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Needs Analysis of Parsons School District – USD 503

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

I. Introduction

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

In 2009, this model, the Learning Network, was expanded to reach all 17 Kansas districts not making AYP, including Parsons School District, USD 503.

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

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

One of the first activities in pursuit of this goal is to conduct a needs assessment of KSDE and all participating districts, focused on their ability to foster and sustain a school improvement process. The needs analysis encompasses an analysis of student achievement and other data; surveys of teachers, principals, and district administrators; and three-day site visits¹ that include interviews and focus groups with students, parents, civic leaders, teachers, academic coaches, principals, district administrators, and board members as well as classroom observations using a process designed by Cross & Joftus called Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success (K-PALSS). All needs assessment activities are designed to both produce findings leading to recommendations for technical assistance and to train school and state officials to do their own needs assessments and classroom observations in the future.

The site visits conclude with a debriefing conducted by Cross & Joftus for the district’s leadership that includes a presentation of some preliminary findings. This report presents all findings and represents the culmination of the needs assessment for Parsons School District, USD 503 (referred to throughout the report as the district or Parsons).

Parsons is doing a number of things very well. Deb Perbeck has been the superintendent of Parsons for eight years, and during her tenure student achievement has climbed steadily. For example, math proficiency has increased from 54.4 percent in 2003 to 74.1

¹ The site visit for Parsons occurred October 14-16, 2009.

percent in 2009. In reading, proficiency has increased from 58.7 percent in 2003 to 80.7 percent in 2009. Most subgroups have also demonstrated general increases in achievement, although achievement scores for African American students, in particular, have been less consistent. Additionally, Garfield Elementary School—one of three elementary schools in the district—was recently recognized as a National Title I Distinguished School, and the middle school received a \$400,000 21st Century Learning Centers grant. Parsons’ board and staff are experienced, capable, and committed to the district’s focus on improving outcomes for students.

Despite progress, however, Parsons is not and should not be satisfied. Reading and math achievement in the district lags behind achievement in both the county and state. For example, in 2007, 71.3 percent and 67.4 percent of Parsons fourth graders were proficient in reading and math, respectively. The corresponding figures for the state were 84.8 percent and 86.0 percent, and 84.7 percent and 81.6 percent for the county. In addition, significant gaps in achievement among subgroups of Parsons students exist, especially for math. For example, while 74.9 percent of White Parsons students were proficient in math, only 52.6 percent of African American students and 48.5 percent of students with disabilities were proficient. As a result, the district did not demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the fourth straight year.

As the findings below demonstrate, Parsons lacks systemic coherence—there is not clear vision for improvement. And while there have been many positive developments within the areas of curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development, substantial challenges remain. Additionally, the district has experienced declining enrollments and budget cuts, making it difficult to implement improvements even on a piecemeal basis.

The report elaborates on each of these strengths and challenges in the Findings section below. Detailed recommendations about how to address them can be found in the section titled Recommendations for Technical Assistance.

II. Findings

Findings from the needs assessment of Parsons are summarized below in the areas of Leadership; Human Capital and Empowering Culture; Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction and Professional Development.

Leadership

One of the main, overarching findings of the district needs analysis is that the district lacks systemic coherence. Coherence means that “the elements of a school district work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy.”² Though there are

² Childress, S., R. Elmore, A. Grossman, and Caroline King (2007). Note on the PELP Coherence Framework. Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University.

many good things taking place in schools and classrooms, the district lacks a clearly articulated strategy for improvement.

This lack of strategic focus is evident in two ways. First, there is no overarching strategic plan that guides the work of the school board and senior administrative staff.³ Second, the district's strategy for improving the quality of schools and instruction appears to be to empower principals to serve as instructional leaders of their schools and then hold them accountable for improved results. This strategy, commonly referred to as school-based management or decision-making, can be and has been implemented effectively in some districts, most notably Edmonton Public School District. Such a strategy, however, requires that district and school policies, systems, and allocation and use of resources are aligned to support the success of school principals, which is not the current reality in Parsons.

This approach also requires that school principals are highly effective and supportive of the strategy. While the principals in Parsons are strong and willing to assume major responsibility for improvement in their schools, they all reported a desire for a unified vision of instructional improvement—such as a district-wide focus on differentiated instruction—along with additional collaboration with their colleagues and support from the central office. The district's superintendent and assistant superintendent agreed that such a focus—and ongoing, consistent, and well-implemented support from the district office—has the potential to improve the consistency and quality of curriculum and program implementation, and ultimately enhance student learning.

In addition, the principals, superintendent, assistant superintendent, and several teachers with whom we spoke agreed that a more unified vision for instructional improvement and collaboration among schools and the central office would also improve students' transitions from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school. Currently, focus group participants agreed that students face an unnecessarily difficult and jarring transition when moving from one level to the next.

A final area that would benefit from a more strategic and coherent approach is special education. While services for students with individual education plans (IEPs) in Parsons have improved, principals and teachers acknowledge that these students are not viewed as all educators' responsibility. Moreover, district administrators and cooperative representatives agree that improved coordination could lead to improved service quality for and increased achievement among students with disabilities.

Other findings related to the leadership of the district include the following:

- The board and staff in key leadership positions are experienced, capable, and committed to the district's focus on improving student achievement for all students. Moreover, the district is committed to establishing effective leaders at

³ While there are five district goals, most board members agreed that (1) most goals are actually strategies; (2) the district does not track progress toward achieving the goals; and (3) the goals do not guide the work of the board or senior leadership team.

all levels. For instance, the district had three of its five principals serve as mentees for one year before taking over the responsibility of school leader.

- A comprehensive facilities plan was developed and carried out through the support of a \$14.7 million bond issue that passed with 73% of the vote. As a result, the district's facilities have improved greatly over the last two years.

Despite these positive signs, the district faces several additional challenges:

- Parsons is experiencing a worrisome decline in student enrollment, from 1,430 in 2006-07 to 1,230 in 2009-10. The decline was especially drastic between 2008-09 and 2009-10 when enrollment dropped by 100 students (the previous average decline was approximately 30 students a year). A large portion of students moved away, perhaps due to the recession, but a significant number (41) stayed in the community and chose to attend school in one of three neighboring districts.⁴
- One result of declining enrollment is a declining budget, although the recession plays a significant role as well. In 2009-10, Parsons faced a \$733,000 decrease in its funding from the state, partially offset by an increase in federal funding of \$523,000 (a net loss of \$210,000 out of a general fund budget of \$9.4 million). This loss was absorbed by laying off six certified staff and four classified staff. While personally painful for the staff members who lost their jobs, the district insists that the cuts did not hurt student learning—some very small classes were combined. According to Parsons' budget director, the district is expecting another cut of approximately \$163,000 during this school year and still more cuts next school year. While the district has the ability to absorb a cut of \$163,000 during the school year, the budget director and superintendent are concerned further cuts are likely to cut into services or critical staff positions. It should be noted that the district has handled the budget cuts effectively, managing to add to its now \$1 million contingency fund to ensure salaries can be paid if state payments are late and to absorb at least some future budget cuts.
- There also appears to be a widespread negative perception of the district, especially the middle school, among the larger community. Students, teachers, administrators, and knowledgeable community leaders insist that the perception is false, although there is some acknowledgement that student motivation and parent involvement are low.

Human Capital

Parsons displays a number of strengths related to human capital:

- The district appears to have talented and highly committed staff at all levels who enjoy working in Parsons.

⁴ Kansas has an open enrollment plan that enables students to attend school in any district they choose.

- The elementary schools' literacy coaches are widely viewed as very effective and serve as critical players in the district's improvement efforts.
- The district has a well-implemented mentorship program for new teachers and teachers who change grades, which pays mentors an honorarium for their time. Some teachers did note, however, that while the individual mentoring support they receive is helpful, group meetings are not.

Parsons also faces three significant human capital challenges:

- The districts' evaluation tools and processes for evaluating teachers, principals, and the superintendent are not based on student outcomes and generally not viewed as effective by any of the stakeholders. As a result, the district lacks a performance-based system for making decisions about cutting staff during lean budget years.
- There is a need for literacy and math coaches at the secondary level and for math coaches at the elementary level (see the sections on Curriculum and Instruction for more on this issue).
- There are concerns among teachers and principals about the quality of special education paraprofessionals, and it is not clear that these concerns are reflected in the paraprofessionals' evaluations.

Empowering Culture

We uncovered several strengths associated with an empowering culture in Parsons:

- The high school, after undergoing significant turnover among principals, has greatly enhanced the learning environment, while significantly reducing student discipline referrals. The high school also offers students opportunities to take rigorous courses and earn college credits, through its dual and concurrent enrollment program with the community college.
- There are significant opportunities for establishing deep connections with community organizations—such as the state hospital, the hospital, the community college, the recreation commissioner—to enhance and improve services for students.
- Parsons provides afterschool opportunities for students at every grade level. The middle school just won a 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) grant of \$400,000 for afterschool programs.
- Although in the early stages, this year the middle school and high school began implementing the AVID program to encourage more students to go to college.

- There are two preschool programs offered, including one focused on serving students with disabilities.

Several challenges remain that the district must address as it develops a coherent approach to improvement:

- The district serves a very needy student population. There are significant numbers of foster children, and approximately two-thirds of the student population is low income, a figure that is likely to increase due to recent job layoffs in the area. In addition, the county was recently ranked third from the bottom in the state in terms of “behavioral health,” which includes indicators such as drug and alcohol use and teen pregnancies.
- Although a social worker was widely described as very effective in helping needy students, there is no comprehensive approach to serving the behavioral, health, and resource needs of its many at-risk students.
- Teachers, principals, and district administrators described student transitions—from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school—as unnecessarily difficult.
- There were some questions raised among students (almost all of whom are high performing), parents, and at least a couple of board members about the rigor of schooling. Students noted that teachers in the high school often do not push students to achieve to their full potential.
- There is a significant unmet demand for preschool.
- Low parent involvement was widely cited as a problem in the district, especially at the secondary level.

Curriculum, Assessment, Instruction, and Professional Development

Findings related to the areas of curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development are based upon a comparative analysis of information from the following three sources: (1) student achievement data; (2) perceptions identified by Parsons’ educators on “Surveys of Educational Practices,” and by representatives from all constituent groups during focus groups and interviews; and (3) data collected during classroom visits, which document to what extent effective teaching/learning practices are being implemented.

More detail about the data collected during classroom visits using the K-PALSS (Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success) process can be found in the Appendix of this report.

The need for a clearly articulated strategy of improvement is evident in many areas throughout the following sections of the report. While the district has taken several steps to strengthen curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development, a number of these steps appear disconnected from each other—or at the very least, are not working seamlessly to improve learning outcomes for students.

Curriculum

Parsons displays a number of curriculum strengths:

- The district has a written curriculum at the middle and high school levels, which is aligned with the state standards. Elementary schools use Reading First and Everyday Math as common materials for ensuring alignment with the state standards.
- The district builds “collaboration” time into the master calendar to enable educators to work collectively rather than in isolation. All teachers are given regularly scheduled time every week to discuss curriculum, teaching and assessment strategies, and learning outcomes as measured by the quality of student work. In each building, teachers receive between 45-60 minutes to meet with colleagues in professional learning communities (PLCs) by grade level and/or by department/subject.
- Using the AVID concepts, concurrent credit for courses at the college level, and additional course offerings, the high school is working to prepare students for post-secondary education or training experiences.

In addition to these strengths, there are several curriculum challenges as well:

- Currently, Parsons lacks systematic procedures to ensure effective vertical curricular alignment—between elementary and middle school, and middle and high school—and procedures for monitoring, evaluating, and reviewing the impact of curriculum implementation on a continuous basis.

<p>“We have a lot of fragmentation of programs across the district; each building does its own thing.” <i>–Literacy coach</i></p>

- Although the rhetoric in Parsons supports including all students and ensuring that they have access to the core curriculum, students with disabilities appear to have limited access to the core curriculum both at the high school and the middle

school. Focus groups with teachers and principals noted that there were too few special education staff (both paraprofessionals and teachers) allocated to the middle school. Special education teachers at the middle and high school also reported pulling students out of their regular classrooms to teach the core math and language arts curriculum.

“At the start of the 2009-2010 school year, there were 25 students with disabilities in this building. I teach a math class for 15 students with disabilities and a language arts class for 18 students with disabilities.” – *Secondary special education teacher*

- The curriculum is taught selectively with a focus on items evaluated on state tests in the year that they are taught. This narrow focus leads to gaps in student knowledge and skills needed to master the tested indicators at higher grade levels. Increasing the breadth and depth of the curriculum, as it is written and taught, can ensure increased rigor. Focus groups with teachers and administrators and surveys of representative school-based staff members identified the need for increased rigor for all students. Parent representatives also voiced the need for a more rigorous curriculum.

“Most students regurgitate information for tests, but do not truly learn it. They are not asked to apply it to a situation. Thus, the level of learning needed for increased student achievement is not there.” – *Classroom teacher*

- Improved communication is needed between special education and general education teachers and staff around curriculum issues and student learning outcomes. Likewise, communication between the district and the cooperative regarding special education goals and professional development is lacking.
- The district lacks an identified focus on literacy that is articulated and taught across all levels. The elementary level has implemented the Reading First model to guide reading instruction. There is no model to guide the instruction of literacy skills at the secondary level, however. Instruction specific to vocabulary and comprehension is not happening outside of the English/Language Arts classroom, particularly at the middle and high school levels. Focus groups of both teachers and administrators revealed a lack of willingness among science and social studies teachers to teach reading skills.⁵
- The district lacks a culturally responsive curriculum. None of the 38 classrooms visited across all levels demonstrated the use of culturally responsive readings or perspectives. And, consistently, a high percentage of African American students fail to demonstrate adequate yearly progress on state tests. The need for cultural

⁵ For more information on the crucial issue of adolescent literacy, see Carnegie Corporation of New York’s Council on Advancing Literacy. (2009). *Time to Act: An Agenda for Advancing Adolescent Literacy for College and Career Success*, available at www.carnegie.org/literacy/tta/.

responsiveness is consistent with findings from the 2005 study “Bridging the Achievement Gap in Parsons, USD 503,” completed by Wichita State University.

Assessment

Two assessment strengths stand out:

- Multiple and common assessments are administered to provide meaningful feedback on student learning for instructional purposes. Elementary schools use DIBELS, Running Records, and MAP assessments. Common assessments are also being developed at the middle and high school levels.
- School and district leaders coordinate the implementation of state assessments. Teachers and students have access to computers to practice taking the Center for Education Testing and Evaluation (CETE) formative tests, and the Kids Identification System (KIDS) is updated to ensure that students are identified accurately and that the district is able to disaggregate student performance data.

Yet three significant challenges remain, at least two of which are directly related to the district’s lack of systemic coherence:

Parsons’ Maxim 43: “There is no point in testing if you don’t look at the data, understand it and don’t change.” –*Annual Growth for All Students: Catch-up Growth for Those Who are Behind.*

- Currently, the district does not have systematic procedures for data-based decision making to continuously enhance student achievement district-wide. Teachers need professional development to learn how to access, understand, analyze, and interpret data to identify instructional strategies needed to address student learning needs.
- Parsons lacks a longitudinal data system to track student performance and link data from multiple assessments (e.g., screening, diagnostic, progress monitoring, formative assessments, and state assessments).
- Teacher survey results and interviews with special education staff and general education teachers indicated a need to reduce the number of Kansas Assessment of Modified Measures (KAMM) assessments administered across the district. Criteria need to be developed and used consistently to ensure that students with disabilities are taking the appropriate state assessments.

Instruction

Table 1 presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 79%) 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.

The sound instructional strategies that *principals* believe are most *strongly evident* in their schools include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited by 71% of principals as strongly evident)
- identifying struggling students and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction (cited by 43% of principals as strongly evident).

The strategies believed by *principals* to be *least evident* include:

- measuring the effectiveness of staff development by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning (selected as strongly evident by 0% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 57%)
- participating in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation (selected as strongly evident by 14% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 57%)
- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (selected as strongly evident by 14% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 43%).

Generally, the sound instructional strategies that teachers believe are most strongly evident and least evident in their schools are similar to those selected by principals. Teachers on the whole, however, identified a much higher number of strategies as strongly evident and very few strategies as minimally evident or non-evident.

Teachers believe that the strategies that are most *strongly evident* include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 81% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 1%)
- identifying struggling students and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction (cited as strongly evident by 64% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 10%)
- 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 63% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 10%)
- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment (cited as strongly evident by 62% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 10%)

- 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 60% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 4%).

While teachers believe that many strategies are strongly evident, teachers' responses were **divided** on a couple of strategies between *least evident* and *strongly evident*:

- measuring the effectiveness of staff development by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning (selected as strongly evident by 25% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 30%)
- providing adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions to support teacher and administrator learning (selected as strongly evident by 29% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 26%).

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

Please rate the extent to which you believe the following instructional practices are evident in your school.	Principals		Teachers	
	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^
Educators create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments.	71%	0%	81%	1%
Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction.	43%	0%	64%	10%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.	29%	0%	63%	10%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment.	29%	0%	62%	10%
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.	29%	0%	60%	4%
Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based	29%	0%	57%	5%

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^
on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.				
Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	29%	0%	56%	1%
Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well being.	29%	0%	42%	11%
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development.	29%	14%	55%	8%
Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level.	14%	0%	51%	4%
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	14%	0%	45%	22%
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction.	14%	0%	43%	15%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.	14%	14%	44%	22%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning.	14%	14%	33%	24%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning.	14%	29%	29%	25%
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	14%	43%	23%	23%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	14%	57%	37%	26%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students.	0%	29%	37%	14%

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^
The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning.	0%	57%	25%	30%

Teacher Response Rate = 84/107

Principal Response Rate = 7/7

Source: Cross & Joftus survey of Parsons principals and teachers October 2009.

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

^The response option “No Opinion” was deleted from this presentation. Less than 1% of teachers and 0% of principals selected this option on any response.

Despite the fact that most principals and teachers believe that sound instructional strategies are evident or strongly evident in Parsons, classroom observations and focus group conversations paint a much more complex picture:

- Parsons’ student scores on state tests have climbed steadily—one indicator of effective instructional practice. Administrators and teachers noted that the additional resources, professional development, and coaching staff provided through the Reading First program likely contributed to increased gains at the elementary level. In 2007-08, at the elementary level 92.3 percent of students scored proficient and above in reading. In contrast, at the middle school level, only 73.2 percent of students scored proficient and above in reading, and at the high school level, 74.7 percent of students scored proficient and above.

- During observations of 38 classrooms, all levels of schooling demonstrated orderly and well-managed environments conducive to learning. In middle school classrooms, teachers demonstrated the greatest percentage of effective learning environment practices, research-based instructional practices predictably linked to expediting student achievement, and teaching strategies that required students to use higher level cognitive skills. Middle school practices could serve

“We’re good about the teaching here, but not so good about the learning.”
-Parsons district administrators

as models during district professional development sessions, beginning with the practice of posting standards in the learning environment in student-friendly “I can” statements, as well as the other effective “teaching” and “learning” practices identified in the Appendix.

Several additional instructional challenges are apparent:

- Only two of Marzano’s nine research-based practices were evident in over 70% of the 38 classrooms visited. (See Appendix for specific percentages by school level.)

- Currently, Parsons lacks systematic procedures for conducting classroom visits and using classroom observation data to inform professional development priorities. Systems and procedures should ensure that administrators monitor the implementation of varied and research-based practices, provide substantive feedback to teachers, and follow-up with support in order to target practices that accelerate student learning.
- Teachers have limited access to technology and related professional development. This limitation prevents teachers from feeling adequately trained to maximize the use of technology to support delivery of the curriculum.
- Focus groups of teachers and administrators agreed that homework is being implemented inconsistently district-wide. Different schools have different homework policies and supports.
- There is a need to develop consistent guidelines for the early identification and support for low-performing students by differentiating instructional practices.

“Fewer modifications and manipulatives are allowed or accepted at the secondary level. Varied instructional techniques would help students with disabilities grasp concepts, and all students would benefit.” – *Special education teacher*

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Parsons exhibits several professional development strengths:

- Through the Reading First program, elementary schools have benefited from on-going professional development. This is evident by the consistency of effective practices found in observations of elementary classrooms. Academic coaches reinforce effective practices by providing continuous feedback. By providing math and literacy coaches at the middle and high school levels, and using their skills to reinforce the implementation of professional development practices, the district may be able to replicate the success it has seen at the elementary level.
- The middle and high schools use professional learning community (PLC) time to assess student learning collaboratively and plan appropriate instruction.
- Parsons has additional opportunities to participate in professional development provided through the Tri-County Cooperative. The cooperative offers professional development related to MTSS, secondary reading, reading across the curriculum, Ruby Payne’s approach—which focuses on poverty issues and challenges confronting African American children—and differentiated instruction, for general and special education teachers. The cooperative also provides Infinites, an online service that allows general education and special education staff to build specific instructional

strategies and skills, and Training and Assistance for Classroom Teachers (TACT), a service that provides classroom support and model teaching strategies.

Despite these opportunities, Parsons faces a number of professional development challenges as well:

“Too much time is spent in meetings with excuses and blame and not enough time developing actions for improving results.” – *Parsons district administrator*

- Although the district provides time for staff to engage in professional development opportunities, only the Reading First initiative (limited to elementary schools) has provided consistent training and skill development along with follow-up and coaching support to improve teaching practices.
- Administrators and teachers noted that teachers lacked sufficient opportunities to practice effective differentiated instruction techniques with peers and coaches.
- Teachers and administrators all agreed that professional development needs to be “on-going, job-embedded, and specifically tied to the learning needs of students,” as identified by assessment data.
- Focus groups representing both teachers and administrators suggested that by using a classroom observation process like PALSS, they could implement a consistent and systematic procedure for gathering data to inform future professional development, based on the implementation of research-based effective teaching practices.
- Both teachers and administrators agreed that staff members need additional professional development to integrate and use technology effectively in the classroom—so that students are able to use it meaningfully, participation increases, and new learning occurs.
- Professional development priorities need to be aligned with the District/School “Building Academic Needs Assessment Plans” and targeted to ensure the investment of teacher time results in the continuous improvement of student achievement.
- Special education focus group participants, the director of special education, and the assistant director of special education all reported that few Parsons staff members attend Tri-County sponsored professional development. Both the district and the cooperative should work together to maximize participation in relevant professional development sponsored by the cooperative.

III. Recommendations for Technical Assistance

One of the primary goals of this needs assessment is to identify areas in which the district could most benefit from technical assistance and to design that technical assistance in a way that will have the greatest impact on the district’s school quality and student

achievement. Based on this needs assessment, Cross & Jofus, LLC recommends that the technical assistance provided to Parsons address one or more of the following general recommendations:

- 1) Define an instructionally oriented theory of change and then develop, implement, and monitor policies, systems (including professional development and systematic classroom observations), and practices that support that theory. Ensure that there are clear definitions of roles for the superintendent, assistant superintendent, principals, assistant principals, and instructional coaches in developing the instructional improvement theory of action and action plan, and in implementing and monitoring achievement of the plan. Coordinate the development and implementation of the plan with the Tri-County Cooperative to ensure that the needs of all students are accounted for and met by the plan.
- 2) Develop a district-wide strategic plan that includes measurable goals and strategies and report regularly to the board about progress toward meeting the goals. As part of this process, redefine the working relationship with the Tri-County Cooperative and establish shared goals and accountability structures for meeting the needs of students with disabilities.
- 3) Revise the evaluation tools and processes for teachers, principals, and the superintendent, placing an emphasis on student outcomes.
- 4) To ensure the effective implementation of a rigorous curriculum:
 - Develop and implement systematic vertical communication procedures to align the curriculum between the elementary and middle levels, and middle and high school levels
 - Develop and implement follow-up procedures for monitoring, evaluating, and reviewing the impact of curriculum on a continuous basis
 - Provide resources to support inclusion of all students and to ensure that all students have access to the core curriculum
 - Develop a district-wide literacy plan that is culturally responsive and focused on 21st Century literacy skills
 - Include the “non-tested indicators” in the state standards in the curriculum—as it is written *and* taught—to ensure the delivery of a high-quality rigorous curriculum for *all* students.
- 5) Budget allowing, add at least one, and preferably two, academic coaches at the secondary level. Consider making the middle school a Title I school, to enable more federal resources to be allocated. Another strategy is to reallocate some Title

- It funds out of the district’s professional development offerings to apply to the middle school. Math coaches at the elementary school level are also needed.
- 6) Draw from the homework policy and processes used by the middle and high school principals to develop a systematic plan to enhance the use of homework as an effective learning tool and, at the elementary level, parent engagement.
 - 7) Continue to expand the AVID program, initiated this year in the middle school, based upon an evaluation of the practices that demonstrated the greatest impact on student learning. Consider using virtual offerings to expand options—including Advanced Placement classes—for high school students.
 - 8) Develop procedures to ensure data-based decision making. Continue to develop a comprehensive data system to link assessment data and track student performance over time. Develop and ensure the use of explicit criteria for identifying the appropriate state assessments for students with disabilities.
 - 9) As the district develops and implements a district-wide theory of action and strategic plan, it should consider using a model like that used at the middle school for professional development. This model includes SMART (Specific, Manageable, Achievable, Relevant, and Timely) Goals, building outcomes, and strategies proposed for accomplishing each outcome. Working as a collaborative, a representative group of district staff, administrators, and coaches can develop, implement, and continuously evaluate a system-wide plan that draws on an analysis of student achievement data, identifies research-based instructional practices that will have the greatest impact on increasing achievement, and consistently assesses the extent of implementation using a “walk-through visitation protocol” with attributes similar to PALSS.
 - 10) Apply for a grant—perhaps with the State Hospital—that would enable the district to implement a comprehensive approach to meeting students’ health, behavioral, and resource needs.⁶
 - 11) Develop a comprehensive strategy for enhancing and improving services for students and their families through partnerships with community businesses, hospitals, the recreation commission, and the community college.
 - 12) Develop and implement a communications plan for addressing community misconceptions about the district.

Once district leadership has had an opportunity to review this report, a representative from Cross & Jofthus will contact the Parsons superintendent to finalize a technical assistance plan that includes 24 days of external support for the time period January through September of 2010. This plan, developed in collaboration between the senior

⁶ Ottawa School District, for example, is implementing Communities in Schools.

leadership of the district and Cross & Jofus will describe in detail the goals, objectives, activities, service provider, and timeline of the technical assistance.

APPENDIX
Findings from Classroom Observations
PARSONS SCHOOL DISTRICT

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

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

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

Elementary Schools (21 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	TEACHING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
<p>Learning Environment</p> <p>100% Orderly/Clean/Well-Managed 100% Safe/Conducive to Learning 62% Evidence of Learning/Displays student work</p> <p>Instructional Design</p> <p>24% Standards-based lesson</p> <p>5% Data-based instruction is explicit</p> <p>14% Modeling</p> <p>90% Checking understanding</p> <p>48% Guided Practice</p> <p>48% Independent Practice</p> <p>10% Teacher/Student Evaluation /Summary</p> <p>Strategies Used</p> <p>Adjust for multiple learning styles</p> <p>76% visual</p> <p>76% auditory</p> <p>33% kinesthetic</p> <p>0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives</p> <p>5% Address diverse language needs</p> <p>10% Identify similarities & differences</p> <p>19% Summarize & take notes</p> <p>76% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition</p> <p>76% Use homework & practice opportunities</p> <p>24% Represent knowledge in multiple ways</p> <p>19% Organize learning in groups</p> <p>52% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback</p> <p>5% Generate & test hypotheses</p> <p>19% Use cues, questions & advance organizers</p>		<p>Learning Environment</p> <p>Instructional Design</p> <p>Need to communicate standards as the focus for lessons, based on evidence of previous learning.</p> <p>Use of explicit modeling needs to increase.</p> <p>Increase guided practice activities prior to independent work.</p> <p>Active engagement of students in the evaluation process should be strengthened.</p> <p>Strategies Used</p> <p>Provide more opportunities for kinesthetic learning.</p> <p>A larger repertoire of instructional strategies is needed for educators to scaffold instruction for all tiers of learning, address culturally responsive teaching, and meet diverse learning needs.</p> <p>Provide professional development in using the six research-based Marzano strategies which were not evident in at least 50% of the classrooms visited.</p>

Elementary Schools (21 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	LEARNING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
<p>Cognitive Level</p> <p>29% Knowledge 48% Comprehension</p> <p>19% Application 5% Analysis 0% Synthesis 0% Evaluation</p>		<p>Students need to be provided instruction and opportunities to demonstrate higher-level thinking skills, beginning with application.</p>
<p>Environment/Resources</p> <p>52% Textbooks 62% Supplemental materials</p> <p>33% Manipulatives 43% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 24% Worksheets: Open-ended/Fill-in/Multiple choice</p>		<p>Students need increased opportunities for using manipulatives, technology, materials that reflect diversity, and worksheets that require responses to open-ended answers.</p>
<p>Interactive Behaviors</p> <p>86% Active involvement in classwork 90% Asks/answers questions 76% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)</p>		<p>Students need opportunities to demonstrate self-evaluation of their learning progress and to develop ownership for plans to improve achievement.</p>
<p>Strategies Demonstrated</p> <p>Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways:</p> <p>38% interpersonal 5% intrapersonal</p> <p>100% verbal-linguistic 24% logistical-mathematical 14% visual-spatial 33% bodily-kinesthetic 10% musical-rhythmic</p>		<p>Students need opportunities to demonstrate their learning using a variety of multiple intelligences—interpersonal, intrapersonal, logistical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, & musical-rhythmic.</p>
<p>Work Produced</p> <p>0% Individual Work 0% Group Work 0% Written work 0% Project 0% Presentation/Performance 0% Self-Evaluation/Reflection</p>		<p>(Not completed during classroom visitations)</p>

Middle Schools (9 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	TEACHING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
<p>Learning Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 100% Orderly/Clean/Well-Managed 100% Safe/Conducive to Learning 56% Evidence of Learning/Displays student work <p>Instructional Design</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 67% Standards-based lesson 11% Data-based instruction is explicit 22% Modeling 100% Checking understanding 67% Guided Practice 56% Independent Practice 11% Teacher/Student Evaluation/Summary <p>Strategies Used</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adjust for multiple learning styles 100% visual 100% auditory 11% kinesthetic 0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 0% Address diverse language needs 0% Identify similarities & differences 22% Summarize & take notes 67% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 100% Use homework & practice opportunities 11% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 22% Organize learning in groups 56% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 0% Generate & test hypotheses 56% Use cues, questions & advance organizers 		<p>Learning Environment</p> <p>Instructional Design</p> <p>Students would benefit from lessons designed based on existing data. Use of modeling in small flexible learning groups would increase student learning.</p> <p>Students would benefit from practicing self-evaluation techniques.</p> <p>Strategies Used</p> <p>Students would benefit from being provided kinesthetic learning experiences during instruction.</p> <p>The use of culturally responsive teaching that addresses diversity within the student population will benefit all students and the community.</p> <p>Providing instruction using the six Marzano research-based instructional strategies which are not evident in at least 50% of the classrooms would increase the likelihood of greater student achievement gains.</p>

Middle Schools (9 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	LEARNING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
<p>Cognitive Level</p> <p>33% Knowledge 11% Comprehension 44% Application 11% Analysis 0% Synthesis 0% Evaluation</p>		<p>Students need to be provided instruction and opportunities to demonstrate higher-level thinking skills.</p>
<p>Environment/Resources</p> <p>78% Textbooks 44% Supplemental materials 11% Manipulatives 33% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 44% Worksheets: Open-ended/Fill-in/Multiple choice</p>		<p>Student use of textbooks, technology and manipulatives should be increased to address diverse learning needs; the use of resources should be extended beyond worksheets to strengthen learning skills.</p>
<p>Interactive Behaviors</p> <p>100% Active involvement in classwork 100% Asks/answers questions 67% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)</p>		<p>Students should be provided opportunities for regular and continuous feedback on performance with self-evaluation to take responsibility for their future learning.</p>
<p>Strategies Demonstrated</p> <p>Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways:</p> <p>22% interpersonal 0% intrapersonal 100% verbal-linguistic 44% logistical-mathematical 0% visual-spatial 11% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic</p>		<p>Students need to be provided opportunities to demonstrate their learning using a variety of multiple intelligences: interpersonal, intrapersonal, logistical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and musical rhythmic.</p>
<p>Work Produced</p> <p>44% Individual Work 11% Group Work 0% Written work 0% Project 0% Presentation/Performance 0% Self-Evaluation/Reflection</p>		<p>Students need assignments that require them to work in groups and present their work with projects, presentations, and performances which include opportunities for self-evaluation of learning progress.</p>

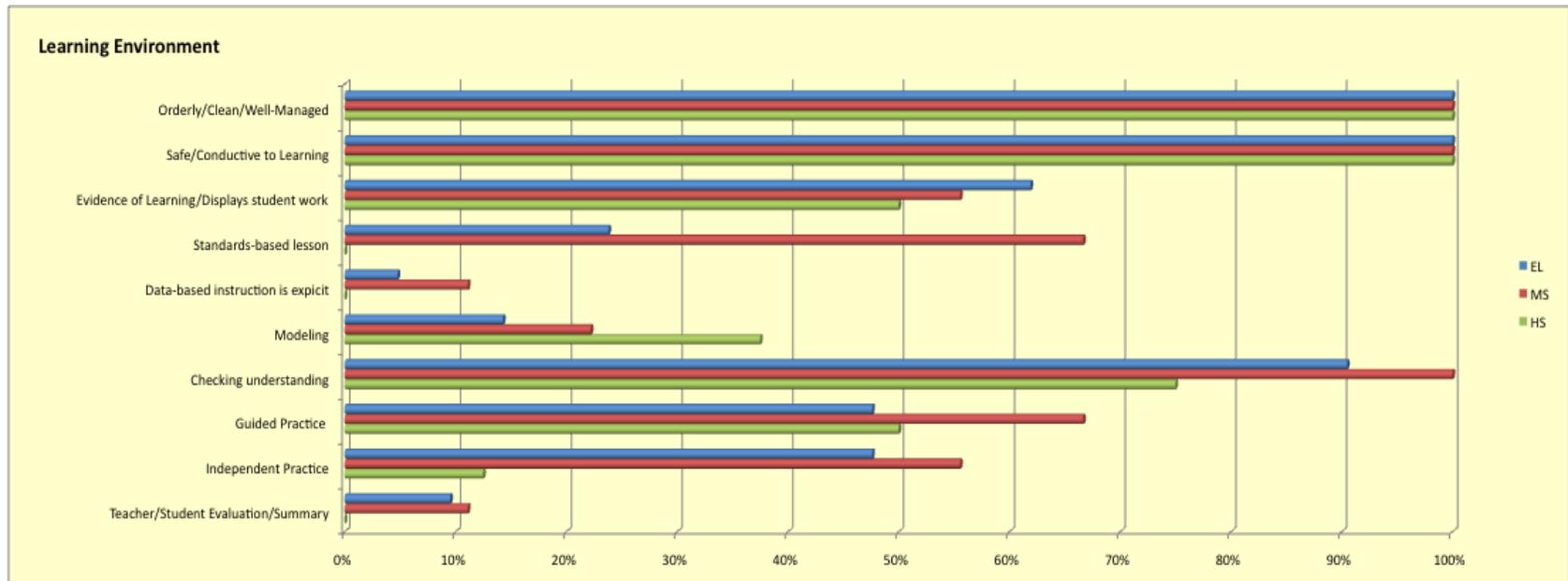
High School (Eight Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	TEACHING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
<p>Learning Environment</p> <p>100% Orderly/Clean/Well-Managed 100% Safe/Conducive to Learning 50% Evidence of Learning/Displays student work</p>		<p>Students would benefit from having models of their work displayed as samples of expected levels of performance, accompanied by rubrics/criteria used for scoring.</p>
<p>Instructional Design</p> <p>0% Standards-based lesson 0% Data-based instruction is explicit 38% Modeling 75% Checking understanding 50% Guided Practice 13% Independent Practice 0% Teacher/Student Evaluation/Summary</p>		<p>Communicating the standards addressed in each lesson helps students focus on the learning results they are expected to accomplish each day. Students need opportunities for self-evaluation in order to take responsibility for future learning</p>
<p>Strategies Used</p> <p>Adjust for multiple learning styles</p> <p>100% visual 63% auditory 0% kinesthetic 0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 0% Address diverse language needs 0% Identify similarities & differences 0% Summarize & take notes 38% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 63% Use homework & practice opportunities 0% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 13% Organize learning in groups 13% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 0% Generate & test hypotheses 0% Use cues, questions & advance organizers</p>		<p>Students need experiences that scaffold learning and accommodate diverse needs and learning styles.</p> <p>All of the Marzano strategies listed on the left side are needed to accelerate student learning. Only one strategy, the "use of homework and practice," was evident in more than 50% of classrooms observed.</p>

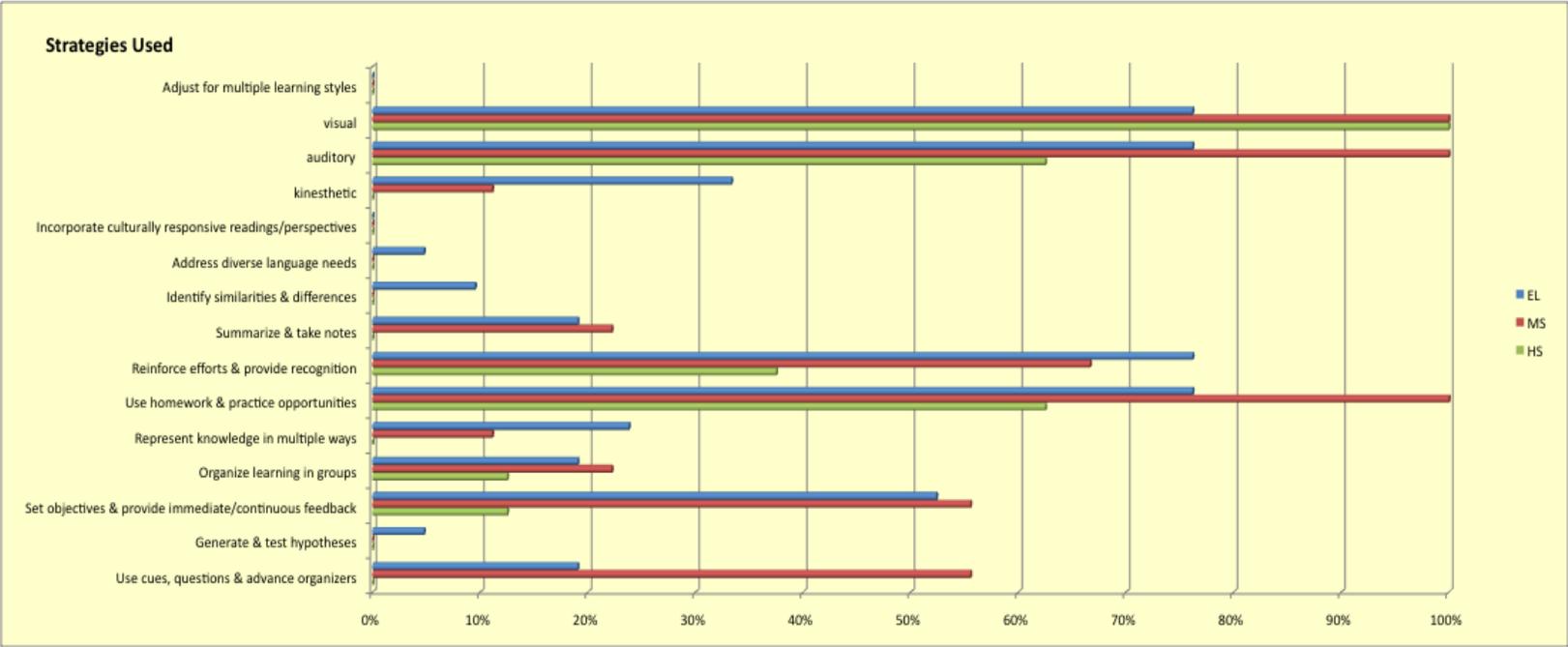
High School (Eight Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	LEARNING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
Cognitive Level 38% Knowledge 13% Comprehension 50% Application 0% Analysis 0% Synthesis 0% Evaluation		Students need to be provided instruction and opportunities to demonstrate higher-level thinking skills.
Environment/Resources 63% Textbooks 13% Supplemental materials 0% Manipulatives 75% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 50% Worksheets: Open-ended/Fill-in/Multiple choice		Students need increased opportunities for using supplemental materials, manipulatives, and other materials that reflect diversity.
Interactive Behaviors 75% Active involvement in classwork 100% Asks/answers questions 38% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)		Students need to receive feedback and develop skills for reflection and self-evaluation.
Strategies Demonstrated Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways: 25% interpersonal 0% intrapersonal 63% verbal-linguistic 50% logistical-mathematical 0% visual-spatial 0% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic		Students need opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge using a balance of multiple intelligences.
Work Produced 25% Individual Work 13% Group Work 25% Written work 0% Project 0% Presentation/Performance 0% Self-Evaluation/Reflection		Students need assignments that require them to work in groups and present their work with projects, presentations, and performances, which include opportunities for self-evaluation of learning.

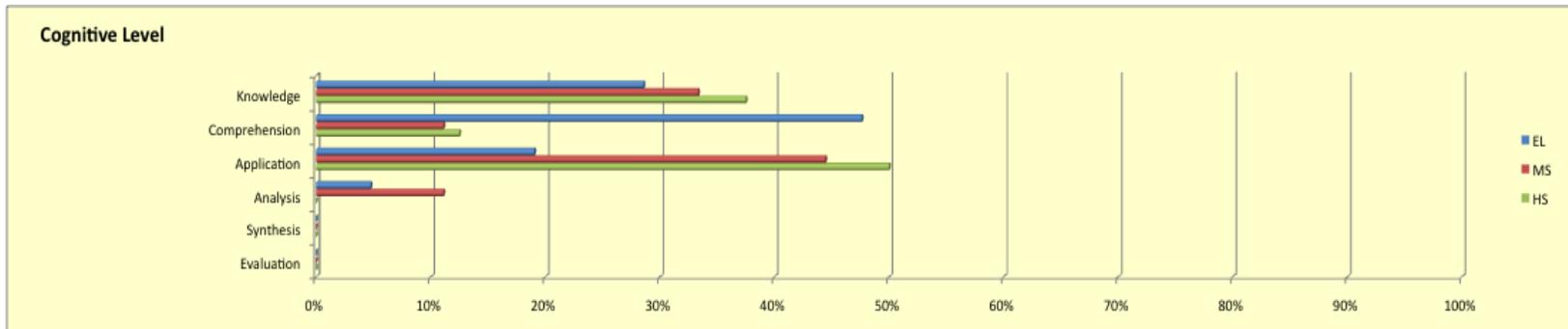
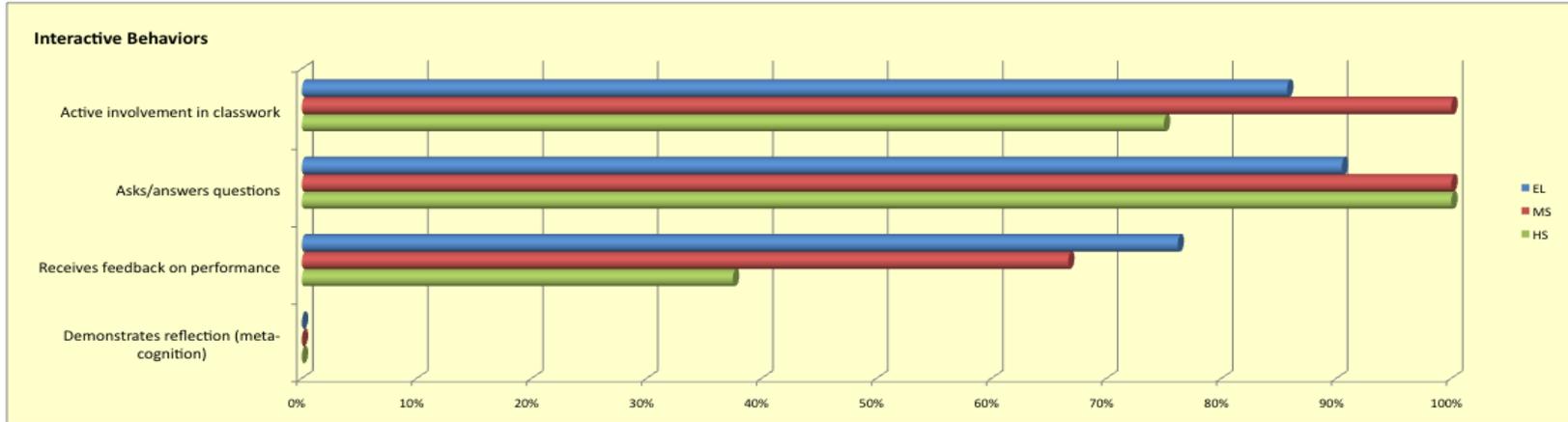
TEACHING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN PARSONS SCHOOL DISTRICT – USD 503



TEACHING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN PARSONS SCHOOL DISTRICT – USD 503 (continued)



LEARNING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN PARSONS SCHOOL DISTRICT – USD 503



LEARNING PRACTICES OBSERVED IN PARSONS SCHOOL DISTRICT – USD 503 (continued)

