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Needs Analysis of Morris County School District – USD 417

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 Learning Network, was expanded to reach all 17 Kansas districts not making AYP, including Morris County School District, USD 417.

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

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

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

The site visits conclude with a debriefing conducted by Cross & 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 Morris County School District, USD 417 (referred to throughout the report as USD 417).

At a size of 537 square miles, USD 417 draws students from Morris County as well as Lyon, Geary, and Wabaunsee counties. The vast majority of the district’s almost 900

¹ The site visit for USD 417 occurred September 28-30, 2009.

students are white (91.8%), 41.3% are economically disadvantaged, and 14.8% are classified as students with disabilities.

USD 417 is doing a number of things very well. Diane Miller has been the district superintendent for several years, and she has a good working relationship with the Board of Education. Further, overall student achievement in USD 417 has exceeded state targets for a number of years. In 2008-09, for example, 88.3% of students met or exceeded targets in reading, and 87.7% met or exceeded targets in math. Achievement scores at Council Grove High School—previously below those of nearby schools—are now comparable to or higher (see table).

Percentage of Students At or Above Proficiency – 2008 and 2009

Area High Schools	Reading		Math	
	2008	2009	2008	2009
Council Grove H.S.	69.6%	91.4%	66.7%	78.9%
Wabaunsee H.S.	91.7%	86.1%	75%	77.1%
Osage City H.S.	89.8%	94.1%	87.7%	92.7%
Marion H.S.	88.1%	87.9%	71.4%	78.1%
Northern Heights H.S.	78.3%	95.6%	68.9%	88.1%
Herington H.S.	77.8%	80.5%	87.2%	82.5%

In addition, the district enjoys strong support from the community. As is the case with many small rural communities, the school district is a focal point for community activities and a major contributor to the well-being and the culture of the community. The district is also the second largest employer in Morris County, behind the highly regarded local hospital. The surrounding community is perceived to be a good place to live and raise a family, and the word “family” is used quite often when people identify the benefits of living there. The school district recently passed a bond issue to build a new addition to the high school as well, though it took four attempts to pass the bond successfully.

The district and community, however, face some significant challenges. Several teachers and parents noted that USD 417 has a culture of low expectations, which affects students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the wider community. This culture of low expectations is especially problematic for students with disabilities, a subgroup that is not demonstrating adequate yearly progress (AYP). In 2008-09, only 62.1% of students with disabilities were deemed proficient or above in reading—well below the state goal of 72% proficient—and this gap in achievement and has been a trend for several years (with the exception of the 2006-07 school year). Special education services and the providers of these services are not clearly connected to the core instructional program and do not appear to support student success in the core curriculum. Additionally, materials and instructional approaches in special education appear fragmented and out of date.

Two additional issues that are strongly perceived to be challenges are the ongoing, long-time split in the district created by the consolidation of several local districts into USD 417 several decades ago, and apparent significant alcohol/drug usage by the community’s

youth. These and other issues are discussed in further detail in the Findings sections below.

II. Findings

Findings from the needs assessment of USD 417 are summarized below in the areas of leadership; empowering culture and human capital; and curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development.

Leadership

USD 417 has many leadership strengths:

- The district’s leadership is widely respected throughout the community. The Board of Education is viewed as being committed to the education of the students, and Board members speak of making decisions “for the kids.” The Board has a good balance of experience, with some long-term members and two new members who joined the Board in July.
- The Board of Education has a list of goals that they review each year during a summer retreat. During the yearly review, the Board receives reports regarding progress on meeting the goals, and sometimes goals are dropped or added.
- The Board and superintendent have a positive relationship built on trust, respect, and good communication.
- The leadership team is small—consisting of the superintendent, director of curriculum, the four school principals, and the assistant principal at the high school—which encourages collaboration, good communication, and shared decision-making.
- Leadership has established several working staff committees to review curriculum and to recommend changes. These committees appear to be working hard to accomplish their tasks in a timely manner.
- The district has established a District Academic Council (DAC) consisting of Board representation, staff members, and individuals from the community. This committee is well regarded by its members and has great potential for the district. Leadership should continue to support the DAC as an important advisory group to the Board and the leadership team.
- The district has a good formal communication process, though staff reported a need for improved communication at all levels of USD 417.

The district’s leadership has an emphasis on improvement of curriculum and instruction throughout the schools. In order to support this emphasis, leadership has developed several initiatives that are perceived as strengths. While these all of these initiatives hold promise for improvement, there is a lack of coherence in the district’s efforts to support them. Coherence means that “the elements of a school district work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy.”² The district does not appear to have established such a strategy for school and instructional improvement.

The superintendent shared a “transformational model” during the needs assessment visit that could serve as a very effective starting place for developing an articulated strategy. The elements of the model as it was presented are:

- Develop teacher and leader effectiveness
- [Design and implement] comprehensive instructional programs using student achievement data
- Extend learning time
- Provide operating flexibility and intensive support.

The model, however, has neither been distributed nor discussed with all of the leadership team or the teaching staff.

The lack of a coherent framework to support promising initiatives was demonstrated in several instances:

- The Board of Education has a strong belief that a low pupil/teacher ratio is necessary and has supported this belief for years in staffing schools. While this has resulted in extremely favorable class sizes, the district is in need of instructional coaches to work closely with principals and teachers to improve teaching and student achievement. Funding for these coaches could come from raising the student/teacher ratio. Also, the district needs to establish criteria and guidelines for the establishment or continuance of classes of a very small size. Such a review of small classes could free resources to allow for the hiring of coaches.
- Principals have been designated as the instructional leaders of their schools, but it is unclear what that role means to principals or their staff members. In focus group conversations, for example, teachers did not identify their principals as instructional leaders and were not clear on what the term “instructional leader” meant.
- There has been a movement to establish professional learning communities (PLCs) in

“PLCs have become a catchall phrase for any meeting. The feeling is that it’s just a matter of saying ‘let’s put a checkmark in the we’re doing PLCs column.’” –
USD 417 teacher

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

the schools with the good intent of having small groups of teachers working together to improve curriculum, instruction, and learning. PLCs have not been well-defined or supported, however. There is wide variation in the existence and effectiveness of the PLCs in schools, and most were not seen as having any significant impact.

- Walk-throughs have been introduced and are being used by principals to observe classroom instruction. The district, however, needs to better define the purpose of the walk-throughs and how data will be collected and used by the leadership team and teaching staff to improve professional development and instruction (see the Instruction and Professional Development sections below for additional information on this point).
- Historically, USD 417 has had a mentoring program to provide support to new teachers. According to teachers participating in focus groups, the effectiveness of the program has been mixed depending on the support of the mentoring teacher. Recently, due to budget constraints, stipends to mentors have been cut, and teachers expressed concerns about expectations, role definitions, staff development for mentors, and accountability—noting that the program has been implemented and supported differently in different schools.

Empowering Culture and Human Capital

Human Capital

USD 417 has a good, committed staff of administrators, teachers, and support personnel. The district has been able to fully staff its schools with teachers who meet the definition of “highly qualified” and to maintain its very favorable pupil/teacher ratio. The principals are able to choose their own staff members and have supervisory responsibility for special education staff members as well.

Yet, challenges remain:

- Though principals currently have supervisory responsibility for special education staff members, this has not always been the case. Responsibility for supervision has shifted back and forth between the district and the Flint Hills Special Education Cooperative (which provides special education services to the district), making it difficult to ensure accountability for student learning and achievement.
- Another challenge relates to the deployment of staff in the buildings, particularly special education paraprofessionals. Classroom observations consistently noted paraprofessionals doing clerical tasks—not working with students. With training, paraprofessionals can become valuable instructional assistants and can support not only students with disabilities, but also any struggling student in the system.

- The district’s staff evaluation system has not been changed in years and needs to be reviewed at all levels. Many teachers expressed concern that the evaluation process is not rigorous enough. Additionally, it is not clear that the evaluation system serves its intended purposes—as both a support for staff development and continued improvement, and as an accountability mechanism to ensure high performance.

Empowering Culture

USD 417 has a number of positive initiatives that provide early education for very young children and alternative programs for those students who need additional help or support in a different educational setting. Examples include:

- A K-6 after school program, initially begun with 21st Century funds and now sustained by the district and through parent fees
- A four-year-old at-risk program
- A district day care program for teen parents and staff members
- A Virtual Prescriptive Learning program
- The Making Academic Progress program
- An Alternative Learning Classroom
- A Mental Health Services summer school program.

All of these are good programs providing needed services to students and the community. Additionally, the community and school district have a positive relationship, which is shown in several ways:

- The district and its schools are focal points for community activities; extracurricular events are well attended and participating students are supported.
- There are a number of district-community partnerships, which enhance both entities for the betterment of all citizens; a prime example is the collaborative usage of activity venues, such as schools and parks and recreation buildings.
- The community passed a bond issue for a much needed upgrade to the high school facilities.
- There is a unique mentoring program at the high school, which matches *all* high school students with local leaders who meet together in small groups at the high school on a monthly basis.

- The district is the second leading employer in the county, providing professional jobs for a community that struggles to keep its young people after they complete their education.
- Residents feel positive about living in Council Grove, Prairie Heights, and the surrounding area, and raising families in those communities. The school district is seen as one of the reasons people value living in the community.

While there are many positive aspects to the culture surrounding USD 417 and the community as a whole, there are also important challenges that face the district and the community and have a direct impact on the quality of education students receive:

- Several teachers and parents in focus groups described a culture of low expectations for students, especially at the high school level. While scores improved in 2009, teachers and parents remain concerned. There appears to be a perception in the district and community that most of the students are getting a good education and that postsecondary education is not for everyone. Despite this perception, however, parents, students, and teachers report a lack of rigor at the high school that often leads students to discover that they are not prepared for college work. No Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes are offered, and only a few concurrent enrollment classes are available to students. Additionally, though students taking the ACT Test score at about the state average on most tests, according to ACT data on college preparedness, only 17% of USD 417 students who took the ACT last year are meeting the college-readiness benchmark for success in math, English, social science, and biology, compared to an average of 25% of students in Kansas.

Parents and general education teachers of students with disabilities also identified the existence of a pervasive sense of low expectation for students with disabilities. The federal special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), requires that special education services be designed to help children and youth with disabilities have access to and make progress in the core curriculum. This does not appear to be happening, and performance scores corroborate this perception.

The current work being done in the district by curriculum committees needs to address the need for high expectations and a rigorous curriculum for *all* students, supported by high-quality teaching.

- An additional challenge confronting the district is the widely reported high usage of alcohol and drugs by young people in the community. This issue affects the school district in several ways and is believed to be a primary factor related to student academic and social performance. The challenge appears to be widely known in the areas surrounding USD 417 and damages the reputation of the district, particularly the high school. Neither the district nor the high school can

solve this problem alone; parents and community members must play an essential role as well.

This problem is illustrated by a recent survey³ of USD 417 students:

- Notably, 56.6% of students (as compared to 34.6% for the state) reported an “elevated risk” for antisocial involvement
 - 53.5% (compared to 37.3% for the state) noted that “community disorganization” was an issue
 - 43% cited parental attitudes favorable to drug use (compared to 32% for the state)
 - On the positive side, USD 417 students reported “elevated protection” well above the state response in community rewards (64.3% compared to 54.4%) and family attachment (61% to 55%).
- Another challenge identified by students, staff, and community members is the continued disconnect between residents in Council Grove and residents in the area of the district served by Prairie Heights elementary and middle schools. The rift in the district appears to have existed for decades, since the consolidation of several small districts into USD 417, and may have contributed to a number of students from Prairie Heights choosing to attend high schools in other districts. The spilt may have also contributed to the difficulty the district had in passing the bond issue to support renovations at Council Grove High School. The Board of Education has attempted to address the issue by having some of its meetings outside of Council Grove in the other areas of the district, but this challenge remains.
 - The district appears to do a very good job of communicating formally with parents and community. For example, the Power School student data system is much appreciated by parents, students and staff and appears to be used by both parents and students. In addition, the district and school Web pages, school newsletters, and the School Reach automated phone system all received high marks from constituents. Parents and teachers, however, reported a desire for more informal communication that builds stronger relationships between the administration, teachers, home, and school.

³ Student survey conducted in 2008 by Communities that Care.

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 USD 417 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 modified K-PALSS (Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success) process, cited below, can be found in the Appendix of this report.⁴

Curriculum

USD 417 exhibits several strengths related to curriculum:

- The district has established procedures, timelines, and a clearly defined structure for implementing and validating a standards-aligned curriculum, formative end-of-unit assessments, and resources in the “core academic subjects” by 2011-2012.
- The district uses the framework from the Curriculum Leadership Institute (CLI), which connects the research-based practices of Deming’s organizational management of continuous improvement, Tyler’s format for curriculum development, and Marzano’s, Bloom’s, and Hunter’s instructional practices—all of which are predictably linked to gains in student achievement.
- The district provides opportunities for continuous discussion of curricular issues between and among schools and grade levels, during regularly scheduled meetings of two advisory groups: the District Academic Council (DAC) and the Subject Area Committee (SAC).
- The district and the District Academic Council both view the CLI model as a step-by-step method for addressing Tier 1 issues identified in the district.
- The Kansas Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) will soon be in place in the district. The district is engaged in the structuring process this year and has teams at both the district and building levels.

⁴ Since USD 417 already has a classroom observation process in place, a slightly modified version of the USD 417 observation tool was used to complete classroom observations. Data from observations were then incorporated into the K-PALSS reporting format. See Appendix for more information.

- Fifty-nine percent of teachers participating the Cross & Jofus Survey of Educational Practices noted that “students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.”
- In over 70% of the 43 classrooms visited, teachers demonstrated explicit alignment of their classroom activities to the district’s curriculum.

“[The district’s] got their eye on the ball, are much more focused and very receptive to change...we can actually see progress from the changes made.” –USD 417 parent

Despite these strengths, the district faces several challenges in implementing its curriculum:

- Special education services and instruction need to be aligned with the district curriculum. Special education is not providing access to and supporting students’ success in the general curriculum, and Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) are not standards-based. Additionally, instructional materials and strategies for students with disabilities appear to be antiquated and do not support progress in the core curriculum.
- It appears that little or no communication takes place between special education and general education teachers and staff around curriculum issues, and communication between the district and the Cooperative regarding special education goals and needs is poor.
- Focus groups with teachers and principals noted that implementation of the curriculum would be strengthened if a systematic process was used to promote “models of effective implementation practices.” Students would benefit if teachers had demonstrations of best practices, which were supported consistently throughout the district.
- As was also noted in the section on Empowering Culture, focus groups of representative school-based staff members identified the need for increased rigor for all students. Community members, parents, and students all expressed concerns over low expectations within the curriculum across all school environments.

Assessment

USD 417 exhibited the following strengths in the area of Assessment:

- The district’s use of “End of Unit” tests provides a common measure of student progress as it relates to the curriculum. USD 417 is currently using the MTSS Structuring Phase to determine which specific assessments will be utilized across the schools.

- The district has gathered a large array of data to inform the Improvement Plan currently in development for KSDE. These data, however, have not yet been displayed across all educational environments and discussed in a systematic way to inform instructional improvement.

USD 417 also faces several challenges related to Assessment:

- Assessments of students with disabilities and the data gleaned from those assessments are not currently discussed with general education teachers to help to inform instructional design. This disconnect creates challenges for both students and educators.
- The district is not using assessment data across all schools during PLCs. There is currently no district protocol for using data, nor uniform training that enables educators to practice using data to inform instruction—so that educators can examine student work, modify instructional practices, develop lessons collaboratively (including special education staff), and continuously review assessment data to inform future practice.

“Knowing which data, rather than just more data, would be best to make educational decisions.” –*USD 417 teacher*

- USD 417 lacks a longitudinal data system to track student performance and to link performance data from multiple assessments (e.g., screening, progress monitoring, accountability assessment, and diagnostic assessments). This is in the process of being discussed and developed through the district’s implementation of MTSS, but staff will also need professional development to properly manage and interpret data, and most importantly, use it to inform instruction.

Instruction

Table 1 presents the results from a survey of teachers (response rate 81.2%) and principals (response rate 100%) administered online by Cross & Joftus. Instructional strategies that principals and teachers believe are most strongly evident and are least evident, are highlighted below. Additional instructional strengths and challenges are identified later in this section.

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

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited by 100% of principals as strongly evident)
- using data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development (80% of principals)

- meeting regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment (cited by 80% of principals as strongly evident and not evident or minimally evident by 20%).

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

- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (selected as strongly evident by 20% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 40%)
- identifying students who are struggling to master content and providing them with support individually or in small flexible groups, using differentiated instruction (selected as strongly evident by 20% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 40%)
- fostering collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well being (selected as strongly evident by 20% of principals and not evident or minimally evident by 20%).

The sound instructional strategies that teachers believe are most strongly evident and least evident in their schools are related to, but not identical to those selected by principals. *There are some significant differences between principals' views and teachers'.*

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

- creating safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments (cited as strongly evident by 67% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 3%)
- students participating 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 59% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 6%)
- using a variety of appropriate instructional strategies and resources, including technology, to actively engage students, encourage positive social interaction, and emphasize critical thinking, problem solving, and interdisciplinary connections (cited as strongly evident by 58% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 10%).

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

- providing adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions to support teacher and administrator learning (selected as strongly evident by 14% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 47%)
- providing adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions to support student learning (selected as strongly evident by 16% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 33%)

- administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitoring instructional practices and providing meaningful feedback to teachers (selected as strongly evident by 20% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 34%)
- empowering students to use data to monitor their own progress (selected as strongly evident by 30% of teachers and not evident or minimally evident by 36%).

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

Please rate the extent to which you believe the following instructional practices are evident in your school.	Principals		Teachers	
	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^	Strongly Evident*	Not Evident or Minimally Evident^
Educators create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments.	100%	0%	67%	3%
Teachers and administrators use data from class, school, districts, and state assessments to determine results-based staff development.	80%	0%	51%	14%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to plan instruction and assessment.	80%	20%	41%	17%
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.	60%	0%	58%	10%
Subject matter is delivered to students at an appropriately rigorous level.	60%	0%	52%	7%
Educators collaboratively function as a community of learners focused on improving student learning using appropriately allocated time and resources.	60%	0%	51%	13%
School or district leaders facilitate, monitor, and guide the continuous improvement of instruction.	60%	0%	35%	28%
Educators participate in staff development designs that provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and support for implementation.	60%	20%	42%	19%
The effectiveness of staff development is measured by the level of classroom application and the impact of those practices on student learning.	60%	20%	20%	29%
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and	60%	0%	16%	33%

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^
interventions are provided to support student learning.				
Adequate resources (human, fiscal, and physical), incentives, and interventions are provided to support teacher and administrator learning.	60%	20%	14%	47%
Students participate in research-based instructional practices that assist them in learning the curriculum, meeting rigorous academic standards, and preparing for assessments.	40%	0%	59%	6%
Administrators, academic coaches, or teacher leaders monitor instructional practices and provide meaningful feedback to teachers.	40%	0%	20%	34%
Educators meet regularly on school-based learning teams to examine student work and identify effective teaching practices that address learning priorities.	40%	20%	19%	27%
Educators provide equitable opportunities to learn that are based on respect for high expectations, development levels, and adaptations for diverse learners.	20%	0%	52%	1%
Educators apply research to decision-making to develop instructional practices related to diverse learning needs of students.	20%	0%	36%	17%
Educators foster collegial relationships with families, school personnel, and the larger community to support students' learning and well being.	20%	20%	36%	14%
Students who are struggling to master content are identified by educators and provided with support individually or in small flexible groups using differentiated instruction.	20%	40%	52%	14%
Students are empowered to use data to monitor their own progress.	20%	40%	30%	36%

Teacher Response Rate = 69/85

Principal Response Rate = 5/5

Source: Cross & Jofus survey of Morris County principals and teachers September 2009.

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

^The response option "No Opinion" was deleted from this presentation. No principals and generally less than 1% of teachers selected this option on any response.

Additional strengths in the area of Instruction include the following:

- The district is using McREL’s Power-Walk-Throughs to begin to systematically monitor the fidelity of implementation of “expected instructional practices.”
- The district uses the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) model for identifying instructional practices in all buildings, to provide differentiated instruction for students.
- The district’s Technology Committee provides all teachers the opportunity to acquire needed resources using a “justification process”; requests are considered and technological support is typically provided to expedite the delivery of instruction.

USD 417’s challenges in Instructional Practice are as follows:

- Special education staff members do not appear to participate in, understand, or utilize the instructional practices that are expected by all general education teachers in the district. Instructional materials are not jointly selected by the district and the cooperative to ensure alignment with the core curriculum and to promote the practice required by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)—that special education services must be designed to help students with special needs “have access to and make progress in the core curriculum.”
- Though survey results show that teachers *believe* they are using effective instructional practices, the following research-based effective teaching practices were observed to be *minimally evident in less than 50% of the classrooms visited* (see Appendix for specific percentages):
 - Providing instruction at higher levels of thinking including application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.
 - Engaging students in instructional activities that are predictably linked to gains in student achievement—only three of the nine activities were found to be present in more than 50% of classrooms.
- Focus groups and walk-through participants noted that the district’s McREL classroom visitation protocol *does not* encompass some of the key attributes of the K-PALSS (Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success) model, including:
 - Focusing the outcomes of the visits on identifying future professional development practices needed to increase student achievement, not only for those students not yet meeting proficiency, but also for those who exceed or have exceptional results on state assessments (i.e. to provide increased rigor for all).

- Developing procedures to promote effective instructional practices as models.
- The district lacks consistent definitions for the “research informed practices” it wishes to promote. Also lacking are grade-level appropriate demonstrations and support for practicing activities, with feedback from coaches and/or colleagues to ensure that practices are understood and implemented by all staff.
- While the district has instructional material adoptions, teachers have the freedom to use the materials or resources they choose individually. This practice may be leading to the lack of coherence and rigor seen in observations and reported by all focus groups.
- Focus groups with teachers and principals also noted that homework is assigned inconsistently throughout the district, and that the district lacks appropriate mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of homework.

“I need to have a better conversation with my teachers after the walk-throughs. That’s how we’re going to improve.” –*Morris County administrator*

“Feedback is the piece that’s missing.” –*Another Morris County administrator*

Professional Development

USD 417 exhibited a number of Professional Development strengths:

- The district has a Professional Development Council (PDC) in place with representative involvement from those responsible for staff training. It addresses district-wide needs in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as well as building-level needs based on evaluative feedback.
- The PDC provides oversight to address district-wide needs and engagement with representatives from other district committees (DAC, SAC, and the Technology Committee) to ensure consistency.
- The SIOP training provided during the 2008-09 school year was described by more than 52% of teachers and all administrators as outstanding, deep, and effective. Walk-through observations showed evidence in the majority of classrooms of SIOP training, including the four strategies expected in all lessons. Teachers reported that SIOP allowed them to work with all students in a deeper way; teachers also identified the critical attributes of effective professional development, which ideally will be replicated in the future (e.g., following presentation of research-based strategies, teachers have opportunities to practice

with feedback, ongoing support, and monitoring with accountability for implementation).

Three significant Professional Development challenges stand out for USD 417:

- Currently, it appears that special education staff members are using one reading intervention across all grade levels, for all special education students. Additionally, it is not clear that special education staff members are attending district professional development sessions or implementing effective strategies to ensure that students with special needs to have access to and make progress in the core curriculum.
- Walk-through data are not being used to inform professional development activities consistently and effectively throughout the district.
- The district lacks a multi-year professional development plan focused on achievement data that identify students’ instructional needs as well as MTSS requirements.

“We must analyze our walk-through data and have it as a component in MTSS structuring.”
–*Morris County administrator*

III. Recommendations for Technical Assistance

One of the primary goals of this needs assessment is to identify areas in which the district could most benefit from technical assistance and to design that technical assistance in a way that will have the greatest impact on the district’s school quality and student achievement. Based on this needs assessment, Cross & Jofus, LLC recommends that the technical assistance provided USD 417 address one or more of the following general recommendations:

1. Strongly consider adopting the “transformational model” identified by the superintendent as the district’s Theory of Action.
2. Continue to work with the Board goals but develop methods/criteria for measuring the success or completion of the goals and adjust as needed. The district leadership should provide the Board with a yearly assessment report regarding progress toward the goals.
3. Develop a coherent framework to support improvement in curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development. This framework should address the following:
 - Redefine the working relationship with the Flint Hills Cooperative, and establish shared goals and accountability structures for meeting the needs of students with disabilities

- Clearly define the principal’s role as instructional leader, set expectations, and provide support to enable the principal to fulfill expectations
 - Make adjustments to the current walk-through process, to include key elements of the K-PALSS process — so that administrators can systematically and expediently collect data on the extent to which research-based instructional practices are implemented, and so that observations and data can be used to guide instruction and future professional development
 - Continue to develop a comprehensive data system to link assessment data and track student performance
 - Determine the role of professional learning communities (PLCs) in the district and establish expectations and needed support for them, so that both general and special education staff can examine student work; consistently review assessment data to inform curriculum and instruction; and modify instructional practices and develop lessons collaboratively
 - Employ coaches to work in the schools, particularly in reading and math
 - Develop a district-wide homework plan, and develop procedures for monitoring and evaluating teachers’ use of homework
 - Strengthen the mentoring program for new teachers.
4. Build a culture of distributed leadership in the district by defining leadership roles, establishing expectations, allowing people to do their jobs, and holding people accountable.
 5. Establish a culture of high expectations for *all* students and ensure the delivery of a high-quality, rigorous curriculum for *all* students.
 6. Review the staff evaluation procedures in the district at all levels and establish procedures that support professional growth and are tied to improved student outcomes. The district should work closely with its NEA representatives to initiate this effort for teachers. New evaluation procedures for the leadership team should also be undertaken.
 7. Address the issue of drug and alcohol usage by students by seeking out and utilizing local, state, and national resources.
 8. Continue to support the DAC as a valuable resource for the district.
 9. Build relationships with parents by developing more personal communications and a welcoming culture.
 10. Closely review the relationship between the Council Grove community and the community served by the two Prairie Heights schools to determine why the split continues and what affect it is having on students choosing not to attend the high school.

Once district leadership has had an opportunity to review this report, a representative from Cross & Jofus will contact the USD 417 superintendent to finalize a technical assistance plan that includes 24 days of external support for the time period January through September of 2010. This plan, developed in collaboration between the senior leadership of the district and Cross & Jofus will describe in detail the goals, objectives, activities, service provider, and timeline of the technical assistance.

APPENDIX
Findings from Classroom Observations (modified for USD 417)
MORRIS COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Using a modified observation protocol that combined the Mc-REL walk-through observation form with a key elements of the K-PALSS (Kansas Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success) process, Cross & Joftus staff in collaboration with a representative from the Kansas State Department of Education and district staff visited classrooms and recorded observations of effective “teaching” demonstrated by the teacher and “learning” demonstrated by the students.

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

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

It is important to note that the K-PALSS observation process was modified in USD 417 to accommodate the McREL Power Walk-Through format the district is currently using. Because of this, some categories (the items in the section titled Learning Environment, Instructional Design and Interactive Behaviors) were not explicitly evaluated in the walk-throughs. As such, the walk-through data only provide feedback for those areas the district assesses using their McREL protocol. The graphs following the tables show a summary of the practices that were observed in all classrooms, which were aligned with the McREL observation program.

Elementary Schools (26 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	TEACHING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
<p>Learning Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0% Orderly/Clean 0% Safe 0% Displays student work 0% Respects cultural diversity with materials resources 0% Supports high expectations 		
<p>Instructional Design</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 88% Standards-based lesson 0% Inquiry-based lesson 0% Total group 0% Flexible small skill group 0% Cooperative learning group 0% Teacher-led learning 0% Student-led learning 0% Modeling 0% Checking understanding 0% Guided Practice 0% Independent Practice 		
<p>Strategies Used</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adjust for multiple learning styles 100% visual 100% auditory 0% kinesthetic 0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 0% Address diverse language needs 23% Identify similarities & differences 0% Summarize & take notes 58% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 58% Use homework & practice opportunities 50% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 65% Organize learning in groups 88% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 23% Generate & test hypotheses 85% Use cues, questions & advance organizers 92% Increase student engagement 		<p>Instruction needs to include more opportunities for students to identify similarities and differences in multiple formats to meet diverse learning needs.</p> <p>Instruction needs to include opportunities for students to summarize learning in meaningful ways.</p> <p>A larger cadre of learning experiences is necessary to cause students to think at higher levels of cognition.</p> <p>Instructional activities need to be structured so that students use diverse thinking and problem-solving skills.</p>

Elementary Schools (26 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
LEARNING	
Interactive Behaviors	
35% Asks/answers questions 0% Active involvement in classwork Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways: 0% interpersonal 0% intrapersonal 0% verbal-linguistic 0% logistical-mathematical 0% visual-spatial 0% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic 0% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)	Students need to be provided multiple opportunities to be actively involved in answering questions which continuously show progress of learning in order to inform future teaching practices.
Cognitive Level	
27% Knowledge 31% Comprehension 27% Application 12% Analysis 0% Synthesis 4% Evaluation	Teachers need to provide instruction that moves students to higher-level thinking; specifically the focus needs to be on moving students above application level.
Work Produced	
27% Individual Work 27% Group Work 31% Written work 4% Project 4% Presentation/Performance 0% Self-Evaluation/Reflection	Concerning work produced: teachers need to provide assignments that require students to collaboratively develop their assignments, present their work by project, performance, and presentation, and include opportunities for students to demonstrate self-evaluation/reflection practices.
Resources	
100% Textbooks 0% Supplemental materials 0% Manipulatives 12% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 27% Worksheets	Increase the effective use of technology in the instructional process which requires students to demonstrate diverse and higher levels of thinking. Use of worksheets which offer opportunities for students to provide responses to open-ended answers will strengthen learning skills.

Middle Schools (12 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	TEACHING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
Learning Environment		
0% Orderly/Clean 0% Safe 0% Displays student work 0% Respects cultural diversity with materials resources 0% Supports high expectations		
Instructional Design		
58% Standards-based lesson 0% Inquiry-based lesson 0% Total group 0% Flexible small skill group 0% Cooperative learning group 0% Teacher-led learning 0% Student-led learning 0% Modeling 0% Checking understanding 0% Guided Practice 0% Independent Practice		
Strategies Used		
100% Adjust for multiple learning styles 100% visual 100% auditory 0% kinesthetic 0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 0% Address diverse language needs 33% Identify similarities & differences 25% Summarize & take notes 50% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 25% Use homework & practice opportunities 33% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 33% Organize learning in groups 58% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 25% Generate & test hypotheses 75% Use cues, questions & advance organizers 42% Increase student engagement	Adjustments for various learning styles need to balance ways students receive information. A larger repertoire of instructional strategies is necessary to provide educators with skills to scaffold instruction for all tiers of learning, address culturally responsive teaching, and address diverse learning needs.	

Middle Schools (12 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	LEARNING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
<p>Interactive Behaviors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 83% Asks/answers questions 0% Active involvement in classwork Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0% interpersonal 0% intrapersonal 0% verbal-linguistic 0% logistical-mathematical 0% visual-spatial 0% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic 0% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition) 		
<p>Cognitive Level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8% Knowledge 17% Comprehension 58% Application 17% Analysis 0% Synthesis 0% Evaluation 		<p>Need to provide instruction and opportunities for students to practice higher-level thinking skills.</p>
<p>Work Produced</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 25% Individual Work 42% Group Work 50% Written work 8% Project 25% Presentation/Performance 0% Self-Evaluation/Reflection 		<p>Concerning work produced: teachers need to provide assignments that require students to collaboratively develop their assignments, present their work by project, performance, and presentation, and include opportunities for students to demonstrate self-evaluation/reflection practices.</p>
<p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 42% Textbooks 0% Supplemental materials 0% Manipulatives 50% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 33% Worksheets 		<p>Students' use of textbooks, technology and manipulatives should be increased to address diverse learning needs.</p> <p>Use of worksheets which offer opportunities for students to provide responses to open-ended answers will strengthen learning skills.</p>

High School (9 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	TEACHING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
Learning Environment 0% Orderly/Clean 0% Safe 0% Displays student work 0% Respects cultural diversity with materials resources 0% Supports high expectations		
Instructional Design 44% Standards-based lesson 0% Inquiry-based lesson 33% Total group 22% Flexible small skill group 0% Cooperative learning group 0% Teacher-led learning 0% Student-led learning 0% Modeling 0% Checking understanding 0% Guided Practice 0% Independent Practice		
Strategies Used 100% Adjust for multiple learning styles visual 100% auditory 0% kinesthetic 0% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives 0% Address diverse language needs 11% Identify similarities & differences 22% Summarize & take notes 11% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition 22% Use homework & practice opportunities 11% Represent knowledge in multiple ways 33% Organize learning in groups 44% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback 0% Generate & test hypotheses 56% Use cues, questions & advance organizers 56% Increase student engagement		<p>Adjustments for various learning styles need to balance ways students receive information.</p> <p>A larger repertoire of instructional strategies is necessary to provide educators with skills to scaffold instruction for all tiers of learning, address culturally responsive teaching, and address diverse learning needs.</p>

High School (9 Classrooms)

OBSERVED PRACTICES +	LEARNING	PD RECOMMENDATIONS Δ
Interactive Behaviors		
56% Asks/answers questions 0% Active involvement in classwork Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways: 0% interpersonal 0% intrapersonal 0% verbal-linguistic 0% logistical-mathematical 0% visual-spatial 0% bodily-kinesthetic 0% musical-rhythmic 0% Receives feedback on performance 0% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)		
Cognitive Level		
33% Knowledge 22% Comprehension 22% Application 22% Analysis 0% Synthesis 0% Evaluation		Teachers need to provide instruction and opportunities for students to practice higher-level thinking skills.
Work Produced		
22% Individual Work 11% Group Work 67% Written work 0% Project 0% Presentation/Performance 0% Self-Evaluation/Reflection		Teachers need to provide assignments that require students to collaboratively develop their assignments, present their work by project, performance and presentation and to include opportunities for students to demonstrate self-evaluation/reflection practices.
Resources		
78% Textbooks 0% Supplemental materials 0% Manipulatives 22% Technology 0% Materials reflect diversity 33% Worksheets		Student use of technology and manipulatives should be increased to address diverse learning needs. Use of worksheets which offer opportunities for students to provide responses to open-ended answers will strengthen learning skills.