

December

11

Needs Analysis of Colby Public Schools, USD 315

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

I. Introduction

Background

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

In 2009 and 2010, this model, the Kansas Learning Network (KLN), was expanded to reach 23 additional Kansas districts struggling to demonstrate AYP. In 2011, 12 more districts joined the Network, including USD 315, Colby Public Schools. Since 2008, four districts have left the Network because they demonstrated AYP for two consecutive years.¹

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 visits² that include interviews and focus groups with students, parents, civic leaders, teachers, instructional coaches, principals, district administrators, and board members as well as classroom observations using a process designed by Cross & Joftus called the Focused Classroom Walkthrough process (part of Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success, or K-PALSS).

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

¹ Under the No Child Left Behind Act, a district must demonstrate AYP two consecutive years in order to be removed from the “needs improvement” list.

² The site visit for USD 315 took place November 14-15, 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 Colby Public Schools, USD 315 (referred to throughout the report as USD 315 or Colby).

Colby Student Demographics

In the 2010-11 school year, Colby enrolled 958 students—a slight decline in enrollment from 2006-07, when Colby served 988 students—and employed 70 certified and classified full- and part-time employees, approximately 62 of which were teachers. Students in Colby attend three schools: Colby Grade School, Colby Middle School, and Colby High School.

The racial-ethnic balance in Colby has shifted slightly over the past five years. The percentage of students identified as Hispanic/Latino, for example, has increased from 2.9% to 4.5%, and the percentage of students identified as White has declined somewhat, from 94.8% to 92.2%. The percentage of students identified as English language learners (ELLs) has also increased slightly, from .7% in 2006-07 to 1.6% in 2010-11.

Table I—Demographic Patterns in USD 315

Race-Ethnicity	2006-07	2010-11
American Indian/Alaska Native	.6%	.5%
African-American	1.2%	.8%
Hispanic/Latino	2.9%	4.5%
Asian/ Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander	.4%	.9%
Multiracial	0.0%	1.0%
White	94.8%	92.2%

Like many other districts new to the KLN this year, the most sizable demographic shift in Colby over the past five years lies in the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals. In 2006-07, 35.9% of students were eligible for free and reduced priced meals. By 2010-11, that percentage had increased by almost six percentage points, to 41.6%.

The percentage of students with disabilities has also climbed just slightly over the past five years, from 17.9% in 2006-07, to 18.6% in 2010-11, more than five percentage points above the Kansas average of 13.5%.³

Student Achievement

³ KSDE data for Colby Public Schools.

For the most part, Colby students have performed well on state assessment tests. The group “all students” has exceeded state assessment benchmarks for proficiency in reading and math, for example, for the past three years (for additional detail, see Table II below). Additionally, in October 2011 Colby Public Schools received 12 Standards of Excellence awards from the Kansas State Department of Education—including building-wide awards in reading and math at the elementary school, in reading at the middle school, and in reading, math, and science at the high school.

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

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

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2009 - 76.7%	2010 - 81.3%	2011 - 86%
All students	Met (90.6%)	Met (85.7%)	Met (89.6%)
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (86.6%)	Met (81.1%) ⁴	Met (86.2%)
Students with Disabilities	Met (82.6%)	No (71.3%)	No (72.1%)
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 (91.1%)	Met (86.2%)	Met (89.5%)
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, 2010 and 2011; not on Improvement.

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2009 - 70.5%	2010 - 76.4%	2011 - 82.3%
All students	Met (86.1%)	Met (82.6%)	Met (87.8%)
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (81.4%)	Met (76.7%)	Met (79%) ⁴
Students with Disabilities	Met (77%)	Met (67.8%) ⁴	Met (75%) ⁴
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 (87.6%)	Met (83.9%)	Met (89.4%)
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—91.5%, 2010—90.8%, 2011—72.8%[^]

Notes:

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

*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.

^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, there are some clear achievement challenges in USD 315. Students with disabilities failed to meet proficiency benchmarks on state reading assessments in 2010 and 2011, placing the district on improvement in reading, and in 2011, two groups of students met benchmarks on the state math assessment through criterion designations. Additionally, the four-year graduation rate for all students was 72.8%, and for some groups of students—most notably students who are eligible for free and reduced priced meals and students with disabilities—was below the 50% mark in 2011.⁵

The Big Picture

Colby is located in the northwest corner of the state, just off of I-70, about two hours north of Garden City. Most students who attend Colby Public Schools live in or near the town of Colby, which serves as the county seat for Thomas County. According to 2010 census data, Colby has approximately 5,200 residents, more than 96% of which are identified as White. The median household income is just above \$41,000, well below the Kansas median of approximately \$50,000.⁶

Like many districts in Kansas, Colby's resource base has constricted considerably over the past several years. The district's total operating budget—\$9,842,222 in the 2011-12 school year—has been reduced by \$1,322,211 since 2008-09, due largely to reductions in state funding and enrollment declines. Representatives in focus groups expressed frustration with attempts to address state and federal education mandates and provide appropriate supports for increasing numbers of economically disadvantaged students in the face of continuing state budget cuts.

Fortunately Colby possesses a number of overall strengths that it can build upon to address these challenges and others.

- The superintendent appears to be well liked and respected by all stakeholders, who value her leadership skills.

⁵ It should be noted that since this new graduation rate measure attempts to account for the number of students who begin high school as freshmen and graduate as seniors, many districts' graduation rates are substantially lower than those of previous years. Additionally, the percentage rates in Colby represent small numbers of students. The data should be cause for concern, however.

⁶ According to 2010 US Census data.

- The Colby Board of Education has established a mission statement and six overarching goals, which are used to help guide the work of schools in Colby.
- Parents, community members, board members, and students expressed pride in the district. Parents and community members feel connected to schools and appreciate opportunities to be involved.
- Teachers and administrators have worked together to develop and implement vertically aligned mathematics and reading curricula, aligned to state standards. Administrators and teachers have also attended Common Core training, and the district has begun transitioning to the Common Core standards.
- The district has several structural elements in place to support improvement: 1) a recently implemented a classroom walkthrough protocol, along with training for teachers and administrators to use classroom walkthrough data to improve teaching and learning; 2) development of a data warehouse that enables teachers to readily access and use student assessment data; and 3) professional learning communities and other professional development to support teachers' use of research-based effective instructional strategies in the classroom.

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

- As the number of students identified as economically challenged continues to increase, and state education funding continues to tighten, the district will be challenged to serve *all* students well and ensure that *all* students receive a high quality education.
- Currently, the district's four-year graduation rate is 72.8%, and graduation rates for some groups of students are significantly lower. The district is challenged to improve graduation rates, prepare students for success in life after high school, and build a culture of high expectations for all students.
- Though district decision-making is guided by a mission statement and six overarching goals, the district lacks a long-range strategic plan with measurable objectives, timelines, and accountability structures to ensure that Colby can track progress and meet its goals.
- USD 315 has developed and implemented a number of initiatives to improve curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development (e.g. PLCs, tiered instruction, and extensive training and professional development around effective, research-based instructional strategies). The district is challenged, however—especially in the face of staff cuts—to fully implement and integrate initiatives to ensure rigor and support student learning and achievement.
- The district would benefit from proactively communicating and collaborating with its special education interlocal to improve special education services by: looking for ways to facilitate more co-planning and co-teaching; reviewing processes in place for special education referral and identification; and

clarifying the expected use of paraprofessionals (both time and support), and defining their relationship in the use of tiered interventions.

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

II. Strengths and Challenges

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

Leadership

Colby displays a number of leadership strengths.

- The Colby Board of Education has adopted a mission statement and a set of six goals for all schools to follow in accomplishing the district’s mission, “To prepare all students to be life-long learners and responsible citizens.”
- District leaders worked with stakeholders—using a collaborative and transparent process—to develop school improvement plans based upon their work with Advanced Ed and QPA accreditation, and on an *Effectiveness & Efficiency School Review*, which was completed in January 2011.
- In 2008, all schools initiated training with South West Plains Regional Service Center to implement professional learning communities (PLCs) throughout the school system. The goal of this work is to build capacity at the district, building, and teacher levels to support instructional improvement and implement MTSS (Multi-Tier System of Supports) to meet the academic and behavioral needs of all students.
- District leaders have been trained by the South West Plains Regional Service Center to regularly conduct structured classroom walkthroughs. Southwest Plains is also training 10 teachers per month—with the goal of training all teachers by the end of the year—so that they can participate in walkthroughs as part of their PLC work. The purpose of the walkthroughs is to systematically reinforce effective teaching and learning practices and inform future professional development.
- Members of Colby’s Board of Education expressed strong support for district leaders, led by Superintendent Terrel Harrison. Ms. Harrison, who

“The Superintendent is our greatest asset!”

—A focus group participant echoing the views of stakeholders in Colby

originally came to the district as the elementary school principal in 2001, is currently serving her fourth year as Superintendent.

- All focus group participants commended the superintendent for her inclusive and transparent leadership style. Participants remarked repeatedly, for example, about the superintendent’s skillful leadership of the budget reduction process.

USD 315 can draw on these strengths and others to address key leadership challenges as it works to improve.

- While district decision-making is guided by a set of six overarching goals, Colby currently lacks metrics and timelines to monitor progress toward achieving those goals. The district would benefit from ensuring that systems, resources, and policies are aligned to support the accomplishment of goals.
- Though focus groups appreciate the way in which district leaders handled recent budget cuts, cuts have left Colby with fewer staff—including the loss of 14 licensed and 11 classified and administrative positions—and resources (e.g. a loss of in-town busing for students, and the implementation of salary freezes for staff) to support student needs. Colby will be challenged to evaluate the impact of cuts and to ensure that it can continue to meet needs as resources tighten.
- As part of the budget reduction process, principals are wearing multiple hats, and the district lacks a full-time curriculum coordinator. All focus groups remarked about the change in administrative duties, to the extent that principals are now seen as managers of facilities rather than instructional leaders. All principals are out of their buildings for some time during the day, with the exception of the high school principal, who also serves as the activities director.
- Though Colby appears to be making strides in this direction, the district would benefit from building a data-driven school improvement culture at all levels. Currently, schools use data differently and lack coherent protocols and expectations for how to use data systematically to support improvement.

Empowering Culture and Human Capital

Colby displays several strengths in the area of Empowering Culture and Human Capital.

- One of the district’s greatest assets is everyone’s pride in Colby. During focus groups, all representative stakeholders interviewed—board members, district administrators, teachers, principals, students, parents, and community

representatives—expressed deep pride in the community and the district.

- Focus groups of parents and community representatives expressed strong connections to the district and its schools, which they attributed to involvement in site councils, parent-teacher organizations, and music and sports booster clubs. One-on-one communication between parents and teachers is strengthened through Power School, which provides parents with 24/7 online access to daily updates on their children regarding attendance, achievement, behavior, and lunch payments. Additionally, parents can learn about class work from the planners/agendas students are required to update every day to keep track of assignments and share with their parents.
- Civic/community members noted that the district’s annual distribution of the Colby Activities and Events Calendar to all business and community groups helps to ensure broad-based promotion of district accomplishments and upcoming events. The calendar, which also includes contact information, helps create shared awareness and ownership of district happenings.
- Student survey data collected for the January 2011 *Effectiveness & Efficiency School Review* completed by the Center for Innovative School Leadership indicated that students had several positive views about the district. These views were reaffirmed during student focus groups we conducted.
 - More than 95% of the students surveyed felt that principals and/or assistant principals are effective instructional leaders in their schools.
 - Nearly 85% of the students surveyed thought teachers in their schools cared about students’ needs and provided a high-quality education in clean schools.
- The district has a number of academic and extracurricular supports for students, such as an early warning system for low-performing students, recognition ceremonies for those who demonstrate exemplary accomplishments, and a debate program.
- The middle school recently received an Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT) grant, which provides teacher training opportunities and technology-based student learning opportunities. Two teachers are participating in training each year to build technology and learning capacity at the elementary and middle school levels.
- The district uses a systematic process for teacher evaluation on a regularly scheduled basis, including twice yearly evaluations for teachers with one-two years of experience, annual evaluations for those with three-four years of experience, and evaluations once every three years for those with five or more years of experience.

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

- Though participants in focus groups expressed pride in the district, Colby is challenged to build a culture of high expectations for *all* students. One group of focus group participants reported, for example, that a previous high school principal did not encourage students with disabilities to stay in school or encourage teachers to sufficiently differentiate instruction to effectively reach students with various learning needs. The principal has now left, and the district is working to ensure that educators are meeting the needs of all their students—that there is a culture of high expectations for all students.
- Students in focus groups pointed out that there could be more rigor at the high school. While they noted that they feel generally prepared for postsecondary opportunities, students also reported that they didn't feel a great deal of pressure to achieve or perform at high levels in their junior/senior year; they expressed the view that too much class time was used for homework.
- Budget cuts have led staff cuts and corresponding class size increases—resulting in classes of 25-30 at the high school. Teachers in focus groups report that they are spread thin and teaching more subjects, since the district now employs fewer staff members.
- While the district should be lauded for using systematic teacher and principal evaluation processes, educator evaluations are not currently tied to student outcomes. As Kansas moves toward new teacher and principal evaluation principles (which include a focus on student data), Colby can integrate those principles and improve its evaluation system.

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 Colby educators on surveys of educational practices, and by representatives from all constituent groups during focus groups and interviews; and (3) data collected during classroom visits, which document the extent to which effective teaching/learning practices are being implemented in the classroom.

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

Curriculum and Assessment

Colby has several valuable curriculum and assessment strengths.

- The district has devoted significant time and resources to K-12 curriculum alignment in all content areas. The alignment process includes a material identification process for teachers to strengthen the classroom delivery of content.
- The district has embraced adoption of the Common Core standards. District leaders and teachers have attended several conferences, including the KSDE Common Core Summer Academies and Southwest Plains Regional Service Center Common Core professional development to deconstruct the Common Core standards and begin to identify instructional materials to support an effective transition to the Common Core.

“We are constantly looking at our curriculum and data and having conversations about how our kids are doing.”

—*Grade School Teacher*

“We are already looking at the Common Core. We want to be ready for the transition...our kids deserve it.”

—*Middle School Teacher*

- Technology is embedded throughout the K-12 curriculum. Teachers recognize that technology can serve as a valuable tool for delivering curriculum.
- College and career readiness programs at Colby High School include 10 career clusters and 14 pathways. Partnerships are also in place with Colby Community College and Northwest Kansas Technical College to provide additional course options for students.
- The district has created a strong comprehensive assessment system. Colby uses AIMSweb in grades K-12 as a screener for reading and math. The DRA (Developmental Reading Assessment) serves as the primary diagnostic tool for reading. Local formative assessments have been written and are used in reading and math at all grade levels as well. In an effort to manage assessment data, the district has purchased and installed a data management warehouse, which enables every teacher to access individual and class reports that contain all testing information for students.

Colby must address some important curriculum and assessment challenges as well.

- While the curriculum development process and supporting materials for teachers appear to be sound, currently the curriculum is not available to the public. By enabling parents, students, and community members to easily access the curriculum, the district would enhance communication and help everyone have a better understanding of what Colby expects students to know and be able to do.
- Focus group conversations with teachers and principals indicated that as the district transitions to the Common Core, the curriculum development process

could be improved by giving educators more time to focus on specific curriculum and instructional points.

- Professional learning communities (PLCs) are in place in the district. Focus group conversations with principals, teachers, and paraprofessionals indicate, however, that PLCs operate very differently from school to school⁷ and could be used more effectively with the right supports (e.g. common protocols). Additionally, teacher focus groups reported a need for time for more vertical communication K-12 in content areas and involvement of special education teachers in the PLC process.
- Though Colby offers some dual credit courses through Colby Community College, USD 315 currently lacks AP courses and offers only four advanced courses—Honors English I and II, Honors American History, and College Reading. To address this challenge, district leaders have been meeting regularly with Colby Community College representatives to expand offerings for students. ACT scores are dropping, however, and teachers in focus groups expressed concern about students’ readiness to enter college.⁸
- Several questions were raised about Colby’s special education services in focus group conversations. Educators mentioned concerns, for example, about student/teacher ratios; communication between special education and general education teachers, and within the special education department; and how students with disabilities are served through Colby’s tiered instructional model.

Instruction and Professional Development

Table III presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 85%) and principals (response rate 100%) 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.

Generally, respondents—both principals and teachers—are optimistic about the presence of sound instructional strategies in Colby schools. The strategies that *principals and teachers* cited as most *strongly evident* include:

⁷ Grade level PLC’s are held once a week at the elementary level for 50-60 minutes; multi-grade teams (e.g. 2nd-3rd) meet occasionally. Grade level school improvement teams (which function like PLCs) meet three times per week at the middle school for approximately 1.5 hours. The high school has grade level PLC’s once a month, for approximately 30 minutes in the morning. The district also hosts (two-three hour) district-wide PLCs approximately three times per year.

⁸ District data show, for example, that ACT average composite scores declined from 22.4 in 2006-07 to 21.1 in 2010-11 (below the Kansas average of 22), and that scores have declined across the board over the past five years.

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 50% of principals and 72% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 0% of both principals and teachers)
- empowering students to participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments (cited as strongly evident by 50% of principals and 60% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 0% of principals and 7% 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 50% of principals and 56% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 0% of principals and 10% of teachers).

At least fifty percent *principals* identified two additional strategies as most *strongly evident*:

- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment (cited as strongly evident by 50% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 0% of principals)
- 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 50% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 25% of principals).

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

- 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 57% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 7% of teachers)
- using a variety of appropriate instructional strategies and resources, including technology, to actively engage students, encourage positive social interaction, and emphasize critical thinking, problem solving, and interdisciplinary connections (cited as strongly evident by 59% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 5% of teachers)
- using data from class, school, district, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development (cited as strongly evident by 57% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 5% of teachers).

The sound instructional strategy that *principals* believe to be *least evident* is:

- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited as strongly evident by 0% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 25% of principals)

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

- providing adequate resources to support teacher and administrator learning (cited as strongly evident by 12% of teachers as not evident or minimally evident by 25% of teachers)
- monitoring instructional practices and providing meaningful feedback to teachers (cited as strongly evident by 22% of teachers as not evident or minimally evident by 26% of teachers).

Teachers were *evenly divided* on the presence of the following strategy:

- providing adequate resources to support student learning (cited as strongly evident by 28% of teachers as not evident or minimally evident by 28% of teachers).

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

Please rate the extent to which you believe the following instructional practices are evident in your school.	Principals		Teachers	
	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^
Educators create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments.	50%	0%	72%	0%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.	50%	0%	60%	7%
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%	56%	10%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment.	50%	0%	36%	18%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.	50%	25%	34%	19%

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 provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.	25%	0%	57%	7%
Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level.	25%	0%	45%	10%
Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	25%	0%	45%	12%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	25%	0%	28%	14%
The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning.	25%	0%	24%	21%
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.	0%	0%	59%	5%
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development.	0%	0%	57%	5%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students.	0%	0%	40%	14%
Educators foster collegial	0%	0%	29%	11%

Please rate the extent to which you believe the following instructional practices are evident in your school.	Principals		Teachers	
	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^
relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well-being.				
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction.	0%	0%	28%	19%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning.	0%	0%	28%	28%
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	0%	0%	22%	26%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning.	0%	0%	12%	25%
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	0%	25%	21%	17%

Teacher Response Rate = 58/68

Principal Response Rate = 4/4

Source: Cross & Joftus survey of Colby principals and teachers November 2011.

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

^The response "No Opinion" was deleted from this presentation. Ten percent teachers selected this option on one response, nine on another, and five percent or less on any other response. One principal selected this response in answer to two questions.

Survey responses only tell part of the story. Classroom observations, reviews of district and state assessment data, and conversations with focus group participants point toward some valuable instructional and professional development strengths in Colby.

- One indicator of effective instructional practice is the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the Kansas State Assessment. The group "all students" has exceeded state benchmarks in reading and math for the past three years.
- During observations of 53 classrooms using the Cross & Joftus Focused Classroom Walkthrough observation protocol, the following effective *teaching* and *learning* practices were evident in classrooms visited.

- Classrooms were orderly, well-managed, and adaptable to the learning task, with clear expectations for student behavior and participation in the learning process.
 - Eighty percent of students were actively engaged 85%-100% of the time at all school levels.
 - Positive “student to teacher” and “teacher to student” interactions were consistently observed.
 - Teachers consistently used instructional planning strategies to communicate standards/skills-based lessons and to activate prior knowledge and academic vocabulary.
 - They also checked for understanding to assess and inform instruction and consistently employed the following strategies that research has shown to accelerate learning: 1) reinforcing efforts and providing recognition; 2) using homework and practice opportunities. (See Appendix for specific percentages related to these and other strategies).
- The district is implementing a structured classroom walkthrough instrument that will enable educators to analyze the extent to which the district is implementing research-based effective instructional practices. Currently the structured walkthrough instrument focuses on the following:
 - Levels of engagement in the classroom
 - Target area strategies
 - Use of technology
 - Bloom’s taxonomy
 - Madelyn Hunter’s elements of lesson design
- Colby has provided research-based, job-embedded training for teachers around Marzano’s, Kagan’s, and Gardner’s instructional strategies. Colby has emphasized the use of Kagan strategies in instruction for 15 years, and new teachers participate in Kagan training each year.
 - In the face of a shrinking budget, administrators have put more financial resources into bringing quality training to the district for teachers, as opposed to sending them out of the district for professional development. The district also uses the train-the-trainer approach to stretch PD dollars.
 - The interlocal agency that staffs special education services also provides funding for resources and teacher training—it brought AIMSWeb assessments to Colby this year, for example. Both regular education and special education teachers participated in MTSS structuring training together training through interlocal resources. There are some attempts at co-teaching as well.
 - At the elementary level, focus group conversations indicate that educators discuss assessment data in PLCs and use data to help guide instructional

decisions. Teachers and administrators at the secondary level also report using some data to guide instruction for students, though it appears that PLCs are used unevenly at the secondary level.

- The district has a Professional Development Plan on file, and PD 360 is available for teachers to use to research strategies to meet the needs of a variety of learners.
- Teachers seem very committed and appear willing to use time through PLC's, late start/early release, or other creative means to improve instructional routines and procedures and build high expectations for all students. Paraprofessionals provide an important support to teachers; if used effectively, they can offer small group skill remediation for struggling learners through tiered intervention.

Despite these strengths, however, Colby has some clear instructional and professional development challenges.

- The district's budget shrinkage—encompassing a loss of more than \$1 million over four years—has resulted in reduced opportunities for professional development, increased class sizes, and realigned administrative duties. Currently, principals are challenged to serve as instructional leaders.

“We want leadership from our principals to help us make choices for students.”

—*Teacher*

- Educators report initially participating in MTSS structuring training in 2008 in reading, math, and behavior with state approved facilitators at the ESSDACK service center. Since that time, both teachers (special education and general education) and administrators have participated in several general MTSS training sessions. This year, the district has begun “implementing” MTSS to varying degrees at all three schools in the district in both reading and math.

The district is planning to complete KSDE structuring forms and would benefit from participating in additional MTSS structuring and implementation training in both reading and math with support from a state-approved MTSS facilitator—to use data effectively and group students flexibly and appropriately for tiered instruction. Currently, MTSS is not being implemented with fidelity. Tier 1 core instruction targets all students in all grades, but tier 2 instruction focuses on pull-out interventions and homework completion. Tier 3 instruction has not yet been clearly defined at any level.

- There are an average of six paraprofessionals per special education teacher in this district. Currently, it appears, however, that paraprofessionals are largely responsible for supporting assignment/homework completion; most do not provide skill remediation with students who need extra assistance. The district would benefit from deploying paraprofessionals more effectively.

- Communication is essential between regular education staff, special education staff, paraprofessionals, and administrators. Conversations with teachers, administrators, special educators, and paraprofessionals indicate that communication is currently lacking, and that staff would benefit having more time and clear protocols for collaboration, co-planning, and co-teaching.
- Though PLCs appear to operate fairly effectively at the elementary level, secondary educators—both middle and high school—would benefit from having regular and structured PLC discussions, focused on using data to drive instructional decisions. Teachers in grades 6-12 report that they would also benefit from having structured conversations about the vertical alignment of curriculum and instructional expectations at key transition stages.
- Focused Classroom Walkthroughs indicate that the following student learning activities that lead to higher levels of thinking were observed in an average of less than 50% of the classrooms observed.
 - Asks/answers higher level questions (defined as above application).
 - Investigates and solves problems.
 - Participates in individual reflection (metacognition).
 - Uses technology in the learning process.
- The need for a more focused and integrated instructional framework is clear. The district has embraced a number of initiatives to support instruction, including: tiered instruction, Kagan strategies, and Marzano strategies. Focus group conversations, however, suggest that educators are challenged to implement strategies effectively and deeply.
- Classroom walkthrough data also underscore the need for more supportive professional development and instructional coaching to ensure deep implementation of effective instructional strategies.
 - Strategies to meet diverse language and cultural needs were observed in only 6% of classrooms observed.
 - Differentiation to match student learning needs and strengths was observed in only 19% of classrooms visited.
 - Student demonstration of learning through differentiation in activities/materials and products/assignments was observed in only 15% of the classrooms visited.
 - Of Marzano's nine research-based practices for engaging students in instructional activities that are predictably linked to gains in student achievement,⁹ the following were observed less than 50% of the time: 1) identify similarities and differences; 2) summarize and take notes;

⁹ Marzano, R. (2001). *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

- 3) organize learning in groups; cooperative learning ‘pairs/small groups; 4) generate and test hypotheses.

III. Recommendations

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

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

- As the number of students identified as economically challenged continues to increase, and the district’s budget continues to tighten, the district will be challenged to serve *all* students well and ensure that *all* students receive a high quality education.
- Currently, the district’s four-year graduation rate is 72.8%, and graduation rates for some groups of students are significantly lower. The district is challenged to improve graduation rates, prepare all students for success in life after high school, and build a culture of high expectations for all students.
- Though district decision-making is guided by a mission statement and six overarching goals, currently, the district lacks a long-range strategic plan with measurable objectives, timelines, and accountability structures to ensure that Colby can track progress and meet its goals.
- USD 315 has developed and implemented a number of initiatives to improve curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development (e.g. PLCs, tiered instruction, and extensive training and professional development around effective, research-based instructional strategies). The district is challenged, however—especially in the face of staff cuts—to fully implement and integrate initiatives to ensure rigor and support student learning and achievement.
- The district would benefit from proactively communicating and collaborating with its special education interlocal to improve special education services by: looking for ways to facilitate more co-planning and co-teaching; reviewing processes in place for special education referral and identification; and clarifying the expected use of paraprofessionals (both time and support), and defining their relationship in the use of tiered interventions.

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

1. The superintendent should work with the board of education and the district leadership team—and parent/community stakeholders where possible—to develop a long-range plan based on the district’s goals and priorities, with measurable objectives, timelines, and accountability structures. A key focus of this planning should be how the district will meet the academic and social

needs of *all* its students, including a large percentage of economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities. This process should also address questions such as: How can building leadership issues be addressed, so that principals can serve as instructional leaders? Where can resources be leveraged? Can/should the district share staff with nearby districts? How can committee work be restructured to better meet the needs of students and staff members?

2. The district should develop processes and systems to support implementation and integration of research-based effective curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development initiatives, with the goal of continually improving student learning and achievement to support high expectations for *all* students. This effort should include:
 - a. Building PLCs at all levels that are equipped to use data systematically to support teacher-administrator decision-making and collaboration, to improve student learning and achievement. This process should include:
 - Ensuring that there is sufficient time for educators to collaborate and plan together; developing and implementing common PLC protocols; monitoring the effectiveness of PLCs.
 - Using classroom observation data systematically to provide regular and helpful feedback to educators.
 - Identifying priority data and analyzing data to determine the extent of implementation of effective teaching/learning practices.
 - Determining future professional development practices using observation data.
 - b. Building a common instructional framework, tied to rigorous standards, that helps teachers and administrators integrate research-based effective instructional practices. This framework should draw on an analysis of student achievement data and prioritize research-based instructional practices that will have the *greatest impact* on increasing achievement for *all* students, including economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and other groups of students at risk of school failure. As part of this process, the superintendent should work with building principals and teacher leaders to review and prioritize district instructional and professional development initiatives.
 - c. Examining what supports the district needs to implement MTSS with fidelity in reading and mathematics. In this review process, the district should work with a state approved MTSS facilitator to determine who should participate in structuring, then implementation training, and look at the feasibility of establishing an MTSS Leadership Team. The

district should also look more broadly at how tiered instruction is being implemented, to ensure that students are not being “tracked” by ability.

- d. Developing a monitoring system to measure the implementation and impact of professional development on changes in teacher behaviors.¹⁰ In addition to classroom walkthroughs, the district may consider the use of tools such as the Innovation Configuration Matrix (ICM).¹¹ The ICM was designed to ensure that strategies are implemented correctly and with fidelity; it includes teacher self-assessment of the use of best-practice strategies.
3. The district should work collaboratively with its special education interlocal to look for ways to enhance communication and facilitate more co-planning and co-teaching; review processes in place for special education referral and identification; and clarify the expected use of paraprofessionals’ time, support, and relationship in the use of tiered interventions.
4. As it works to improve graduation rates and ensure that students are college and career ready, the district should review the rigor of the high school curriculum and continue to look for ways to offer dual-credit and higher-level courses in partnership with Colby Community College—and/or through virtual education opportunities. Colby should also look at counseling efforts and work to continue to strengthen relationships with parents, community-based social service agencies, and other community groups to help ensure that all students have the supports they need to be successful.

Next Steps

1. Based on the findings and the recommendations in this needs appraisal, Cross & Joftus recommends that the district participate in the following KLN Communities of Practice (CoPs):
 - Curriculum and Assessment, Stage 1
 - Tiered Instruction, Stage 1
2. Your district facilitator will be in touch with the superintendent within the next couple weeks to discuss the CoPs, answer questions, and begin planning for the drafting of the district's Integrated Improvement Plan.

Process for Analyzing Classroom Walkthrough Data

¹⁰ Reeves, D.B. *Transforming Professional Development Into Student Learning Results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2010.

¹¹ 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.

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.¹²

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.

¹² 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.