

November

11

Needs Analysis of Stanton County Schools, USD 452

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 452, Stanton County 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 452 occurred October 27-28, 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 Stanton County Schools, USD 452 (referred to throughout the report as USD 452 or Stanton County).

Stanton County Student Demographics

In the 2010-11 school year, just over 500 students attended Stanton County schools, and enrollment has remained fairly steady for the past several years. The district employs 45 certified and classified full- and part-time employees, and now has two schools—Stanton County Elementary School and Stanton County Junior-Senior High School. Stanton County Middle School was closed last year, when the secondary schools were combined.

Demographic patterns have shifted somewhat in Stanton County over the past five years. In 2010-11, approximately 52% of students identified as White, and almost 45% identified as Hispanic/Latino.

Table I—Demographic Patterns in USD 452

Race-Ethnicity	2006-07	2010-11
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.0%	0.0%
African-American	0.6%	.6%
Hispanic/Latino	41.4%	44.9%
Asian/ Native Hawaiian/Pac. Islander	0.4%	0.0%
Multiracial	2.3%	2.7%
White	55.3%	51.8%

As is the case in many districts across Kansas and the United States, the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals has risen over the past five years—in 2010-11, 60% of students were identified as economically disadvantaged, an increase of four percentage points from 2006-07. At the same time, however, the percentage of students identified as students with disabilities has decreased markedly, from 13.9% to 8.9%, well below the state average of 13.5%.³

Forty-two percent of students have also been identified as English language learners (ELLs), an eight percentage-point increase from 2006-07, when 34% of students were identified as ELLs. This increase in the number of ELL students poses a significant challenge for the district.

Student Achievement

³ KSDE and district data.

Overall, the majority of Stanton County students have performed relatively well on state assessment tests. The group, “all students” has met state assessment benchmarks or criterion benchmarks for proficiency in reading and math for the past three years (for additional detail, see Table II below). Stanton County schools also received seven Kansas Standards of Excellence Awards in 2011, including building-wide awards for math at the elementary and secondary levels.

Table II—Stanton County 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 (89.0%)	Met (83.2%)	Met (83.6%) ⁴
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (83.2%)	Met (78.4%) ⁴	No (76.7%)
Students with Disabilities	N/A	No (61.9%)	N/A
ELL Students	Met (80.9%)	No (70.1%)	Met (70.5%) ⁵
African-American Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hispanic	Met (79.8%)	Met (76.7%) ⁴	No (71.2%)
White	Met (95.0%)	Met (88.5%)	Met (94.3%)
Asian*	N/A	N/A	N/A
American Indian or Alaskan*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Multi-Racial*	N/A	N/A	N/A
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Is.*	N/A	N/A	N/A

Mathematics – Met AYP in 2009; did not in 2010. Met in 2011; not on Improvement.

Student Category	Year & State Target		
	2009 - 70.5%	2010 - 76.4%	2011 – 82.3%
All students	Met (90.4%)	Met (81.1%)	Met (84.5%)
Free & Reduced Meals	Met (85.6%)	Met (76.9%)	Met (79.7%) ⁴
Students with Disabilities	N/A	No (59.5%)	N/A
ELL Students	Met (86.8%)	Met (74.4%) ⁴	Met (77.9%) ⁴
African-American Students	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hispanic	Met (85.7%)	Met (76.5%)	Met (78.8%) ⁴
White	Met (93.3%)	Met (84.6%)	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

Overall Graduation Rate: 2009—100%, 2010—96.2%, 2011—81.5%[^]

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

⁵ The group made Safe Harbor through the hypothesis test at the 75% level of confidence.

Notes:

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

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

N/A indicates that data are not available.

Despite these accomplishments, however, USD 452 faces some clear achievement challenges. Students with disabilities and English language learners failed to meet proficiency benchmarks on the state reading assessment in 2010, and students qualifying for free and reduced priced meals and Hispanic students failed to meet benchmarks in 2011, placing the district on improvement in reading. Moreover, in 2011 many other groups of students met benchmarks on the state reading and math assessments through safe harbor or confidence interval designations.

The Big Picture

Located along the far western border of Kansas, Stanton County has seen its student population shift considerably over the past ten years. Today, approximately 40% of students are identified as English language learners, and like many nearby districts in the KLN—Garden City, Dodge City, Liberal, and Ulysses—USD 452 is working to address the needs of students and families whose first language is Spanish, not English, some of whom have only recently immigrated to the United States.⁶

To meet these needs and others, Stanton County recently hired a new superintendent who is providing support for all teachers to obtain ESL (English as a second language) endorsement. USD 452 also possesses a number of overall strengths that it can build upon as it moves through this transition.

- The new superintendent appears to be well liked and respected by all stakeholders. She and the board are committed to moving forward in a positive way.
- Despite the economic downturn, Stanton County has maintained a sound financial position.
- All stakeholders interviewed expressed pride in the district. Students describe teachers as caring and kind, and focus group participants noted that schools provide a safe, supportive learning environment for students. This foundation can serve as a powerful lever for growth in the district.
- The district has access to an online curriculum-building tool, and elementary educators have begun look at transitioning to the Common Core standards.

⁶ For more in-depth information on demographic shifts in western Kansas, see the November 14, 2011 *New York Times* article, "Hispanics Reviving Faded Towns on the Plains," http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/14/us/as-small-towns-wither-on-plains-hispanics-come-to-the-rescue.html?_r=1&nl=todaysheadlines&emc=tha23.

- The district has some key structural elements in place to support improvement—a professional development council and an assessment coordinator, for example.

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

- The district currently lacks a strategic plan and measurable objectives to guide improvement.
- There is a cultural disconnect in the community and the district, and the district lacks an overall plan/approach for meeting the needs of the large number of English language learners it serves.
- Though elementary teachers have begun to think about how to transition to the Common Core, the district lacks a viable and rigorous written curriculum for all students, and educators at the secondary level have not yet begun the Common Core transition process.
- Regular leadership turnover—in both the superintendency and in the principalship at the high school level—has left teachers and principals largely on their own when it comes to developing and implementing curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development.

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

Leadership

Stanton County exhibits a number of leadership strengths.

- The current superintendent, Angela Lawrence, is serving in her first year as superintendent, and central office staff members have been in their roles for a number of years. The board of education, teachers, students, and parent/community focus groups all expressed confidence in the new superintendent and veteran central office staff.
- The board is pleased with the performance of Ms. Lawrence. According to all members, the board has a renewed focus on the interests of students and their families and is working collaboratively with Ms. Lawrence to meet those

“We have turned a corner.”

—*Stanton County Board of Education, expressing hope for the future*

interests. They have newly developed board goals and have begun to set their direction.

- Last year, the board of education decided to close the middle school building and create a combined junior-senior high school. While there were those who had misgivings about having middle school students in the same building with high school students, all groups interviewed reported the move has been positive.
- The district has formed a collaborative partnership with the High Plains Educational Cooperative, which appears to be very effective. Focus group participants report that students with disabilities have access to the core curriculum and that all parties are using an inclusive delivery model for special education services.
- Parents, students, and teachers were also positive about the district's decision to utilize Go.edustar, an online grade book that allows parents and students to access students' real time academic progress. Focus group participants see this tool as enhancing formal communication between the school and parents.
- Facilities at USD 452 are conducive to learning and well maintained. The district is currently looking at the elementary facilities to ensure that the elementary school will continue to meet students' needs in the future.
- Despite budget concerns in nearby school districts, USD 452 has maintained a sound financial position.

The district can draw upon these strengths and others to address a number of leadership challenges.

- Leadership consistency has been a significant challenge for the district. Stanton County has had five superintendents and seven high school principals in the past eight years alone. The board understands its role in this challenge and is committed to ensuring that the district has consistent leadership moving forward.
- Recently the board of education and the superintendent met to set new goals for the school district. This is a positive step. The new goals, however, are not measureable. Moreover, they lack timelines and processes for implementation and monitoring, making it very difficult to track progress. The district would benefit from developing and implementing a long-range strategic plan.
- All focus groups noted that there is currently a cultural disconnect within USD 452. Over the last several years, the number of English language learners has increased substantially. This year, more than 40% of students have been identified for English as a Second Language (ESL) services. Though the

superintendent has taken the proactive step of providing support for all teachers to receive ESL endorsement, currently, the district does not appear to be adequately equipped to meet the needs of the increasing number of ELL students it serves.⁷ This is a clear leadership challenge for the district. Focus group participants noted, for example, that there is a lack of extended instructional time for students receiving ESL services to master content, placing students at a disadvantage. There are also low levels of parent engagement among many non-English speaking parents. Throughout interviews, participants made the point that effective Hispanic parent engagement is crucial to improved student achievement.

“Teachers must be willing to change the way they teach in order to meet the needs of students who are English language learners.”

—*Civic Leader*

“It is not a question of what it costs if we support the ESL community. The question is: what is the cost if we don’t?”

—*Parent*

- Compounding this challenge, parent, staff, community, and student focus groups noted that district communications fail to reach a significant percentage of families, especially families who do not speak English and those who do not have Internet access. Participants made several suggestions for improving communication, including: a bilingual district newsletter, home or porch visits, adult English classes, etc. Focus groups also suggested that the district implement more bi-directional communication—allowing parents the opportunity to share their thoughts, rather than just listen to information provided by the school. It should be noted that the district has taken some important steps to engage parents—holding parent-teacher conferences in the evening, for example—and parent participation in parent-teacher conferences is excellent at the elementary level (99%) and fairly high at the middle and high school levels as well.
- Principals estimate they spend about 50% of their time on management and 50% serving as instructional leaders. It became clear from conversations in focus groups, however, that the district does not have a shared understanding about what the role “instructional leader” means for principals. Additionally,

⁷ According to the district, currently 15 out of 41 teachers are ESL endorsed, four teachers are in the process of receiving their endorsement, 15 more are taking classes needed for endorsement, and seven teachers do not plan to pursue endorsement.

like many small districts, Stanton County appears to lack support and ongoing professional development for principals in their roles as instructional leaders.

Empowering Culture and Human Capital

Stanton County displays some clear strengths in the area of empowering culture and human capital.

- All stakeholders interviewed—board members, teachers, parents, principals, students, and district administrators—described some element of pride in the district, from the quality of the school and staff members, to the terrific students within the school community. The power of this strength cannot be overstated; it provides a solid foundation and commitment for the future.
- “Our teachers are willing to come in before school and after school. If you want help and you ask, they will be there for you.”

—*Student*
- Focus group conversations indicated that stakeholders believe that USD 452 provides a safe, supportive, and caring environment for learning.
 - The words used over and over to describe the student body were “good kids.” Students appear to be very supportive of each other and seem welcoming and open to new students and staff. Students interviewed in the student focus group reported that they liked their school and they felt like they were receiving a good education in Stanton County.
 - Stanton County has undertaken a number of efforts to improve learning opportunities for students. The elementary school offers an after school program for students who need extra help, with transportation home afterward. The district also purchased Study Island this year, and each elementary classroom also uses the last 30 minutes of the day to focus on remediation and enrichment. To meet the needs of older students, the junior-senior high has been providing extra support to students receiving failing grades, working with them for a full day on early release days. The secondary school is also in the process of developing a teacher-run before and after school program to help students who are struggling academically.
 - It is fairly easy for the district to hire new staff. Starting salaries are relatively high, the district offers a very comprehensive benefits package, and teachers who have received ESL endorsement receive a \$1000 stipend. Stanton County also offers up to \$1500 in moving expenses and payment of \$135/credit hour for continuing education. According to district leaders, “the hardest thing is finding adequate housing.”

Several challenges in this area are apparent as well, however.

- Perhaps the biggest challenge in this area lies in the cultural disconnect identified in the Leadership section. Participants in the community focus group, for example, indicated that little had been done to integrate other cultures into the community or into the school, and though there is Hispanic representation on the site council, there is not Hispanic representation on the board of education.
- This lack of cultural integration also poses challenges for expectations. Currently, it appears that Stanton County does not have high expectations for *all* students.
- Staff evaluations could also be improved. The current teacher evaluation system does not take student achievement data into account, and it does not provide for a systematic observation of instructional practice. Moreover, though principals are evaluated annually, the district has not used a standardized evaluation tool to guide evaluations. Finally, with the frequent turnover of the superintendent’s position, the board has not received consistent feedback on staff performance.
- Though it is fairly easy for the district to hire staff, staff retention may pose a challenge for the district. Moreover, since the district is so small, teachers must sometimes wear multiple hats, making it difficult for all teachers to be “highly qualified” according to No Child Left Behind. According to the district, currently 37 out of 41 teachers are highly qualified.

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 Stanton County educators on surveys of educational practices, and by representatives from all constituent groups during focus groups and interviews; and (3) data collected during classroom visits, which document 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

The needs analysis uncovered several curriculum strengths in USD 452.

- Some educators in the district have embraced Kansas’ adoption of the Common Core standards, and a few staff members report that they have

participated in professional development related to the Common Core. The elementary school has taken the lead on this, and educators are using Common Core standards to guide instructional planning at the Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade levels.

- The district has begun work on developing an aligned curriculum, using an online tool provided by the Southwest Plains Regional Service Center.
- The elementary school has developed a specific checklist of “what students at each grade level need to know.” This checklist is used to guide instruction and is shared with parents, helping teachers to discuss what has been accomplished and what has not. Additionally, every student at the elementary level has an individual learning plan.
- At the elementary level, the district has adopted the Harcourt Reading series to deliver a standards-based literacy program, and it uses Saxon Math to support math instruction.
- Students with disabilities and English language learners access the core curriculum. The High Plains Educational Cooperative appears to work closely with district staff to ensure that, to the extent possible, students with disabilities are educated in the regular classroom setting with limited pullout.
- High school students have access to dual credit courses—through Seward County Community College in Liberal—that allow them to complete college hours before graduating from high school, and some students are taking advantage of these course options.

To build on these strengths, however, Stanton must address some significant curriculum challenges.

- Currently, USD 452 appears to have a very limited curriculum. In focus group conversations, educators consistently referred to the “curriculum” as the state standards and the program and/or textbook that has been purchased for that grade level or subject area. Though some work has been done to align what is being taught to state standards, and the district has an online tool to assist with curriculum development, there is little evidence that educators are using the online tool—that it is even being accessed—to support curriculum work in the district.
- Though the elementary school has begun work to integrate the Common Core standards into teaching, elsewhere in the district the standards have been a low priority. It appears that little to no work has been done at Stanton County

The curriculum at the high school consists of a textbook and state standards, and the textbook is selected by the teacher in that area.

—*High School Teacher*

Junior-Senior High School to prepare teachers to implement the Common Core.

“When it comes to the Common Core at Stanton County Junior-Senior High School, we are holding off.”

—*Teacher*

- Many districts across the country are aligning their curriculum to support success in Algebra I for all 8th grade students. Currently, only 25-30% of 8th graders in Stanton County take Algebra I. This puts the rest of the students at a disadvantage in mathematics and limits their options for advanced math in high school. In addition, district policy requires only three credits of math for graduation, coupled with the option to take classes that are academically lower than Algebra 1, allowing students to leave high school with very few post-secondary school educational options.
- Though dual-credit classes are available for students at Stanton County High School, only 18 junior and seniors (25%) are currently taking advantage of the dual-credit option. Taking dual-credit courses enables students to experience college classes while in high school, facilitating an easier transition into college after graduation, and allowing high school students to earn college credit for their work.
- When the district made the decision to close the middle school in Spring 2011, the sixth grade curriculum was left undefined—a major challenge, as 6th graders are now taught in a self-contained elementary setting. This shift was compounded by the challenge of having two new sixth grade teachers: one in her first year and one experienced but new to the district. The lack of a defined 6th grade curriculum is a significant issue in the district. Sixth grade is now a key transition year for students.

Assessment

Stanton County possesses some important assessment strengths.

- Despite its small size, the district understands the importance of assessment and has an identified assessment coordinator who maintains assessment data for the district.
- USD 452 uses assessments from the Center for Educational Testing and Evaluation (CETE) at the University of Kansas. This is a helpful resource, and it has potential to provide more formative tools than are currently being used. According to the CETE website, beginning in late September (2011) the Kansas Interim Assessments, for the first time, includes mathematics tests in high school and reading tests for grades three-five. This is an expansion from last year, when interim tests were only available in mathematics for grades three-eight.

- Teachers administer formative assessments regularly at the K-5 level, based on the checklists that teachers and administrators have developed. This process enables the district to gather ongoing formative assessment data for the purpose of making curricular and instructional decisions.
- Kindergarten and 1st grade students take early literacy assessments three times yearly, and classroom teachers use this assessment data to guide instruction.
- The district uses a local assessment—based on work by the national assessment provider STI (Software Technology Intervention)—twice yearly to monitor achievement of students as they prepare to take the Kansas State Assessment. The Southwest Plains Regional Service Center provides technical support for this assessment, which is directly aligned with Kansas’ standards.

Stanton County can enhance this assessment work by addressing several challenges.

- The district currently lacks an overall assessment plan to guide implementation of assessment across all grades. Without a comprehensive assessment plan, assessment in the district works in a piecemeal fashion—individual teachers decide on assessments from grade-to-grade and subject-to-subject. As indicated in assessment strengths section of this report, there is more consistency at the elementary level than there is at the junior-senior high school.
- Though the elementary school has taken steps to implement formative assessments, most assessments in the district tend to be summative, not formative. When assessments are implemented once, twice, or three times per year they provide broad, general data that are difficult to use for specific instructional decisions. Assessments that are short, specific, and focused on learning objective(s), help educators obtain real-time data, so instruction can be differentiated based on the needs of specific students.
- It does not appear that current assessments—and the ways in which they are administered—are meeting the needs of *all* students in the district. Stanton County has a significant percentage of ELL students; yet the district does not have systematic processes in place to ensure that assessments are modified appropriately, and that learning data are valid, not skewed by students’ proficiency in the language.
- The district would benefit from having more discussions about assessment data at key transition points. There has been little conversation and collaboration around assessment results between school levels, and this lack of coordination has led to a lack of continuity from level to level. The receiving teachers do not know what was taught at the previous level, or how each student progressed toward expected learning standards. Conversely, the sending teachers do not know what is expected of students at the next level.

Though the district has reduced the number of buildings and transition points, in order for the district to improve, it must develop ways for teachers to communicate and plan effectively across grade levels and schools.

Instruction

Table III presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 100% plus; see footnote at the bottom of the table) 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.

With a couple of exceptions, *principals* are in agreement about the sound instructional strategies that are evident or strongly evident in their schools. The strategies that principals cited as most *strongly evident* include strategies related to staff development:

- using data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development (cited as strongly evident by 100% of principals)
- participating in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation (cited as strongly evident by 100% of principals)
- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment (cited as strongly evident by 100% of principals).

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

- providing adequate resources to support teacher and administrator learning (cited as strongly evident by 0% of principals and as not evident or minimally evident by 50% of principals).

On the whole, teachers are somewhat less optimistic than principals. The instructional strategy that *teachers* cited as most *strongly evident* is:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 56% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 2% of teachers).

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

- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities (cited as strongly evident by 12% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 42% of teachers)

- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited by 12% of teachers as strongly evident and by 28% of teachers as minimally evident or not evident)
- providing adequate resources to support teacher and administrator learning (cited as strongly evident by 9% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 26% of teachers)
- measuring the effectiveness of staff development by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning (cited as strongly evident by 5% of teachers and as not evident or minimally evident by 18% 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^
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development.	100%	0%	49%	7%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	100%	0%	16%	14%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment.	100%	0%	19%	23%
Educators create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments.	50%	0%	56%	2%
Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.	50%	0%	37%	12%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.	50%	0%	35%	4%
Students who are struggling to master content are identified by	50%	0%	35%	26%

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 and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction.				
Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	50%	0%	28%	9%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students.	50%	0%	23%	16%
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction.	50%	0%	23%	18%
Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level.	50%	0%	21%	2%
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	50%	0%	14%	16%
Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well-being.	50%	50%	26%	12%
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%	30%	9%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning.	0%	0%	16%	23%

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%	0%	5%	18%
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	0%	0%	12%	28%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.	0%	0%	12%	42%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning.	0%	50%	9%	26%

Teacher Response Rate = 43/41 (this includes some special education staff from High Plains)

Principal Response Rate = 2/2

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

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

^The response option "No Opinion" was deleted from this presentation. Fourteen percent of teachers selected this option on one question; typically zero-five percent of teachers selected this response, and no principals selected this response.

Survey responses only tell part of the story. Classroom observations, reviews of district and state assessment data, and conversations with focus group participants suggest some valuable instructional strengths in USD 452.

- 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 met or exceeded state benchmarks in reading and math for the past three years.
- During observations of 34 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.
 - The vast majority 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 used instructional strategies to promote student participation and address learning styles. They also used the following strategies that research has shown to accelerate learning: 1) reinforcing efforts and providing recognition, and 2) setting objectives and providing immediate continuous feedback that is accurate, timely, specific, and fair (See Appendix for specific percentages related to these and other strategies).
- All elementary students have individual learning plans that provide a road map for instruction. This information is shared with parents and also helps differentiate instruction for students.
- Class sizes in Stanton County support effective instruction. Most classes are under 20 students and many at the junior-senior high school range from 10-15 students.
- Both principals and teachers see effective instruction as a priority, and the new superintendent appears to share this perspective as well.
- It appears that students with disabilities and ELL students are receiving most, if not all, of their instruction in the regular classroom. The High Plains Educational Cooperative is supportive of keeping as many students in the regular classroom as possible, and students are pulled out for instruction on a very limited basis.

“Being on improvement is a good thing. It will help us teach and serve all students in our community.”

—*Administrator*

Stanton County must address some important instructional challenges as well.

- Focus group participants identified a need to increase instructional rigor, and this view was supported by classroom observations (see Appendix). Though students appear to be engaged, rigorous instruction is not the norm.
- A number of junior high courses are “tracked”—at three different levels in some core classes—and students are placed in classes based on prior performance. Though focus group participants report that students receive the same “core instruction, just at a slower pace,” experiences are different, and core instruction is delivered differently for students at the same grade level. Tracking reduces the rigor for some students and often fails to prepare them adequately for their next step.

“You can’t practice with the C Team all the time. You have to see how the A Team plays and practice with them or you won’t improve.”

—*Principal*

- Currently, the district lacks clear instructional priorities to guide teaching and learning. Instruction is left largely to the discretion of the teacher. Stanton County would benefit from answering the following question: “what are the key instructional practices that the system universally believes will move achievement ahead?” With answers to this question, the district can develop and implement instructional priorities that are planned, supported through professional development, and supervised.
- Special education and ESL paraprofessionals help provide instruction and support to identified students. There is little or no time to plan together with regular classroom teachers, however, so collaboration often occurs “on the fly” or as teachers and paraprofessionals walk into class.
- Focused Classroom Walkthroughs identified other instructional challenges. There is a need to increase the following *teaching practices*, which were observed in less than 30% of the classrooms visited (see Appendix for specific percentages related to these and other strategies):
 - Differentiation to match student learning needs and strengths.
 - Use of interdisciplinary and real-world instructional examples.
 - Employment of metacognitive strategies—teacher modeling of the thinking process.
 - Use of strategies to meet diverse language and cultural needs.
 - Use of strategies that accelerate learning, including: generating and testing hypotheses; summarizing and taking notes; and identifying similarities and differences.
- Observations revealed that the following *student learning strategies* designed to bring about high levels of cognitive engagement were visible in less than 50% of classrooms observed across all levels. Those strategies include:
 - Asks/answers higher level questions.
 - Investigates and solves problems.
 - Participates in individual reflection.
 - Participates in group work and dialogue about the learning task.
 - Uses technology in the learning process.
- The following strategies used to illustrate how students demonstrate physical and cognitive engagement and learning at high levels were minimally evident (observed in less than 50% of classrooms visited) at all school levels:
 - Displays a real world connection.
 - Demonstrates responsibility for learning and explains why it is important.
 - Engages in peer and self-assessment of the learning.

Professional Development

Stanton County has some important professional development strengths.

- The district calendar supports professional development (PD) by including an early dismissal day once each month throughout the school year. This time is used for PD that is unique to each school or for district-wide meetings.
- There is a renewed focus on ensuring that teachers are ESL endorsed. The new superintendent has arranged for *all* teachers who do not have ESL endorsement to participate in training this school year.
- The district has started work on developing a walkthrough process that will be used by administrators to collect data about teaching practices in classrooms. This effort is still in its early stages; implementation is planned for spring 2012.

To build on these strengths, though, USD 452 must also address a number of challenges related to professional development.

- Due to leadership changes over the last several years—both at the district and building level—most PD initiatives that have begun have not been fully implemented. Additionally, it appears that PD has primarily been delivered at the information level, with little or no follow-up to ensure implementation in the classroom. As a result, there is no real culture of professional learning in the schools and across the district.
- Focus group conversations with teachers indicate that the district started a professional learning communities (PLCs) initiative some time ago, which included a master schedule that enabled educators to plan collaboratively, but when leadership changed, the master schedule was altered and collaborative planning time was lost. Consequently, PLC's were never fully implemented and educators are largely on their own when it comes to instructional planning and improvement.
- The district has a Professional Development Council (PDC) with an adopted plan. However, according to focus group participants, the PDC has become largely inactive, except for awarding “PD points.” The PDC does not appear to operate as a proactive planning council that focuses on planning and implementing professional learning experiences for the district.
- Leaders, too, would benefit from professional development to support instructional leadership. Focus

“We have not had consistent training to enhance our skills as instructional leaders.”

—Principal

group conversations with leaders suggest that this has not been a priority in the district.

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, four key systemic challenges were identified.

- The district currently lacks a strategic plan and measurable objectives to guide improvement.
- There is a cultural disconnect in the community and the district, and the district lacks an overall plan/approach for meeting the needs of the large number of English language learners it serves.
- Though elementary teachers have begun to think about how to transition to the Common Core, the district lacks a viable and rigorous written curriculum for all students, and educators at the secondary level have not yet begun the Common Core transition process.
- Regular leadership turnover—in both the superintendency and in the principalship at the high school level—has left teachers and principals largely on their own when it comes to developing and implementing curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development.

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 with a clear improvement strategy. 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 ELL students. 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 articulate, align, and fully implement curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development with the goal of continually improving student learning and achievement to support high expectations for *all* students. As part of this process, the district should assess

its readiness for MTSS and initial structuring training in MTSS with a state-approved MTSS facilitator. This process should also include:

- a. Creation of a district process for transitioning to a curriculum guided by the Common Core standards, with resources and professional development to support teachers' content knowledge and implementation in the classroom. A clear communication plan should be developed to inform all stakeholders of the timeline, process, and roll out for implementation.
- b. Implementation of a process to review and align curriculum and assessments, with an emphasis on effective use of formative assessments; if possible, the district should utilize a data warehouse that enables educators to use and manage assessment data effectively, and track individual student data over time.
- c. Implementation of a system-wide instructional model tied to rigorous standards. This model 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 English language learners, 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, taking on the work of the professional development council.
- d. Systematization of PLCs and classroom observations as catalysts for implementing research-based effective educational practices, by:
 - 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.
- e. Development of a monitoring system to measure the implementation and impact of professional development on changes in teacher behaviors.⁸ In addition to classroom walkthroughs, the district may consider the use of tools such as the Innovation Configuration Matrix (ICM).⁹ The ICM was

⁸ Reeves, D.B. *Transforming Professional Development Into Student Learning Results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2010.

⁹ 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.

designed to ensure that strategies are implemented correctly and with fidelity; it includes teacher self-assessment of the use of best-practice strategies.

3. As part of its planning process, and in collaboration with nearby KLN districts, the district should look undertake a culture and communications assessment and implement strategies to engage and involve Spanish-speaking parents effectively.

Next Steps

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

Process for Analyzing Classroom Walkthrough Data

As recently proposed by City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Lee in *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*, “Since what goes on in the classroom is at the heart of instructional improvement, a key part of developing an improvement practice is observation.” Connecting classroom observations to the “larger context of the system’s improvement strategy” is how to support sustained improvement.¹⁰

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:

¹⁰ 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.

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 & Jofus 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.