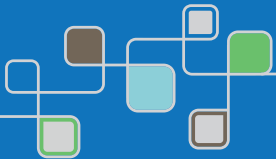


# The Learning Network™

Rethinking School Improvement

CROSS & JOFTUS



Our partnership with Cross & Joftus is allowing us to change our relationship with districts that have the greatest challenge, that of overcoming the effects of poverty.

The change is moving us away from a focus on compliance to that of collaboration. We want the state department's services to improve as well, just as we expect real change to occur at the district level. That willingness to direct the mirror back at ourselves is a critical shift in the way we do things in Kansas, one that I believe will make all the difference.

**Alexa Posny** Former Commissioner, Kansas

## The Problem: Persistent Failure to Improve Struggling Schools

Despite a great deal of hard work among educators and a public demanding improvement, schools and districts continue to struggle to educate all students to high standards. At the same time, states—which have both a legal and a moral responsibility to intervene—have relied almost exclusively on ineffective, “top-down” measures in their attempts to improve outcomes for students.

It need not be this way. In a time of need and change, responsible educators, administrators, and policymakers across the nation must seize the opportunity to turn around persistently failing schools, meet the needs of all students, and improve outcomes and implement educational reforms in such a creative manner as to ensure their sustainability for generations to come. Such an opportunity comes in the form of The Learning Network—a collaborative approach to improving the quality of schools, districts, and states developed and managed by an extraordinary group of educators from Cross & Jofus.

## The Learning Network Theory of Action

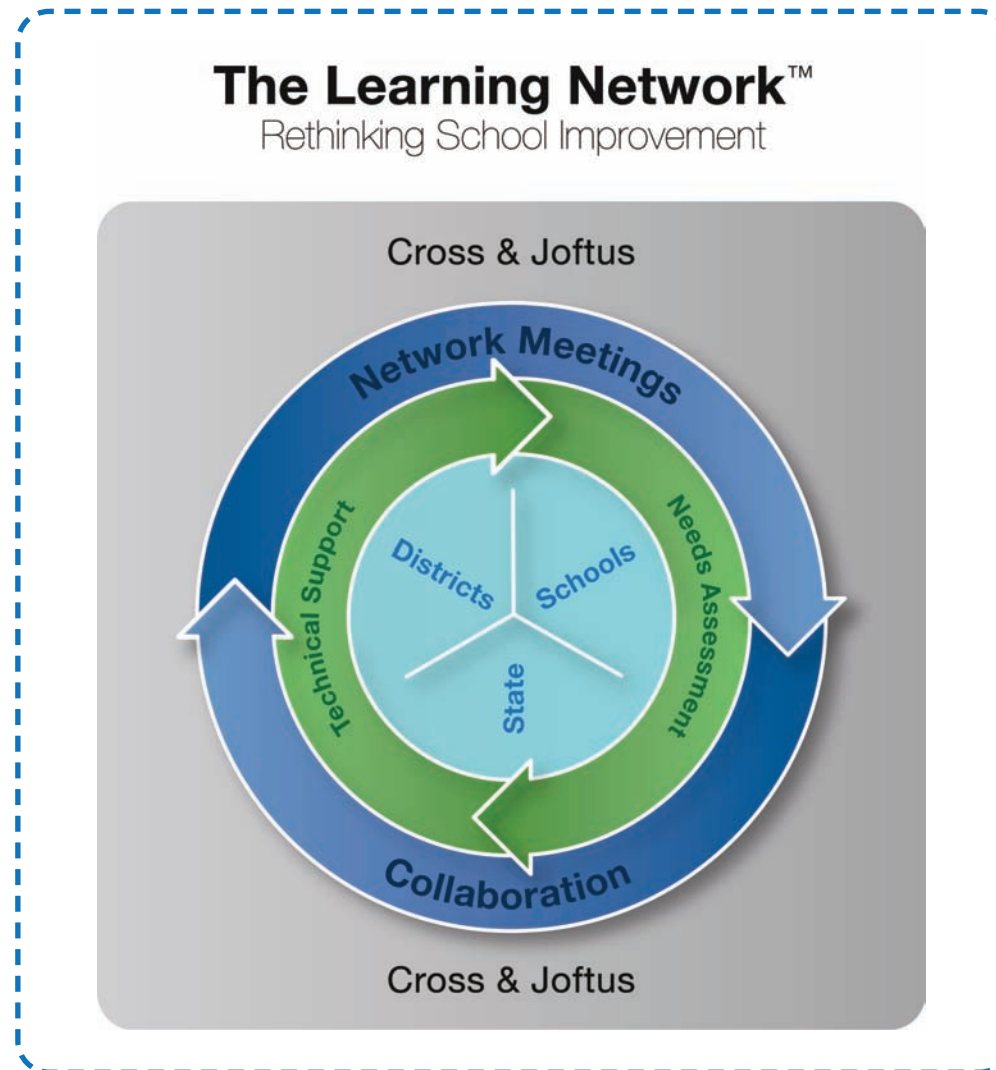
When state departments of education and school districts develop an understanding of their shared challenges, create focused and aligned systems of support for schools, and work strategically and collaboratively to improve instruction and turn around schools, all students can succeed.

## The Learning Network Approach

Cross & Jofus helps the state education agency and its most struggling districts establish a Learning Network to turn around chronically low-performing schools and to increase capacity to raise achievement and close significant gaps in student learning. This approach engages professionals directly in improving results and bypasses less-effective, top-down attempts at reform. They assess needs, establish strategic priorities, gain essential technical assistance, and collaborate with peers across the state. They work as partners to establish a better understanding of roles, strategy, challenges, responsibilities, and available resources at the state and district levels.

## Key Elements of The Learning Network

Key elements of the approach include Cross & Joftus experts, needs assessment, technical support, and collaboration among Learning Network members. These elements support the partnership of the state, the districts, and the schools in their efforts to ensure all children can succeed (see figure).



## **Cross & Joftus Experts**

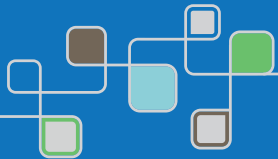
A support team is assigned to work with each district and the state as they navigate through data collection, needs analysis, and implementation. Team members are chosen based on their areas of expertise and demonstrated experience to address the issues confronting each district and the state. Areas of expertise include:

- Strategic Planning and Use of Data
- Systems Analysis
- Classroom Observations for Instructional Improvement
- Professional Development
- Human Resources
- Special Education
- Response to Intervention (RTI)
- District and School Leadership
- School Finance
- Program Evaluation

The assigned team provides individualized assistance and helps strengthen the working partnership between the state education agency and the school district. If necessary, experts are added to the team to assist on specific topics.

## **Needs Assessment**

Each Learning Network district and the state education agency hosts a three-day visit during which a team of experts and peers implements a research-based process—the Process for Advancing Learning Strategies for Success (PALSS). Designed by Cross & Joftus, this process aims to identify strengths and weaknesses of the instructional delivery and support system; determine the systemic coherence of the system; and develop the capacity of administrators and teachers to improve instruction on a continuous basis. PALSS incorporates three key activities: interviews, surveys, and classroom observations.



Our Cross & Joftus consultants have brought to our district an amazing knowledge base and understanding of the research around classroom observations and professional development.

Their experience and focus help us be more action-oriented and productive. And we are already seeing results.

Our once unstructured and inconsistent approach to classroom observations is now a rigorous, systematized district-wide effort.

**Darren Dennis** Director, Learning Services, Garden City Public Schools

## Interviews

The first step of PALSS is to interview or conduct focus groups with administrators to determine their vision for instructional improvement and theory of action for accomplishing that vision. There are several questions that Cross & Joftus addresses during the interviews:

1. Is there a clear, commonly held vision in the system for instructional improvement?
2. Is there an overarching strategy for accomplishing this improvement?
3. What are administrators' beliefs about how to best improve instruction?
4. Is there coherence with regard to how the school, district, or state is organized, operates, and uses resources?

The goal is to gain an understanding of leadership's vision, plan, and capacity for reform in order to develop and implement a plan that is most likely to result in instructional improvement and, ultimately, gains in student achievement.

## Surveys

In addition to interviews, Cross & Joftus conducts a confidential online survey of all teachers and principals in the system. The survey draws from standards of the National Staff Development Council and the state's professional development and student achievement. The survey asks teachers and principals to rate the extent to which effective, research-based instructional practices are occurring in their schools.

## Classroom Observations

Another key element of PALSS is classroom observations. Twenty-five years of research affirms the power of classroom observations to improve instruction.<sup>1</sup>

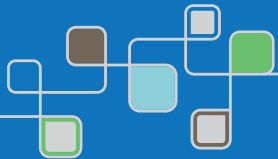
The unique nature of PALSS is that the data collected during visitations help teams of educators examine what instructional practices have the greatest impact on advancing achievement and what opportunities they should pursue to increase learning levels.

Data collected during classroom visits identify what is being done right, what needs work, and what is needed to advance continuous improvement of student learning. The success of PALSS as a professional development effort is linked to how this educational data collection system focuses on using the "Three C's" to accomplish continuous improvement: (1) changing conditions, (2) capacity building, and (3) clustering for support.<sup>2</sup>

## References

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Marzano (2001). *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.  
Downey (2004). *The Three Minute Classroom Walk-Through: Changing School Supervisory Practice One Teacher at a Time*. Corwin Press.

<sup>2</sup> Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, Inc.



This process has proven to be a critical driver  
of important internal conversation.

To have external critical friends look at our work has both  
sparked our sense of urgency and affirmed that we are on the right  
track regarding what should be improved and prioritized.

**Cynthia Lane** Asst. Superintendent of Business and Instructional  
Support Services Kansas City, Kansas Public Schools

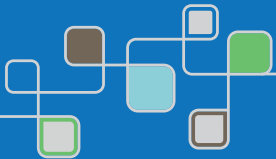
District and state administrators and teachers are trained to conduct five-minute observations using a protocol developed by Cross & Joftus. Training includes a “seminar” that introduces the administrators and teachers to the concept, goals, and processes of classroom observations, observation as a group of approximately six classrooms for the purpose of calibration, and follow-up discussion. Teams of administrators and teachers conduct approximately 70 classroom observations over three days.

The teams compile their data and Cross & Joftus presents a summary of the results in two ways. First, data are presented in tabular form, showing the percentages of classrooms visited that demonstrated each teaching and learning element by school level (i.e., elementary, middle, high) as well as a short description of what needs to be changed. An example of this table from a real district is presented in Appendices 1 and 2. Second, Cross & Joftus presents the data graphically to show observed practices across all levels of schooling. A partial example of the graphical representation of observed practices is presented in Appendices 3 and 4.

The findings of the interviews, surveys, and classroom observations are incorporated into a final report that the host district or state can use to share findings with stakeholders, develop a technical support strategy, and begin work on a new or improved strategic plan.

### **Technical Support**

The needs assessment report identifies key challenge areas that could benefit from the help of an external expert or a team of experts. With the help of Cross & Joftus, the district or state identifies up to three priority issues to receive immediate attention. It is often the case that lack of coherence is the first item to be addressed. According to the Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University (2007), coherence means “the elements of a school district work together in an integrated way to implement an articulated strategy.” A school district that lacks coherence is one in which the workings of the central office — professional development, hiring, resource allocation, public engagement, etc. — are not aligned to fulfill the mission of the district and improve student outcomes. Hard work yields little in such a system due to broken lines of communication, duplicative efforts, and conflicting sub-goals. An aligned school system, however, is a well-run driver of improvement that is both efficient and effective in addressing issues such as enhancing the quality of the instructional core to meet the needs of all students, raising achievement of ELL and special education students, and increasing college-ready rates. The assembled Cross & Joftus teams have experience in addressing the issue of coherence while remaining focused on the key student achievement goals of their clients.



Overall, our district's needs assessment visit was awesome.

It helped us identify two critical areas to focus our efforts and the technical assistance to be provided by Cross & Joftus: organizational structure and an instructional delivery/support system. The Kansas Learning Network has also provided great teambuilding opportunities for the participating superintendents and our leadership teams.

**Michelle Sedler** Superintendent, Turner Public Schools

## **Collaboration**

Three times throughout the year, participating district leaders and the state education agency gather to share both challenges and solutions. These meetings provide an opportunity for participants to exhibit their work, ask questions of their knowledgeable peers, and establish connections for future collaboration. In addition, each district sends members of its leadership team to participate in the needs assessment visits of at least two other member districts. These intensive three-day reviews bring visiting colleagues together both to provide important external feedback to the host district and share ideas about how to face common challenges at home. In between Learning Network meetings and needs assessment visits, the districts and the state education agency are encouraged to seek support from one another via email, phone, and in-person visits. These collaborative activities reinforce a culture of continuous improvement as participants are regularly encouraged to look deeply into their own data and practice as well as learn about successful innovations their peers are using.

As the national Network grows, opportunities for state leaders to swap ideas and benefit from each other's common experiences will be made available. At the regional and national levels, state superintendents and commissioners can minimize the "reinvention of the wheel" via the dissemination of best practices, ensuring more successful, efficient state agencies.

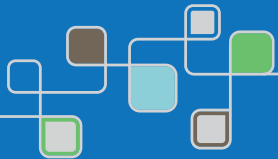
## Expected Short and Long-term Outcomes

### Short-term Outcomes

- A more productive, positive relationship between the state department and its most struggling districts
- More thoughtful, output-oriented, stakeholder-supported district and state strategic plans
- An atmosphere of cooperation and trust across districts, the state department, local teacher unions, and individual educators
- A state department of education that plays a valuable and appreciated role in the school improvement process
- District central offices that have aligned every role and task with the goal of improving instruction and increasing student achievement
- Development of a continuous improvement process

### Long-term Outcomes

- More students graduating from high school ready for career, college, and citizenship
- A diminishing achievement gap among subgroups
- Fewer students in special education classes
- More students in high-quality AP, IB, and dual enrollment programs
- More teachers that feel supported and rewarded in their jobs
- A central office that spends more time encouraging innovation than enforcing rules
- A state department of education that is a national school improvement leader



The C&J consultants were both approachable and knowledgeable about the challenges that districts like ours face.

Thanks to the conversations I participated in with C&J consultants and my peers in other Kansas Learning Network districts, we have already made important changes to our practice. The network we are developing and this mindset of problem solving and collaboration has a lot of potential.

**Denise Seguire** Chief Academic Officer, Wichita Public Schools

## Preliminary Changes in Kansas

While The Learning Network is a developmental process that requires persistent effort, near-term results appear promising. In the state of Kansas, for example, after only one year of focused activity:

- Four out of the five pilot-year districts and the state agency are tackling the issue of coherence and doing so with the backing of their boards and the teachers' union.
- All districts are embracing the art of classroom observation as a critical tool in the improvement of instruction.
- Under the leadership of the Commissioner, the state agency is eager to distance itself from its compliance-focused past and reestablish itself as the resource-of-choice for those districts most struggling to increase student achievement.
- Individuals from different districts are pooling their resources and tapping into each other's knowledgebase to meet common needs, including improved tools and processes for teacher evaluation and formative assessments aligned with state standards.
- Twelve districts recently added to the Network have undergone needs assessments and are beginning to implement recommendations that include aligning written and taught curriculum, enhancing instruction and supports for students with disabilities, and using classroom observations to inform instructional improvement, coaching, and professional development.
- Thirty-two of the lowest performing schools in the state are working with implementation coaches to drastically increase student achievement.

## Funding Opportunities for Learning Network Implementation

Approximately \$3 billion in school improvement grants, made possible by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), was sent to states in Fall 2009. In addition, Title I, Part A stimulus funds and funds for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were released in 2009. Four percent of Title I, Part A funding is reserved for school improvement under section 1003 (a).

The Kansas State Department of Education utilizes Title I and IDEA funding to implement The Learning Network. The Learning Network addresses one of four required ARRA reforms—supporting effective intervention strategies for the lowest performing schools. The stimulus package has allowed Kansas to expand the program to include a total of 17 districts.

## Want to join us? Expectations for new Network member states and districts

The Learning Network approach requires a commitment on the part of both the state and districts to be authentic (willing for others to see strengths and weaknesses), be open (willing to hear sometimes difficult critique of the status quo as well as new ideas for improvement), and be available (willing to spend time learning from and with peers).

**For more information** please contact Scott Joftus at [scott@edstrategies.net](mailto:scott@edstrategies.net) or 301-229-3049 or Torrey Shawe at [torrey@edstrategies.net](mailto:torrey@edstrategies.net) or 202-669-5544.

### About Cross & Joftus

Cross & Joftus, LLC, is a certified small business dedicated to providing education leaders with personalized and expert assistance in policy analysis and development, evaluation, school and district reform, curriculum and instruction, special education and Response to Intervention, and strategic planning.

Cross & Joftus has worked with a variety of educational organizations—foundations, districts and states, associations, and nonprofit think tanks—to analyze policies, conduct evaluations of programs and practices, plan and communicate goals for improvement, and put reform plans into action. For many of our projects, we work in partnership with other organizations, or engage the services of other consultants to ensure the right mix of expertise and experience for each endeavor.

Our success is based on two factors. First, we offer education leaders the small-firm advantage of working directly with our partners and the large-firm advantage provided by a cadre of senior consultants with expertise in the areas of school finance, school-community partnerships, communications, human resource management, teacher quality, high school reform, district leadership, assessment and accountability, and evaluation. Second, we combine rigorous analytical methods with out-of-the-box solutions that are based on a capacity-building and knowledge-use approach that adds value to organizations long after their engagement with Cross & Joftus has ended.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT OUR WEB SITE AT [WWW.EDSTRATEGIES.NET](http://WWW.EDSTRATEGIES.NET)**

# Appendices

## Appendix 1. Teaching Practices Observed in District’s Elementary Schools

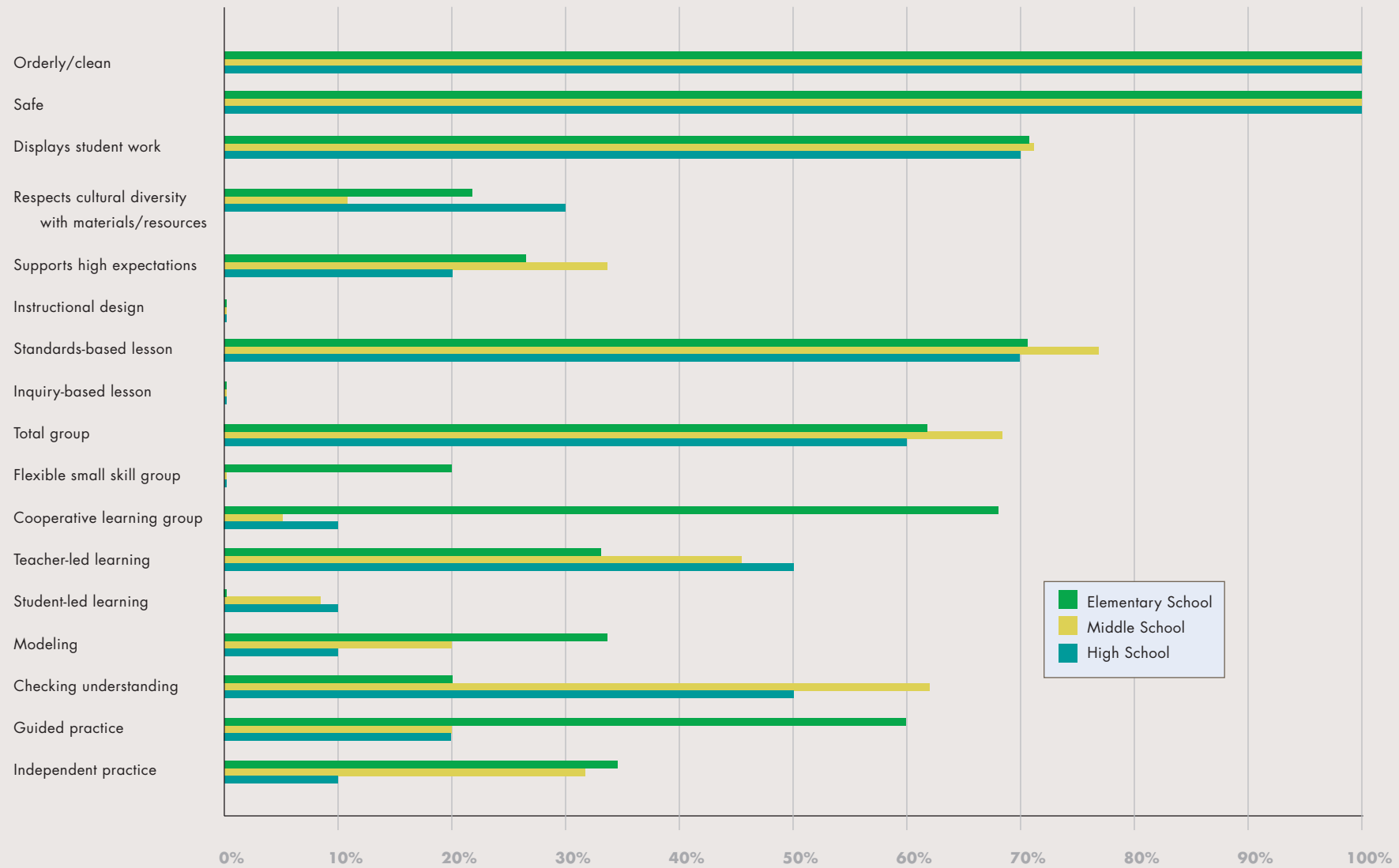
Observed Practices	PD Recommendations
<b>Learning Environment</b>	
100% Orderly/Clean	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respect for cultural diversity needs to be more evident in the learning environment.</li> <li>Support for high expectations for learning needs to be made more explicit for students.</li> </ul>
100% Safe	
71% Displays student work	
22% Respects cultural diversity with materials/resources	
27% Supports high expectations	
<b>Instructional Design</b>	
71% Standards-based lesson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Active engagement of students in the learning process would be strengthened by using inquiry-based and student-led learning.</li> <li>Use of modeling and small flexible learning groups needs to increase.</li> <li>Opportunities to check understanding and give feedback need to occur prior to students being expected to perform independent practice successfully.</li> </ul>
0% Inquiry-based lesson	
62% Total group	
20% Flexible small skill group	
67% Cooperative learning group	
33% Teacher-led learning	
0% Student-led learning	
33% Modeling	
20% Checking understanding	
60% Guided Practice	
36% Independent Practice	
<b>Strategies Used</b>	
Adjust for multiple learning styles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adjustments for various learning styles need to accommodate for a balance of ways students can receive information.</li> <li>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.</li> <li>Need to increase demonstration of the practices that were only evident in 2-40% of the classes visited.</li> </ul>
67% – visual	
67% – auditory	
13% – kinesthetic	
9% Incorporate culturally responsive readings/perspectives	
18% Address diverse language needs	
13% Identify similarities & differences	
20% Summarize & take notes	
58% Reinforce efforts & provide recognition	
38% Use homework & practice opportunities	
13% Represent knowledge in multiple ways	
29% Organize learning in groups	
38% Set objectives & provide immediate/continuous feedback	
2% Generate & test hypotheses	
80% Use cues, questions & advance organizers	
60% Increase student engagement	

## Appendix 2. Learning Practices Observed in District’s Elementary Schools

Observed Practices	PD Recommendations	
<b>Interactive Behaviors</b>		
84% Asks/answers questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students need to be able to demonstrate their learning using a variety of multiple intelligences.</li> <li>• Students need to be provided regular and continuous feedback on performance with opportunities for self-evaluation and for taking responsibility for their future learning.</li> </ul>	
56% Active involvement in classwork		
Demonstrates knowledge in multiple ways		
11% – <i>interpersonal</i>		
0% – <i>intrapersonal</i>		
51% – <i>verbal-linguistic</i>		
4% – <i>logistical-mathematical</i>		
27% – <i>visual-spatial</i>		
20% – <i>bodily-kinesthetic</i>		
7% – <i>musical-rhythmic</i>		
42% Receives feedback on performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to provide instruction and opportunities for students to practice higher-level thinking skills.</li> </ul>	
2% Demonstrates reflection (meta-cognition)		
<b>Cognitive Level</b>		
22% Knowledge		
38% Comprehension		
36% Application		
7% Analysis		
2% Synthesis		
2% Evaluation		
<b>Work Produced</b>		
47% Individual Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need to provide assignments that require students to present their work by project, performance and presentation and include opportunities for students to demonstrate self-evaluation/ reflection practices.</li> </ul>	
16% Group Work		
49% Written work		
0% Project		
7% Presentation/Performance		
0% Self-Evaluation/Reflection		
<b>Resources</b>		
29% Textbooks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student use of textbooks, technology, and manipulatives should be increased to address diverse learning needs; the use of resources needs to be extended beyond worksheets.</li> </ul>	
53% Supplemental materials		
22% Manipulatives		
27% Technology		
4% Materials reflect diversity		
11% Worksheets		

### Appendix 3. Teaching Practices Observed in District (Partial)

#### Learning Environment and Institutional Design



## Appendix 4. Learning Practices Observed in District (Partial)

### Interactive Behaviors

