identifying and resolving testing challenges (vocabulary, computerized testing) that lead to AYP assessments not reflecting actual skill level.
 - e. Using materials that address core curriculum standards but are appropriate for the learning needs of various students, particularly in math.
 - f. Adjusting special education teacher workloads so there is sufficient time for planning and co-teaching, for observing students with disabilities in regular classes to see if modifications in curriculum and instruction are needed, and for sharing information about what works.
 - g. The district should also consider hiring special education coaches to work with regular teachers and paraprofessionals.
- 7) Review and update the teacher evaluation program, so that it is relevant to improving teaching and learning. As a part of this process, establish a system to improve teacher observations. Provide professional development to ensure that the observations are consistent and of high quality.
- 8) Boost efforts to recruit and hire staff from underrepresented groups.
- 9) Review the purpose of the Administrator Council meetings and either discontinue them or schedule them no more than once each quarter.

- 10) Establish a coherent plan and expectations for communication between central office departments and building staff.

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

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

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

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

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