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# Needs Analysis of Bluestem School District, USD 205

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

# I. Introduction

## Background

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

In 2009 and 2010, this model, the Kansas Learning Network (KLN), was expanded to reach 23 additional Kansas districts struggling to demonstrate AYP. In 2011, 12 more districts joined the Network, including USD 205, Bluestem School District. Since 2008, four districts have left the Network because they demonstrated AYP for two consecutive years.<sup>1</sup>

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 analysis of participating districts, focused on their ability to foster and sustain a school improvement process. The needs analysis encompasses an analysis of student achievement and other data; surveys of teachers, principals, and district administrators; and two-day site visits<sup>2</sup> that include interviews and focus groups with students, parents, civic leaders, teachers, instructional coaches, principals, district administrators, and board members as well as classroom observations using a process designed by Cross & Jofus called the Focused Classroom Walkthrough process (part of Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success, or K-PALSS).

All needs analysis activities are designed both to identify strengths and challenges leading to recommendations for improvement and technical assistance, and to train school and state officials to do their own needs analyses and classroom observations in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> The site visit for Bluestem occurred October 11-12, 2011.

The site visits conclude with a debriefing conducted by Cross & Joftus for the district’s leadership that includes a presentation of some preliminary results. This report represents the culmination of the needs analysis for Bluestem School District, USD 205 (referred to throughout the report as USD 205 or Bluestem).

## Bluestem Student Demographics

In the 2010-11 school year approximately 545 students enrolled in the Bluestem School District, a decline of more than 20% from 2006-07, when almost 700 students were enrolled. The district employs 49 certified and classified full- and part-time employees. There are two schools in the district—Bluestem Elementary and Bluestem Junior-Senior High School.

Demographic patterns have shifted somewhat in Bluestem over the last five years. Most students—just under 90%—are identified White, and the percentage of students identified as Hispanic/Latino has climbed from 2.7% in 2006-07, to 5.7% in 2010-11. In 2010-11, 42.8% of students qualified for free and reduced priced meals, an increase of more than 12 percentage points since 2006-07.

**Table I—Demographic Shifts in USD 205**

<b>Race-Ethnicity</b>	<b>2006-2007</b>	<b>2010-2011</b>
American Indian/Alaska Native	1.7%	1.7%
African-American	1.2%	1.7%
Hispanic/Latino	2.7%	5.7%
Asian/ Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander	N/A	.9%
Multiracial	3.8%	1.8%
White	90.5%	88.3%

Additionally, approximately 9.4% of students are classified as students with disabilities—below the state average of 13.5%—and a decline of almost 10 percentage points from 2006-07, when 18.9% of students were identified as students with disabilities.<sup>3</sup>

## Student Achievement

Overall, Bluestem students have demonstrated relatively high levels of student achievement. All student groups have exceeded state assessment benchmarks in reading, by a substantial margin, for the past three years (for additional detail, see Table II below). Further, Bluestem schools received nine Kansas Standards of Excellence Awards—five at the elementary level and four at the secondary level—for the 2010-11 school year.

**Table II—Bluestem Summary Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Data**

<sup>3</sup> KSDE and district data.

**Reading** – Met AYP in 2009, 2010, and 2011; Not on Improvement.

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2009 - 76.7%	2010 - 81.3%	2011 - 86%
All students	Met (91.5%)	Met (86.7%)	Met (91.2%)
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (85.9%)	Met (87.7%)	Met (93.4%)
Students with Disabilities	Met (78%)	Met (74%) <sup>4</sup>	N/A
ELL Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
African-American Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hispanic	N/A	N/A	N/A
White	Met (91%)	Met (86.7%)	Met (91.2%)
Asian*	N/A	N/A	N/A
American Indian or Alaskan*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Multi-Racial*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Is.*	N/A	N/A	N/A

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

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2009 - 70.5%	2010 - 76.4%	2011 - 82.3%
All students	Met (88.8%)	Met (80.6%)	Met (78.9%) <sup>4</sup>
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (76.3%)	Met (81.4%)	No (70.5%)
Students with Disabilities	Met (71.7%)	No (60%)	N/A
ELL Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
African-American Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hispanic	N/A	N/A	N/A
White	Met (88.3%)	Met (80.3%)	Met (79.2%) <sup>4</sup>
Asian*	N/A	N/A	N/A
American Indian or Alaskan*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Multi-Racial*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Is.*	N/A	N/A	N/A

**Overall Graduation Rate:** 2009—69.8%, 2010—88.7%, 2011—79%<sup>^</sup>

Notes:

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

<sup>^</sup>This percentage represents the four-year graduation rate for 2011. As of 2011, all states are now required by the US Department of Education to calculate schools' graduation rates based on a cohort model, in this case, the percentage of students who graduated in four years. The change is designed to ensure that all students are accounted for in the graduation rate calculation.

N/A indicates that data are not available.

Despite these accomplishments, however, USD 205 faces some clear achievement challenges. Students with disabilities failed to meet benchmarks on the state math assessment in 2010, and students qualifying for free and reduced priced meals failed to

<sup>4</sup> The percent standard or above is below the target but above the criterion.

meet benchmarks in 2011 placing the district on improvement in math. Moreover, in 2011 all groups of students appeared to be struggling to meet benchmarks on the state math assessment.

## The Big Picture

While Bluestem students have demonstrated relatively high levels of student achievement on state assessments, some families in the district and surrounding communities still seem to have a negative perception of the district. Bluestem is mostly rural, with the town of Leon located near the center of the district. Population in the northwest section of the district has increased over the last few years; yet focus groups report that most of the families in this area send their children to adjacent districts or home school them. This has a negative impact on the enrollment and finances of the district and was an overriding theme in many of our conversations.

Despite this perception, most students, parents, and staff members with whom we spoke are generally supportive of Bluestem schools. It is clear that Bluestem possesses a number of strengths.

- The superintendent appears to be well respected, and he and the board of education have made a number of bold decisions—including moving to a four-day school week—which have been well-received and have enabled the district to remain fiscally sound.
- The superintendent has begun to develop a theory of action, focused on improving educational achievement through instructional improvement.
- The Bluestem Association for Student Education (BASE) provides an excellent community support vehicle for the Bluestem schools.
- Bluestem appears to provide a safe, supportive, and caring learning environment for students and staff, and students benefit from a strong teaching staff.
- Bluestem has begun to develop professional learning communities, and teachers report that they receive support for professional development when they request it.

The district can draw on these strengths and others to address five key systemic challenges as it works to improve.

- Negative perceptions of the district, coupled with enrollment declines, budget cuts, and an increase in the percentage of students identified as economically disadvantaged have created added challenges for Bluestem over the past few years.
- Though the superintendent has begun to develop a theory of action, the theory needs to be clearly articulated and shared with staff and stakeholders—to gain buy-in and support—and be implemented with fidelity.
- As part of its transition to the Common Core, the district faces the challenge of developing a viable and rigorous written curriculum for *all* students, and building

mechanisms to ensure that the curriculum is implemented consistently across schools.

- Currently, it appears that there may be lower expectations—and perhaps a less rigorous curriculum—for some students.
- The district currently lacks a clear instructional framework supported by ongoing, research-based, job-embedded professional development.

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

## II. Strengths and Challenges

Strengths and challenges identified in the needs assessment of Bluestem are summarized below in the areas of Leadership; Empowering Culture and Human Capital; Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction, and Professional Development.

### Leadership

The district displays a number of leadership strengths.

- Superintendent Dr. Randy Rivers has begun to implement a theory of action to improve achievement for all students, focused improving instructional strategies at all levels and in all subjects. Staff members have begun to discuss how to improve instruction, and several professional development days have been devoted to instructional discussions. Currently, all instructional staff are reading *Teach Like a Champion*, by Doug Lemov.
- According to focus group and interview participants, Dr. Rivers has made some difficult decisions regarding district leadership and structure, which have been very well received. He has handled budget and facility issues well and is regarded as a strong proponent of technology in schools. He has worked to improve communication with parents and community members.
- The leadership team of Dr. Rivers, Junior-Senior High School Principal Joel Lovesee, Assistant Principal Brian Meeks, and Elementary Principal Debbie Webster appears to be highly respected in the district and the community. A recent change of leadership at the high school level has been very positive according to students, teachers, and parents. All groups reported that the academic and social environment at the school has improved. Relationships between students and staff appear to be much more respectful and positive.

“The high school administration is doing a great job. Students are more respectful toward the teachers, and students are in class now rather than roaming the halls.”

— *Community member*

- The Board of Education has made two bold decisions in recent years that have had positive impacts on the district. The first was to transition from the traditional five-day school week, to a four-day week. All groups interviewed emphatically stated that this has been a positive move. Some individuals noted that they had initially been opposed to the move but now fully support it. The Board of Education hosted two community meetings, which allowed broad input into the decision. Students and teachers reported that classroom time is much more focused on learning and there is little wasted time. In addition, the district has been able to save money in tight budget times.

The other bold decision was to move the junior high school into the high school and use the old junior high school facility to house central office staff and special programs, such as a new weight room for athletics. While there were those who had misgivings about having younger students in a building with high school students, all groups interviewed reported that the move seems to have been positive. Additionally, the decision to move central office staff out of their old facility seems to have improved the district's image.

- There appears to be excellent communication among the members of the leadership team. Having the central office in close proximity to the schools has enhanced the communication. The leadership team meets twice monthly to coordinate events and activities and discuss issues that need addressing.
- As with all Kansas districts, Bluestem has experienced significant budget cuts. To its credit, the board of education levies the maximum amount of the local option budget. The board and Superintendent Rivers have worked hard to make budget cuts that do not impact classroom learning. The goal is to protect the instructional program. The board has a "students first" focus.

The district can build on these strengths to address a number of leadership challenges.

- While Dr. Rivers has developed a theory of action to improve student achievement, this strategy has not been fully planned and articulated to the board, staff, and community. Moreover, though staff members are reading *Teach Like a Champion* as part of the strategy to improve student achievement, teachers report that the effort is unfocused and has had little impact. Bluestem would benefit from implementing a clear instructional framework and providing much deeper support for principals and teachers to use effective research-based instructional strategies.
- Currently, USD 205 lacks coherence. Coherence means that the elements of a school district work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy. The twice-monthly leadership team meetings have enabled the leadership team to develop a structure and relationships to achieve coherence. However, the absence of an articulated theory of action that everyone understands, supports, and can implement is getting in the way the district realizing coherence.

- Principals report that their work is becoming more and more focused on instruction, and they are very eager to serve as instructional leaders. The challenge for the leadership team will be to continue to define what the role of instructional leader is and to provide professional development and other learning opportunities necessary for the principals to fulfill that role.
- In a positive effort, the district has begun to develop professional learning communities (PLCs). The district is challenged, however, to find time for teachers to meet on a consistent basis so the learning communities help improve student achievement.
- District leadership has also expressed an interest in classroom walkthroughs to promote observation, reflection, and discussion regarding teaching strategies. The challenge will be to follow-up and actually initiate a teacher observation process that will support principal and teacher growth and result in improved student achievement.
- There are several challenges related to technology in the district. Teachers and students report that plenty of computers are available but that many are old and need to be replaced. Also, teachers report that they see the value of the computers in teaching and learning but need additional training on how to use technology as an effective instructional tool. In response to these challenges, the district wisely employed a technology coordinator this year, but technology utilization and management continue to be a challenge for the district.
- Uncertainty about the effectiveness and cohesiveness of the board of education emerged as a prominent issue in virtually every leadership focus group conversation. The Bluestem Board of Education is the governing body of the district, and members are elected to provide vision, planning, and resources to ensure a quality education for all students. If board members cannot function as a cohesive group and work together with the superintendent for the good of the students, education will suffer in the district.
- As a result of budget cuts, Bluestem Central Office leadership basically consists of Superintendent Rivers. As the district implements a cohesive improvement strategy—with a clear instructional framework, a curriculum based on Common Core standards, and strong professional development program—the board and Superintendent Rivers will need to carefully consider if the superintendent alone can meet all the needs of the district. The district may want to consider creating an additional administrative position to assist the superintendent in planning and implementing these programs.

## **Empowering Culture and Human Capital**

Bluestem exhibits several strengths in the area of empowering culture and human capital.

- Virtually all focus group participants described Bluestem as a safe, supportive, and caring environment for students and staff. Students described principals and teachers as “really friendly,” and noted that principals know students by their first names and seem genuinely interested in them as individuals. Parents reported that the schools have a wonderful welcoming attitude, and they are never made to feel that they are intruding.
- Parents are also very pleased with communication from the district and schools. They all reported that teachers respond quickly to inquiries or concerns. The district newsletter, Bluestem Briefings, sent by Superintendent Rivers, is a good communication tool; it provides key information for parents and news about school activities and events. Parents also gave PowerSchool (an online school-to-home communication tool) high marks for keeping them informed about their students’ progress. PowerSchool allows parents confidential access to information regarding attendance, classroom assignments, grades, etc.
- The Bluestem Association for Student Education (BASE) is an excellent community support vehicle for Bluestem, providing “opportunities for innovative and creative ideas for Bluestem students.” Organized in 1997, BASE has funded a number of teacher-initiated programs and purchased special equipment for the schools.
- Focus group participants note that Bluestem has a strong teaching staff, and they value the recent addition of several new teachers. The district has a very competitive salary schedule, which allows it to compete for excellent teachers. One hundred percent of elementary teachers and 93% of the secondary teachers have been deemed “highly qualified,” according to No Child Left Behind requirements.
- The words used over and over to describe the student body were, “good kids,” kids who are very supportive of each other and are very welcoming and open to new students and staff. The students interviewed reported that they liked their school very much and felt they were getting a good education that prepared them for their futures. Students are encouraged to take the ACT. Most of the students interviewed felt the school and the community had high expectations for them.

Despite these strengths, however, several challenges are apparent as well.

- Concerns about the district’s image came up repeatedly in focus group conversations. Interviewees reported that historically a number of people living in Bluestem and surrounding communities have had negative perceptions about the Bluestem School District. While everyone interviewed strongly disagreed with these perceptions, they noted that the perceptions persist and have had several negative consequences for the district.

A number of families in the district have chosen to send their children to neighboring school districts or to home school them. Bluestem serves a large area (348.6 square miles) in Butler County. The northwest corner of the district adjoins the Augusta and El Dorado school districts. According to focus group participants, most families in that area of the district do not send their students to Bluestem but enroll them in Augusta or El Dorado schools. One parent living in the area said her family was the only one in her neighborhood whose children attend Bluestem. Superintendent Rivers estimated that 60-70 students living in the Bluestem district are enrolled in Augusta schools.

Interviewees reported that most of the families send their children to the other districts because they live in close proximity to those schools, but some also used the Bluestem reputation as the reason and most thought the district's reputation was an underlying reason. Superintendent Rivers also reported that there are a significant number of home school students in the district. The board of education has recognized this negative perception as a challenge and has initiated discussions to develop a plan to address the issue.

- Enrollment in the district continues to drop. In the 2002-2003 school year there were over 700 students in Bluestem. This year, the number has dropped below 500. Various reasons were given for declining enrollment, but the loss of these students has had a significant impact, with a corresponding decrease in funding.
- While the total number of students has declined, the percentage of students identified as economically disadvantaged has increased, to 42.5% of the student body this year. The district is aware that this percentage is on the rise and recognizes that additional supports may be needed to address students' learning needs.
- There was strong agreement among focus group participants that the district and community have high expectations for some students—and students we interviewed reported that their teachers did have high expectations for them. Focus group participants did not agree, however, that there were high expectations for *all* students. There were several comments from parents and community members that a good education was available “for those students who want it,” but it was up to the students and parents to take advantage of the opportunity. Some teachers who participated in focus groups noted that some parents don't expect their children to go to college and this creates challenges as well. These perceptions when combined—like those described in the first part of this section—create a kind of vicious circle, and may make it more challenging for the district to create a culture of high expectations for all students.
- There was similar disagreement regarding the rigor of the curriculum for all students. Students interviewed expressed a strong desire for more honors classes. They regretted the loss of debate and forensics as a class subject (the activities are

still offered in an afterschool format). Some community members expressed the belief that the curriculum could be more rigorous for all students, even those not going to college. Some district staff members also noted that the curriculum could be stronger and better integrated.

- The district's communication efforts received high marks, but there are challenges. Parents reported that they would have benefitted from some training in how to use PowerSchool and wondered if parents who are not computer savvy would take advantage of it. Parents also noted that there are parts of the district that do not have good Internet access, which may prohibit families living in those areas from using PowerSchool. Another challenge in getting information to a wider audience is the lack of a newspaper in Leon, Kansas. The district has to depend on media in other communities to provide publicity, and this is often lacking or non-existent.

## **Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction, and Professional Development**

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

More detail about the data collected during classroom visits using the Cross & Joftus Focused Classroom Walkthrough process can be found in the Appendix of this report.

### **Curriculum and Assessment**

Bluestem has some important curriculum and assessment strengths.

- The administration has begun the transition to the Common Core State Standards. Time is devoted to studying the standards on professional development days and resources have been given to teachers to begin the transition process. The district has developed a Moodle site as a warehouse for teachers and administrators to share resources as they are developed.
- As staff in focus groups noted, curriculum materials such as Fast Forward and Pathways, provide resources for teachers to use with students as part of a tiered intervention approach. It is not clear, however, that intervention materials and strategies are used consistently to address the specific learning challenges students face.

- Focus group feedback from classroom teachers, special education resource teachers, and paraprofessionals, indicated that students with disabilities are included in core curriculum classes at a high rate. Both general education teachers and special education resource teachers noted that efforts are made to provide students with disabilities maximum access to core curricular opportunities.
- The district appears to have a cooperative and supportive relationship with the Special Education Cooperative.
- Career and technical education (CTE) courses appear to have a high level of application and rigor. CTE pathways are being developed and implemented at the junior and senior high levels. Staff believe that CTE coursework provides important opportunities for students who wish to pursue post-secondary vocational schools.
- Dual credit courses are offered in cooperation with Butler County Community College, utilizing Interactive Distance Learning. Odysseyware and Virtual Prescriptive Learning courses are available to students who wish to take elective and higher-level course offerings.
- As part of the Common Core transition process, teachers indicated that they are beginning to implement literacy skills across the curriculum.
- Conversation with the Butler County Special Education Cooperative Director indicates that there are several options for assessing students with disabilities and students in need of tier 3 interventions. These options are not restricted to students with disabilities.
- ACT preparation is offered to high school students. Junior high students participate in PLAN and EXPLORE testing. All students will take part in career study, through the Kansas Career Pipeline. Focus groups with staff indicate that staff have a high level of confidence in the counselors in both school buildings.
- Teachers utilize KCA formative assessments to inform decisions regarding student attainment of state standards.

To build on these strengths, however, USD 205 must also face some significant curriculum and assessment challenges.

- Bluestem lacks a coherent, viable written curriculum throughout the district. Focus group conversations suggest that the curriculum is largely based on available resources. Kansas State Standards serve as the backbone of the curriculum, with special attention paid to tested indicators. Interventions for students appear to be based on indicators from the Kansas State Assessment, as opposed to results from ongoing formative and common assessments.

- Moreover, the district lacks written curriculum documents, and there is no curriculum committee to ensure curriculum alignment. While the district’s transition to the Common Core is a positive move, the district would benefit from implementing a systemic approach to developing a Common Core curriculum and supporting curricular resources and materials going forward.
- The district also lacks a process to monitor the implementation of the curriculum and instructional practices, such as consistent formative testing or a classroom walkthrough observation protocol.
- In interviews with teachers, it was evident that the district’s curriculum resources are becoming dated. The textbook rotation cycle has been abandoned due to budget cuts. Serious consideration to updating resources will be necessary as the district develops curriculum related to Common Core.
- Accelerated Reader is used district-wide. While most staff see this as a positive, careful use of research on the correct application of the Accelerated Reader model—especially with regard to using points for grades—is encouraged to ensure the best use of instructional time.
- The district would benefit from implementing a coherent assessment system to determine students’ needs and target interventions accordingly. It appears that teachers and principals use assessment data in a limited fashion to make instructional decisions. Data collection and usage efforts seem to vary greatly from school to school, and while staff members review Kansas State Assessment data, there appears to be little use of current formative assessment data to inform instruction. The district administers the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) assessment to determine eligibility for Title I services, for example, but it was not clear in focus group conversations how teachers and administrators use DIBELS assessment data to inform curriculum and instruction decisions.
- Heavy reliance on one assessment system – STAR – leaves gaps in determining specific student learning needs. There is also a lack of assessment expertise in the district, leading to little use of data to drive decision-making. The focus of data discussion centers mostly around the Kansas State Assessments and specific indicators.

## **Instruction and Professional Development**

Table III presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 93%) and principals (response rate 66%) 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, the principals surveyed believe that the vast majority of sound instructional strategies covered in the survey are evident or strongly evident in Bluestem schools. The sound instructional strategy that *principals* believe is most *strongly evident* in their schools is:

- monitoring instructional practices and providing meaningful feedback to teachers (cited as strongly evident by 100% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 0%).

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

- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities
- providing adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions to support teacher and administrator learning (cited by 0% of principals as strongly evident and by 50% as minimally evident or not evident).

For the most part, teachers' perceptions are generally in line with principals'. There are some differences, however.

*Teachers* identify a number of strategies as *strongly evident*:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 83% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 0%)
- providing support to students who are struggling to master content individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction (cited as strongly evident by 60% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 12%)
- 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 52% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 5%).

The strategies that *teachers* believe to be *least evident* are generally related to professional learning communities and staff development; these strategies include:

- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities (cited as strongly evident by 5% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 43%)
- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment (cited as strongly evident by 10% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 41%)
- 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 19% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 28%).

Teachers disagreed markedly with principals on the following strategy, which 100% of principals surveyed perceive to be strongly evident:

- monitoring instructional practices and providing meaningful feedback to teachers (cited as strongly evident by 19% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 27%).

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

Please rate the extent to which you believe the following instructional practices are evident in your school.	Principals		Teachers	
	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	100%	0%	19%	27%
Educators create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments.	50%	0%	83%	0%
Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction.	50%	0%	60%	12%
Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.	50%	0%	52%	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.	50%	0%	48%	2%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students.	50%	0%	31%	5%
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to	50%	0%	31%	17%

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^
determine results-based staff development.				
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	50%	0%	26%	19%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	50%	0%	24%	14%
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction.	50%	0%	17%	16%
The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning.	50%	0%	19%	28%
Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level.	0%	0%	50%	0%
Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well-being.	0%	0%	45%	5%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.	0%	0%	33%	5%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning.	0%	0%	31%	14%
Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	0%	0%	31%	14%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to	0%	0%	10%	41%

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^
plan instruction and assessment.				
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning.	0%	50%	24%	19%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.	0%	50%	5%	43%

Teacher Response Rate = 42/45

Principal Response Rate = 2/3

Source: Cross & Joftus survey of Bluestem principals and teachers October 2011.

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

^The response option "No Opinion" was deleted from this presentation. Seven percent or less of teachers selected this response on any question; no principals selected this response.

Survey responses only tell part of the story. Observations of 33 classrooms, reviews of district and state assessment data, and conversations with focus group participants indicate a number of instructional strengths in Bluestem.

- One indicator of effective instructional practice is the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the Kansas State Assessment. Spring 2011 AYP data indicate that 91.2% of Bluestem students were proficient in reading, well above the reading proficiency benchmark and a 4.5 percentage point increase from 2010.
- Bluestem maintains safe, orderly, and clean schools conducive to student learning. This was not only evident in the principal and teacher surveys, but was confirmed during the school and classroom visits.
- During Cross & Joftus' Focused Classroom Walkthroughs, 75-100% of students appeared to be engaged at all levels—elementary, middle, and high school. Moreover, at least 79% of classroom environments visited at all levels were:
  - orderly/well-managed/adaptable to the learning task
  - communicated expectations for student behavior
  - communicated expectations for participation in the learning process
  - exhibited positive student to teacher interactions.

- Focused Classroom Walkthroughs also uncovered consistent evidence in over 50% of classrooms observed at all levels of the following sound ***teaching practices***:
  - strategies to promote student participation and address learning styles
  - strategies that accelerate learning including: reinforcing efforts and providing recognition; using homework and practice opportunities; and setting objectives and providing immediate/continuous feedback that is accurate, specific, timely, and fair.
- Focused Classroom Walkthroughs also showed evidence in 60% of classrooms observed at all levels of the following sound ***learning practice***:
  - engages in active reading, note-taking, and constructed response tasks.
- The district received several Standards of Excellence Awards in 2011. Bluestem High School went off of improvement 2011-12, making Standard of Excellence in reading, math, and building-wide categories.
- Teachers and staff work collaboratively within grade levels, departments, and school-wide for the benefit of all students. There is great pride in the collaborative effort in the district.
- ACT scores for Bluestem students have risen consistently since the 2007-08 school year and have been above the average state scores the past two years, at 21.7 and 21.5 respectively.

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

- The district lacks a defined instructional framework. The district would benefit from implementing a district-wide instructional framework that identifies systematic processes to ensure vertical and horizontal alignment, implementation with fidelity, and a system of evaluation of instructional programs and strategies to increase student learning and assist students in the transition from one grade to another and one school to another.
- Further, the district does not currently have a systemic protocol or process for regularly observing instruction, providing feedback to teachers, and implementing professional development designed to lead to continual improvement in instruction.
- Though survey results suggest that teachers and principals believe they are using effective instructional practices to meet rigorous academic standards, observations of 33 classrooms in Bluestem identified the need to increase the following ***teaching and learning practices***, which were “minimally evident” in the classrooms visited (see Appendix for specific percentages related to these and

other strategies). Improvement in these areas may bring about higher achievement for all students:

- designing lessons based upon data from formal and informal assessments
- designing lessons to include more active student participation in the learning process, student dialogue around the learning task, and participation in individual reflection (metacognition)
- providing opportunities for students to use technology
- increasing the use of Marzano’s research-based instructional strategies<sup>5</sup>: identify similarities and differences; summarize and take notes; represent knowledge in multiple ways; provide opportunities for cooperative learning; generate and test hypotheses; and use higher level questioning
- providing instruction and opportunities for learning at higher levels of thinking, aligned to state assessment/common core curriculum questions that require cognitive levels of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

There are some important professional development strengths in Bluestem.

- The district supports teacher professional development. Individual teachers are able to request professional development through district channels. Teachers also report, however, that they don’t often ask for professional development support in order to save money for the district.
- The district’s four-day school week provides a great opportunity for professional development time. To ensure that time is used effectively, professional development must be organized, allow for teacher discussion of topics, and define accountability for implementation in the classroom.

To build on these strengths, however, Bluestem needs to address some key professional development challenges:

- The district lacks a data-driven professional development plan. Both teacher and principal focus groups noted that there is a lack of continuity, expectations, and accountability in the area of professional development.
- The district has not participated in official MTSS training and has not yet implemented a systematic approach to tiered instruction. Instructional interventions need to be more fully identified and implemented to address student needs effectively.
- The district appears to lack PD around co-teaching. Professional development would benefit teachers who co-teach students with disabilities.

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<sup>5</sup> Marzano, R. (2001). *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

### III. Recommendations

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

At the outset of this report, five key systemic challenges were identified.

- Negative perceptions of the district, coupled with enrollment declines, budget cuts, and an increase in the percentage of students identified as economically disadvantaged have created added challenges for Bluestem over the past few years.
- Though the superintendent has begun to develop a theory of action, the theory needs to be clearly articulated and shared with staff and stakeholders—to gain buy-in and support—and be implemented with fidelity.
- As part of its transition to the Common Core, the district faces the challenge of developing a viable and rigorous written curriculum for *all* students, and building mechanisms to ensure that the curriculum is implemented consistently across schools.
- Currently, it appears that there may be lower expectations—and perhaps a less rigorous curriculum—for some students.
- The district currently lacks a clear instructional framework supported by ongoing, research-based, job-embedded professional development.

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

1. The Board and the leadership team should undertake a strategic planning process to address issues related to curriculum development, an instructional framework, professional development, technology, communication, and public relations/community perceptions.
2. The strategic plan should reflect the district's theory of action and support a coherent approach to improvement. This process should align strategies, timelines, and metrics and connect them to the strategic plan.
3. The district should articulate, align, and fully implement curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development with the goal of continually improving student learning and achievement to support high expectations for all students. This process should include a framework for monitoring implementation and address the following:
  - a. Creation of a district process for developing a viable curriculum guided by the Common Core standards, with resources to support teachers' content

knowledge and implementation in the classroom. A clear communication plan should be developed to inform all stakeholders of the timeline, process, and roll out for implementation.

- b. Implementation of a system-wide instructional framework tied to rigorous standards. MTSS structuring and implementation with support from a KSDE approved facilitator; consistent implementation of MTSS across the district. The instructional framework should draw on an analysis of student achievement data and prioritize research-based instructional practices that will have the greatest impact on increasing achievement. As part of this process, the leadership team should work collaboratively with teachers and teacher leaders to review and prioritize district instructional and professional development initiatives and principals should receive professional development to help them fulfill their roles as instructional leaders.
  - c. Systematization of PLCs and classroom observations as catalysts for implementing research-based effective educational practices, by:
    - conducting classroom observations 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.
  - d. Development of a monitoring system to measure the implementation and impact of professional development on changes in teacher behaviors.<sup>6</sup> In addition to classroom walkthroughs, the district may consider the use of tools such as the Innovation Configuration Matrix (ICM).<sup>7</sup> The ICM was designed to ensure that strategies are implemented correctly and with fidelity; it includes teacher self-assessment of the use of best-practice strategies.
4. The school board must carefully monitor its working relationships and seek board training if board relations become dysfunctional.

## Next Steps

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

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<sup>6</sup> Reeves, D.B. *Transforming Professional Development Into Student Learning Results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Champion, Robby. "The Innovation Configuration can gauge progress of reform initiatives and take the guesswork out of professional development planning." National Staff Development Council, 2003.

- Instruction, Stage I
2. Your district facilitator will be in touch with the superintendent within the next couple weeks to discuss the CoPs, answer questions, and begin planning for the drafting of the district's Integrated Improvement Plan.

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## Process for Analyzing Classroom Walkthrough Data

As recently proposed by City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Lee in *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, “Since what goes on in the classroom is at the heart of instructional improvement, a key part of developing an improvement practice is observation.” Connecting classroom observations to the “larger context of the system’s improvement strategy” is how to support sustained improvement.<sup>8</sup>

In short, observation data need to be used regularly and systematically to improve teaching and learning. In order to do this effectively, districts must determine the skills educators need to develop, practice, implement, and refine during professional development.

The following process will assist district personnel in identifying what skills should take priority in future professional development:

1. Analyze classroom observation data summarized in the Appendix in the **“Teaching/Learning Practices Graphs.”** Based on work from the National Implementation Research Network at the University of South Florida, Cross & Joftus has developed an implementation matrix that quantifies the extent to which research-based practices are being implemented in classrooms observed (see percentages in the Appendix).
2. To prioritize professional development topics, consider using the following criteria provided by the Implementation Research Network:
  - Mark as a first priority those effective practices that are “*inconsistently evident*” in less than 29% of the classes visited.
  - Mark as a second priority those effective practices that are “*minimally evident*” in 30-49% of classrooms visited.
  - Mark as a third priority those effective practices that are “*partially evident*” in 50-69% of the classrooms visited.
  - Mark as a fourth priority those effective practices that are “*consistently evident*” in 70-100% of the classes visited.

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth A. City, Richard F. Elmore, Sarah E. Fiarman, and Lee Teitel, *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009.

