

Needs Analysis of Columbus – USD 493

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

In 2009, this model, the Kansas Learning Network (KLN), was expanded to reach 12 more Kansas districts not making AYP, and subsequently in 2010, to reach 11 more, including Columbus Unified School District, USD 493. Since that time, one district has left the Network because it demonstrated AYP two consecutive years.¹ Seven additional districts demonstrated AYP in the area(s) identified for improvement, and they will continue to remain in the Network for at least one more year.

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

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

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

The site visits conclude with a debriefing conducted by Cross & Jofus 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 Columbus Unified School District, USD 493 (referred to throughout the report as USD 493 or Columbus).

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 Columbus occurred October 18-20, 2010.

USD 493 Student Demographics

In 2009-10, approximately 86% of Columbus' student population of 1,075 students were classified as White, 7% as American Indian, 2.6% as Multi-Racial, 2% as Hispanic, 1% as African-American, and less than 1% as Asian or Hawaiian-Pacific Islander.

A majority of students—over 54%—are classified as Economically Disadvantaged. Additionally, 16% of students are identified as students with disabilities, above the state average of 13.5%.³

Student Achievement

Overall, Columbus students have demonstrated relatively high levels of student achievement. All students, as a group, have met or exceeded state achievement benchmarks in both reading and math for the past three years (for additional detail, see Table I below). The district also boasts high graduation rates.

Table I—Columbus Summary Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Data

Reading – Met AYP in 2008; did not meet AYP in 2009 and 2010. On Improvement

| Student Category | Year & State Target | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|--------------------------|
| | 2008 - 72% | 2009 - 76.7% | 2010 - 81.3% |
| All students | Met (87.2%) | Met (86.3%) | Met (80.6%) ⁴ |
| Free & Reduced Meals | Met (85.7%) | Met (82.4%) | No (73.9%) |
| Students with Disabilities | Met (65.8%) ⁴ | No (60.%) | No (56.4%) |
| ELL Students | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| African-American Students | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Hispanic | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| White | Met (87.2%) | Met (86.3%) | Met (81.5%) |
| Asian & Pacific* | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| American Indian or Alaskan* | Met (83.3%) | Met (83.9%) | Met (71.1%) ⁴ |
| Multi-Ethnic/Multi-Racial* | N/A | N/A | N/A |

Mathematics—Met AYP in 2008 and 2009; did not in 2010. Not yet on Improvement

| Student Category | Year & State Target | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| | 2008 - 64.6% | 2009 - 70.5% | 2010 - 76.4% |
| All students | Met (84.7%) | Met (84.9%) | Met (76.9%) |
| Free & Reduced Meals | Met (82.3%) | Met (82.8%) | Met (71%) ⁴ |
| Students with Disabilities | Met (74.7%) | Met (64.5%) ¹ | No (52.7%) |
| ELL Students | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| African-American Students | N/A | N/A | N/A |

³ District data.

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

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| Hispanic | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| White | Met (84.4%) | Met (84.%) | Met (77.2%) |
| Asian & Pacific* | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| American Indian or Alaskan* | Met (80.6%) | Met (73.3%) | Met (62.2%) ⁴ |
| Multi-Ethnic/Multi-Racial* | N/A | N/A | N/A |

Graduation Rate: 2008—93.6%; 2009—97.8%; 2010—97.8%

Notes:

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

That said, USD 493 faces several challenges. Students with disabilities did not meet reading benchmarks in 2009 or 2010, placing the district on improvement in reading; students with disabilities also failed to meet math benchmarks in 2010. Further, students eligible for free and reduced priced meals failed to meet reading benchmarks, and they appear to be struggling to meet benchmarks in math as well, as do students identified as American Indian.

The Big Picture

Columbus has a relatively new superintendent, David Carriger, who is well liked and respected by staff, parents, community, and board members. The new superintendent and the board have initiated the development of a long-range planning process to help prioritize emerging needs regarding facilities, technology, and curriculum, assessment, and instructional improvement.

At the same time, however, there is also a high rate of poverty in Columbus. A significant number of students are coming to school hungry—they lack adequate clothing and hygiene, and, according to focus group participants, many have parents that are not very involved in or focused on education.

To improve achievement and to enhance the learning climate for all students in the face of significant poverty issues, Columbus will need to address five key systemic challenges:

- 1) AYP and instructional challenges for students with disabilities and low-income students
- 2) A long-term culture of low-expectations for students, especially low-income students
- 3) A need to align district curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development to support student learning and achievement
- 4) A lack of ongoing job-embedded professional development for teachers and other classroom staff
- 5) Budget shortages, leading to reductions in staff and services provided to students.

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

II. Findings

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

Leadership

Columbus exhibits a number of leadership strengths.

- Columbus’ new superintendent, David Carriger, is starting his second year as superintendent of USD 493. Though he has served in this role a short time, board members we interviewed respect him and view him as a dedicated leader who has gone out of his way to make schools an integral part of the community. Staff, parents, and community members with whom we spoke see the superintendent as accessible, willing to make tough decisions, and take action.
- The Columbus Board of Education and district leadership have made some difficult decisions recently, despite opposition from some stakeholders in the community. Last year, the board and superintendent chose to close a school with very low enrollment to fill a large hole in the budget. The decision was not popular with everyone in the community.
- In the coming months, the board and superintendent will initiate the development of a long-range educational plan. The findings from the KLN needs assessment will help inform the plan.
- Everyone with whom we met—parents, students, community members, and staff—see Columbus staff as supportive of students. Faculty members go out of their way to help students, often providing food, clothing, and other supports from their own pockets.

“This is a very close knit community—everyone knows and helps everyone else.”

—*Columbus parent*

While Columbus has a number of leadership strengths, the district also faces some clear leadership challenges as well.

- Currently, the district lacks a coherent strategy—i.e. “the elements of a school district work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated

strategy”—for boosting student learning and achievement through instructional improvement.⁵

- Data are not being used strategically to improve teaching and learning, or to drive professional development. Neither teachers nor principals are consistently relying on data to help guide lesson planning or school improvement.
- Columbus staff members with whom we spoke see administrators as effective managers of buildings. However, there was little evidence that principals are leading the instructional improvement of their buildings. For Columbus schools to have a consistently high level of instruction that serves the needs of all students, the district should establish clear expectations for instructional leadership and provide the necessary support and professional development to ensure that principals can serve as effective instructional leaders.
- Likewise, staff noted that while special education staff members from Southeast Kansas Interlocal 637 are effective managers, they do not appear to be serving as instructional leaders.
- We saw no evidence that Columbus utilizes a structured Professional Learning Community (PLC) model at the district, building, or teacher team levels. Scheduled meeting/planning time appears to be used to share basic information on student progress, rather than to improve instruction and support for students.
- Resources are tight and there are some large expenditures looming—technology, textbooks, and at some point in the near future, a new football stadium. Instructional technology is outdated. There are not enough computers to use effectively in the classrooms, and those that are available are old and slow. Textbooks, too, need to be replaced and updated. Upgrading the technology and building a new stadium will require additional resources. The superintendent and the board are working on options for raising new funds.
- Conversations with staff, students, parents, and community members indicate that administrators and faculty do not always have high expectations for all students. There is a near universal sense that some students, mostly those from lower income families, will never be able to succeed.
- Teachers and building leaders noted in focus groups that they are frustrated with NCLB requirements. Specifically, they are frustrated with “having to teach to the test” and indicated that this approach does not make sense as an instructional practice.

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

Empowering Culture and Human Capital

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

- There appear to be strong linkages between the school district, community colleges, city government, and other service organizations. The superintendent has convened a group of city agencies (schools, law enforcement, and social services) to find way to better support students and prevent problems. Likewise, a new dual-credit program with a local community college has increased course offerings and is helping prepare students for college. The superintendent wants principals and teachers to be community leaders as well as school leaders
- The business community is very supportive and has donated both expertise and resources to the school system. Local businesses raised resources to refurbish the Central gym, for example.
- Many students, especially at the middle and high school levels, enjoy small class sizes. Both student and teacher focus groups reported that many classes have less than 10 students, with few classes having more than 20 students.
- Students, parents, and faculty all reported that Columbus schools provide students with safe, orderly learning environments. A strict policy on bullying seems to be helping (though there were occasional references to bullying in our conversations). Students with whom we met also noted that their parents are very involved in their education and often check online to see grades and homework assignments.
- Teachers in Columbus are highly qualified, and according to all stakeholders, teachers and administrators place a strong value on relationships with students. Every staff person, including the bus drivers and custodians, are seen as working together to support students—faculty members noted, for instance, that bus drivers are often the first people to know and report when something is not right with one of the students.
- There seems to be a great deal of community support for extracurricular activities in the Columbus schools. Patrons are proud of the athletic teams and the band, and community members we met with noted that the whole community comes to support football games, often traveling to neighboring towns for away games. Likewise, there appears to be good communication between the school and community, through regular newsletters and coverage of school issues in the local paper.

To capitalize on these strengths, however, Columbus must also confront several challenges.

- The staff evaluation process appears to be uneven. Staff in focus groups reported that different approaches are used for different staff members. Staff also expressed concern that some staff evaluations are being completed without classroom observations. Currently, staff evaluations are not connected to student performance.
- The very small size of many classes is a resource drain on the district. Faculty could be used more efficiently without compromising the quality of education by combining or reorganizing classes with very low enrollment.
- Poverty is a pervasive challenge for the school system. Both parent and faculty focus groups reported that many children come to school hungry, lacking clean clothes, and ill-prepared for school. The district reported that many students are highly mobile, often changing schools during and between school years.
- The district lacks funds to support afterschool, summer, and other enrichment programs. Columbus used to have a 21st Century Community Learning Centers (CCLC) grant. It ended recently, however, and there are no funds to continue the program. Some students now go to the library after school, and community members in focus groups reported that the librarian often works with students on manners and behavior. Some students also attend a church-based program, but it is fee-based.
- There is a sense among parents and some students that students are not challenged. Students reported in focus groups that other students who had gone onto college before them felt unprepared, and parents report that many teachers seem to let the students “slide by” if they don’t have behavior problems.

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

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

Curriculum and Assessment

Columbus has some important curriculum and assessment strengths.

- State standards are known by teachers and appear to be addressed in classes.
- Columbus uses the Reading Recovery program to assist struggling first grade readers.
- Multiple assessments are in place and are administered to create data on student performance. MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) tests are used throughout the district and given two times per year. Most teachers expressed the belief that this was helpful and noted that MAP test results help teachers prepare students for the Kansas State Assessment. The DIBELS assessment is also used in the elementary schools. This assessment can provide valuable and consistent district-wide data for instructional decisions related to literacy in the primary grades.
- In some cases, students with greater academic needs are receiving additional time and interventions to support learning.
- This year the district is offering six dual enrollments classes with Labette Community College, and one online AP course. Currently, 80 students are enrolled.
- The ACT PLAN test—a pre-ACT test, PSAT, and Explore assessments are administered to high school students to help them assess academic achievement and career preparation.
- Columbus is working to give all students access to core curricular opportunities.

Columbus faces some significant curriculum and assessment challenges, however.

- The district lacks a coherent and consistent curriculum aligned to a district-wide assessment system.
- Educators do not have sufficient materials—textbooks, technology, and supplemental curriculum materials—to support high-quality instruction.
- There are no committees to ensure vertical articulation of curriculum across grade levels. This lack of articulation creates problems as students transition from one grade level to the next, and from one school to the next. Moreover, the district lacks a curriculum director.
- Even though teachers consider state standards when they decide what to teach, the “non-tested” standards at each grade level do not appear to receive attention. This becomes especially problematic as students advance through the system—

“We really need a good research-based curriculum.”

“With no current textbooks, we use the state standards as our curriculum.”

—*Teachers*

interviews with staff indicate that students receive little instruction on non-tested standards, and, as a result, students bring very little previous learning to the next grade level when standards may be tested.

- Currently, teachers and principals use assessment data in a limited fashion to make instructional decisions. Data collection and use appear to vary greatly from school to school, and while staff members review Kansas State Assessment data, there appears to be little use of formative assessment data to inform instruction.
- There is a lack of assessment expertise in the system, and at the present time, there is no long-term plan for building and maintaining an effective assessment system within the district.
- Student Improvement Teams do not meet on a regular basis to identify and provide support to students who may be in need of extra assistance.

“No one in the district is responsible for data.”

—Principal

Instruction

Table II presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 80%) and principals (response rate 100%) administered online by Cross & Joftus. Instructional strategies that principals and teachers *believe* are most strongly evident and those that are least evident are highlighted below. Additional instructional strengths and challenges are identified later in this section.

In general, principals identified a few sound instructional strategies as strongly evident. The sound instructional strategies that *principals* believe are most ***strongly evident*** in their schools include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited by 80% of principals as strongly evident and 0% as not evident or minimally evident)
- 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 by 60% of principals as strongly evident and by 20% as minimally evident or not evident)
- facilitating, monitoring, and guiding the continuous improvement of instruction (cited by 60% of principals as strongly evident and by 20% as minimally evident or not evident)
- identifying students who are struggling to master content and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction (cited by 60% of principals as strongly evident and by 40% as minimally evident or not evident).

Principals indicated that a number of strategies were minimally or not evident. The sound instructional strategies that *principals* indicated were *least evident* were:

- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited by 0% of principals as strongly evident and by 100% as minimally evident or not evident)
- participating in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation (cited by 0% of principals as strongly evident and by 80% as minimally evident or not evident).

Generally, teachers’ views are similar to principals’. There are some clear differences, however. The sound instructional strategies that *teachers* believe are most *strongly evident* in their schools include:

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 67% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 0%)
- 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 52% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 8%)
- identifying students who are struggling to master content and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction (cited by 48% of teachers as strongly evident and by 13% as minimally evident or not evident).

Sound instructional strategies that *teachers* believe are *least evident* include:

- providing adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions to support student learning (cited by 17% of teachers as strongly evident and by 45% as minimally evident or not evident)
- providing adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions to support teacher and administrator learning (cited by 15% of teachers as strongly evident and by 49% as minimally evident or not evident)
- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (cited by 15% of teachers as strongly evident and by 44% as minimally evident or not evident).

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

| Please rate the extent to which you believe the following instructional practices are evident in your school. | Principals | | Teachers | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| | Strongly Evident* | Not Evident or Minimally Evident^ | Strongly Evident* | Not Evident or Minimally Evident^ |
| Educators create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments. | 80% | 0% | 67% | 0% |
| Educators use a variety of appropriate instructional strategies and resources, including technology, | 60% | 20% | 33% | 20% |

| 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^ |
| to actively engage students, encourage positive social interaction, and emphasize critical thinking, problem solving, and interdisciplinary connections. | | | | |
| School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction. | 60% | 20% | 26% | 32% |
| Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction. | 60% | 40% | 48% | 13% |
| Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level. | 40% | 0% | 33% | 12% |
| Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students. | 40% | 20% | 23% | 27% |
| Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments. | 20% | 20% | 52% | 8% |
| Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources. | 20% | 20% | 26% | 14% |
| Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers. | 0% | 0% | 17% | 38% |
| Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners. | 0% | 20% | 39% | 6% |
| Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development. | 0% | 40% | 32% | 34% |
| Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well being. | 0% | 40% | 23% | 18% |
| Adequate resources (human, fiscal, | 0% | 40% | 17% | 45% |

| 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^ |
| and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support student learning. | | | | |
| Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment. | 0% | 60% | 38% | 32% |
| Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities. | 0% | 60% | 26% | 35% |
| The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning. | 0% | 60% | 14% | 35% |
| Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning. | 0% | 60% | 15% | 49% |
| Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation. | 0% | 80% | 20% | 43% |
| Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress. | 0% | 100% | 15% | 44% |

Teacher Response Rate = 66/82

Principal Response Rate = 5/5

Source: Cross & Joftus survey of Columbus principals and teachers October 2010.

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

^The response option “No Opinion” was deleted from this presentation. Two percent or less of teachers and 0% of principals selected this option on any response.

Survey results only tell part of the story. Classroom observations, reviews of assessment data, and conversations with focus group participants suggest three key instructional strengths in Columbus.

- One indicator of effective instructional practice is the percentage of students scoring proficient or above on the Kansas State Assessment. All students, as a group, have met or exceeded state benchmarks in reading and math for the past three years.
- During observations of 30 classrooms in Columbus using PALSS (Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success), the majority of classrooms at all levels of schooling demonstrated orderly, well-

“The teachers care about the kids.”

—Teacher

managed environments that were conducive to learning. Additionally, at all levels, the majority of students were actively engaged in learning, and teachers were regularly providing reinforcements for student efforts. (See Appendix for specific percentages of these and other practices that contribute to accelerating student learning.)

- Conversations with principals and special education teachers indicate that the district has embraced inclusion as the delivery model for students with disabilities.

Columbus also faces a number of instructional challenges as well, however.

- PALSS identified the need to increase the following teaching practices, which were “minimally evident” in the classrooms visited (see Appendix for specific percentages related to these and other strategies):
 - Providing instruction and opportunities for learning at higher levels of thinking aligned to state assessment questions that require cognitive levels of comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation
 - Displaying student work (at the middle and high school levels) as a way of highlighting good models and reinforcing strong effort
 - Incorporating effective learning strategies, including: identifying similarities and differences, summarizing and taking notes, representing knowledge in various forms, cooperative learning, setting objectives and providing continuous feedback, and generating hypotheses
 - Providing instruction that takes into account students’ varying learning styles.
- Though Title I teachers are assigned to the elementary schools, there are no academic coaches. Additionally, paraprofessionals were observed only monitoring classrooms, not providing tutoring or instructional support.
- Currently, everyone teaching students—general education and special education teachers, aides, and paraprofessionals—is receiving very little, if any, feedback and coaching on her or his performance. There appears to be limited instructional support.
- Classrooms lack adequate resources and materials to support teaching and learning. There is no evidence of textbooks designed to provide support for tier 2 and tier 3 instruction. Moreover, according to principals, teachers, and other administrators, aside from specific high school courses (e.g., algebra), the district has not adopted new textbooks in the core curriculum for over 10 years.

“We put ‘people over stuff’ for many years, but now we’ve gone too far and don’t have what we need to teach.”
—Principal

- For three successive years (with the most recent data for FY 2008-09 reported on March 15, 2010), the district has not met the first state target for Indicator 5 for Least Restrictive Environment for student learning—2009 data indicate that only 51.7% of students with disabilities were included in the regular classroom for **80% or more** of their school day, a figure seven points below the state target of 58.8%.⁶
- Currently, Columbus has no systematic classroom walk-through process. USD 493 would benefit from fully implementing systematic procedures to conduct classroom observations, provide substantive feedback to teachers, and use observation data to inform a professional development program that identifies research-based instructional practices needed to accelerate student learning.

Professional Development

Columbus has some professional development strengths.

- As a district “on improvement,” Columbus must allocate 10% of Title I funds to professional development. This provides a base of support for professional development in the district.
- Teachers in focus groups indicated that they have considerable control over their professional development options—they are allowed to participate in nearly any professional development offered by the regional service center that they choose, and principals confirmed that they rarely turn down a request by a teacher to attend professional development.

Columbus must also address some clear professional development challenges, however.

- There is no evidence that student achievement data are utilized to inform professional development for teachers. Although the district purchases a package of professional development services from a local service center, and teachers have control over their own professional development, the teacher and principal focus groups indicate professional development is often a one-day, one-shot training, with no follow-up or support for practice to ensure that instruction improves. Further, there is no process in place to monitor the effectiveness or impact of the professional development on student achievement.
- Despite Title I funds, leadership noted that the district lacks sufficient funding for comprehensive professional development.

⁶ USD 493 Kansas IDEA State Performance Report, FY 2008-09.

- The district does not use instructional coaches to provide sustained and embedded professional development for the teachers or support MTSS. While the administration and staff in each building indicate MTSS has been implemented, there is no evidence that a state approved facilitator has been onsite to support the implementation of the model or that days are allocated for MTSS professional development.
- The district lacks adequate time for professional development. Both teachers and administrators in surveys and focus groups voiced the need for more time for professional development. With only one day designated in the master calendar for professional development, the district does not provide adequate time for teachers to learn, practice, and receive feedback and support for implementation of effective instructional practices.

"We need more professional development time, but make it meaningful, with time to properly implement it *and* have enough feedback to judge its success/failures."
—*Principal*
- The district appears to have PLCs in name only. Teachers noted that when they meet, they rarely have an agenda beforehand. They compose one as they go along, which indicates an inadequacy in the design of the learning community. Further, PLCs are not used in a systematic fashion to review student data or discuss instruction.

"Effective collaboration?
No, we just spin our wheels. We have no direction."
—*Teacher*

"I would like the district to develop a means to provide effective feedback to teachers of observed instructional strategies in a non-threatening manner. Then, use the data gathered from observations to guide PD for teachers to have the greatest impact on student learning."—*Principal*

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.

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

- 1) AYP and instructional challenges for students with disabilities and low-income students

- 2) A long-term culture of low-expectations for students, especially for low-income students
- 3) A need to align district curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development to support student learning and achievement
- 4) A lack of ongoing job-embedded professional development for teachers and other classroom staff
- 5) Budget shortages, leading to reductions in staff and services provided to students.

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

- 1) Using this assessment as a starting point, develop and implement the long-range educational plan with the goal of creating and supporting a culture of high expectations for all students. The plan should include identification of specific measures that will be used to monitor progress toward objectives, as well as clear timelines and action steps.
- 2) As part of the long-range educational plan, develop a process to regularly update the board of education on academic achievement and other key indicators of student learning and success.
- 3) Clarify the role of instructional leader for principals. Determine what this role entails and provide support and ongoing professional development for principals in their roles as instructional leaders.
- 4) With support from an external consultant, if needed, review the way resources are deployed. Think about combining some of the smallest classes to free up funds to support instructional coaches and/or provide other instructional support. Analyze how Title I funds are spent to determine if funding could help support the afterschool program that recently ended. Work with the board on a strategy for debt financing.
- 5) Develop, implement, and align curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development systems. To accomplish this the district should:
 - a. Develop—ideally in conjunction with one or more other districts—and implement a rigorous K-12 curriculum, with supporting curriculum materials and technology, which builds on state standards. Curriculum should align with enhanced assessment, instruction, and professional development, and be supported by classroom observations led by building and district leaders.
 - b. Planning should be completed with the assistance of principals, teachers, paraprofessionals, and the interlocal special education agency—to build a district-wide climate that supports the goal of improved learning and achievement for all students.

- c. Consider the possibility of employing at least a part-time curriculum/assessment coordinator who reports directly to the superintendent. The district may also consider hiring an outside consultant to assist this individual in starting to build a district-wide system for curriculum and assessment.
 - d. Conduct a systematic review of current assessments, and in light of new curriculum, implement appropriate new assessments.
 - e. Develop and implement a comprehensive data system to link assessment data and track student performance over time, and develop and implement procedures to ensure data-based decision-making on all district initiatives. This process should include plans for purchasing appropriate technology and training on data management and usage.
 - f. Develop and implement a system-wide instructional model tied to rigorous standards and supported with professional learning communities (PLCs). This model should draw on an analysis of student achievement data and identify research-based instructional practices that will have the greatest impact on increasing achievement. Instruction should be monitored systemically and evaluated for effectiveness.
 - g. Implement a classroom observation protocol that can be used to support instruction and professional development, by: conducting classroom visits using common criteria and providing feedback to educators; analyzing data using a consistent protocol to determine the extent of implementation of effective teaching/learning practices; and determining future professional development practices using observation data in collaboration with other data.
 - h. Create focused PLC structures and time, so that teachers use observation and assessment data to inform instruction. Ensure that Student Improvement Teams use data systematically to address student needs.
 - i. Develop and implement a data-driven professional development plan that includes input from general and special education teachers, instructional support staff, and principals. The plan should draw on classroom observation data to monitor implementation of the curriculum and instructional practices aligned with district goals. The plan should also include procedures to evaluate the effectiveness of the professional development in meeting teacher learning needs. The district may wish to consider the implementation of a system for early release days or a late start time, which are carefully planned and used for professional development.
- 6) In collaboration with KSDE's Special Education Technical Assistance Support Network, and external consultants if appropriate, conduct an in-depth special education needs assessment to determine how to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and to ensure that students have access to, and make satisfactory progress in the general curriculum. The review needs to look specifically at instructional leadership issues, the process of how students are identified for services, the professional development provided for special education teachers

and paraprofessionals, and how planning time is scheduled to ensure a common instructional focus for students who experience instruction from general education and special education teachers, as well as para-professionals and classroom aides.

- 7) Through community and/or public-private partnerships, look at ways to provide additional after-school, tutoring, summer school, and homework support for students who may be struggling.

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

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

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

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

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