

Jefferson County Public Schools

Annual System Review

November 2013

GE Foundation Review Team

GE Foundation Review – JCPS November 11-15, 2013

Introduction

During the week of November 11-15, 2013 a six-person consultant team visited Louisville to conduct a review of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) implementation. This is the third year of Common Core implementation for the district. Over the course of the week, the team visited 24 schools. Team members conducted observations in 274 classrooms, and 190 educators participated in individual interviews and focus groups.

The focus of the GE Foundation reviews is to monitor the implementation of the Common Core State Standards in six districts. The intent of the review is listening, observing, and learning from principals, teachers, district leaders, and board members so we can provide feedback on JCPS's progress with the Kentucky Core Academic Standards implementation and to share the learning with other GE Foundation districts. In this report we describe strengths, challenges, and recommendations. The report is organized around six major components: Leadership and Culture, Structures and Strategies for Collaboration and Professional Learning, Common Core General Observations, ELA/Literacy Observations, Mathematics Observations, and Recommendations. The observations identified in this report are the predominant themes and patterns our team observed across the 24 schools and heard in multiple interviews.

Leadership and Culture

Leaders in JCPS are very proud of the fact that the school district has met their Annual Measurable Objectives (AMO) for the first time in their history. It has meant moving more students to proficiency levels, moving more gap students to proficiency levels, and overall increasing the achievement growth of students compared to last year's results. It has also meant getting more students College and Career Ready and increasing graduation rates. Their district effectiveness ranking among other districts in Kentucky is on the rise. The district has moved from a 6th percentile ranking in 2010 to a 32nd percentile ranking in 2013. Seventy-five JCPS schools, including 13 of 18 priority schools, as well as the district met their KDE target/Annual Measurable Objective (AMO). The achievement of a district AMO status in JCPS is certainly reason for celebration since it reflects the sustained effort and good work of many teachers, students, and leaders in the system.

Collaboration and teamwork have increased significantly since the Common Core work has begun. The sense of community in schools is also on the rise. This is a significant change from a few years ago when teachers closed their doors and taught in relative isolation. There is a pervasive professionalism and a growth mindset among educators in the schools we visited. A common response from teachers and principals was, "We can do this. We just need to pull together."

There are high expectations for students and adults in most of the schools. There is an increasing sense of urgency to get results, to give one's best, and to move all students forward.

Currently existing norms allow people take risks and experiment, and there seems to be a collective sense of responsibility for all students in the school. Educators acknowledge that this is challenging work, but overall there is optimism that the move toward common standards is good for students. There is a major shift toward data-driven decision-making across schools and classrooms evident in the work of PLCs, coaches, teacher leaders, and school administrators.

Most of the principals are strong and are making efforts to shift their focus to instructional leadership. Principal styles vary from servant leadership (how can I help you?) to assertive leadership (walking around and monitoring instructional changes). The assistant principals in elementary schools are seen as key and valuable in supporting the change efforts. There is also an increase in the role of teacher leaders who are taking responsibility for helping colleagues improve their practices. Counselors are also seen as important members of the staff providing support for both students and teachers. The investment in Goal Clarity Coaches at the school level is seen as a very positive move.

All schools we visited have calm, orderly, respectful, and supportive learning environments with clear behavioral expectations and systems in place. Generally there are good relationships between administrators and teachers, as well as among teachers. Our team observed great rapport between students and teachers. There is an appreciation and growing confidence within schools that they can do the work if they continue to receive both human and material resources from the district.

One of the positive outcomes of the district's restructuring is that Assistant Superintendents of the six Academic Achievement Areas and the Evaluation and Transition Coordinators are spending more time in schools coaching, monitoring Common Core implementation, and supporting principals and teachers. They appear to be creating a good balance between urgency and support. They are helping schools understand where they can be tight and loose related to district expectations.

When leaders were asked about the predominate culture (underlying beliefs, assumptions, and expectations) in JCPS, typical responses were: get the scores up and teach all students in the process, handle problems and decisions at your level, control the messages that go outside to the community, stay the course, give your best effort for our students, and teamwork is the way to success.

Structures and Strategies for Collaboration and Professional Learning

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have been a powerful structure and strategy for supporting the shift to common standards. Teachers are engaged in analyzing data, deconstructing standards, planning lessons, developing common assessments, organizing interventions and enrichments, and sharing ideas. The majority of teachers are enthusiastic and positive about their PLCs. They reported that they could not imagine doing this work without the support from their colleagues. It was also reported that teachers are beginning to have more difficult conversations in their PLCs, and teachers are holding one another more accountable for the curriculum and instructional shifts. There is also a coherent planning and

intervention cycle evolving in most schools where grade level teachers meet weekly to identify specific student learning needs.

There is widespread agreement that creating PLCs is the right overarching strategy to help move systemic change and to reduce teacher isolation. But there is concern that the PLC work may not have a far-reaching impact on improving the quality of instruction without strong instructional leadership and ongoing coaching and supervision. It is important to be aware of one of the shortcomings of PLCs related to the knowing-doing gap. In other words, teachers can talk and share ideas in team meetings, but don't transfer the thinking and talking into instructional changes back in their classrooms. For teachers to improve instruction they need opportunities to see the changes and get coaching while they are implementing instructional changes. According to principals and district leaders, it continues to be challenging to build deep and widespread capacity for rigorous instruction and to build stamina among students.

Daily common planning time is proving to be very valuable as well. Teachers are getting very good at horizontal planning. We observed great consistency across classrooms at a grade level. Some schools have also begun to periodically meet in vertical groups to look at progressions and alignment in math, reading, and writing. A number of schools have a common lesson plan format that is providing consistency across classrooms and grades. On the other hand, limited planning and teacher learning time is still a major concern as the work has ramped up over the past few years and the union contract makes this difficult to change.

Goal Clarity Coaches and School-Based Staff Developers are very much appreciated. Everyone we interviewed spoke highly about these teacher leaders and their work. Teachers described them as available, knowledgeable, dedicated, committed, having a great work ethic, and tenacious to do whatever is needed to help teachers improve and change their practices. Coaches are primarily focused on finding curriculum resources and working side-by-side within classrooms modeling, co-teaching, and giving teachers feedback. They also organize the data and bring it to PLC meetings and facilitate teachers' analysis and planning. Coaches are also very pleased to be in one school where they can go much deeper with the work. However, some coaches seem to be getting pulled into doing administrative tasks not related to their roles and responsibilities, and district leadership is trying to correct this problem.

One of the concerns about Goal Clarity Coaches is that they do not have the content knowledge and skill set to support teachers across math, literacy, and science. Typically, coaches have one area of content expertise, but they are consistently being called upon to help teachers outside their content area. This is beginning to create a credibility gap among some teachers and coaches. Coaches can provide pedagogical assistance, but when the coaching issues are related to a lack of content knowledge, instructional coaches are limited in how they can help. This is particularly the case when coaches do not have a math and science background.

Professional development at the district level has been limited this past year and many teachers talked about this change. Teachers particularly appreciated the PD opportunities offered in the summer. They also spoke highly about the earlier district curriculum work and Gheens'

Academy for Curricular Excellence and Instructional Leadership online resources (pacing guides, seed lessons, diagnostic and proficiency assessments, links to websites) that provide much needed guidance for teachers. Coaches and teacher leaders are providing job-embedded professional development. Many educators expressed the desire for more professional development opportunities outside the school. Principals and teachers expressed the desire for access to national level experts and consultants. Educators want more of a balance between inside and outside learning opportunities. People are feeling a sense of loss since many resources and increased expectations have been deployed to the school level. As one teacher commented, “The district has backed away so far on professional development that they seem invisible.” Teachers are also missing the opportunities to network with and learn from colleagues at other schools.

Principal leadership development and training is a priority for JCPS this year. Principals participate in monthly meetings where the focus is on instructional leadership and they are very positive about their School Based Administrative Teams (SBAT). They spoke about the importance of having this regular time with colleagues for joint learning and problem solving. The SBAT leaders meet monthly with the Chief Academic Officer in the newly formed Principal Communication Committee that has been established to facilitate two-way communication from the schools to the district and from the district to the schools. Many consider this a good move. The district has also initiated a School Improvement Academy that brings together the principals from the lowest performing and struggling schools for monthly meetings to focus on

school culture, best teaching practices, and change strategies. In addition, JCPS principals will be participating in NSIL training being sponsored by the state.

The *Continuous Instructional Improvement Technology System (CIITS)* is being well received by teachers and school principals. They are very pleased with the potential of this state developed web-based resource. At this time educators are primarily using CIITS to develop common formative assessments and to find resources. CIITS is also tied to the PD 360 Program and the new Teacher Evaluation System and will be valuable in directing teachers to a bank of resources that can guide them in developing a personalized professional growth plan. So far there has been a soft rollout for PGES with JCPS pilot schools involved where training has been provided for principals, assistant principals, coaches, and 6-9 teachers at each site. The state has developed implementation rubrics around PGES, and state officials will be collaborating with Louisville and Lexington as Kentucky moves to scale with PGES.

Electronic walkthrough documents have also been developed by the district. These computer-based protocols are intended to guide principal classroom observations. Principals have received training and are expected to monitor standards-based instruction. This is a way for principals to identify teaching patterns across classrooms that can help target areas for instructional improvement. Achievement Area Assistant Superintendents can also look for patterns across their schools. These electronic walkthrough protocols can also help the district monitor implementation across schools. This initiative is in the early stages of implementation this year as part of the shift to instructional leadership and standards-based teaching.

General Observations

There is a general consensus among school level and district level educators that the direction of the Common Core Standards is a good idea for students. Teachers consistently identified two primary reasons for this support or consensus. First, it has provided clarity and focus around their instruction, and second, it is easier to identify students' learning needs. As one teacher commented, "I know what I am doing and I now know what I need to do." Our team observed more curriculum consistency across classrooms and across schools since our last visit.

Teaching is generally strong in most schools. There are very few classrooms across the 24 schools, where there is poor teaching. Educators are working very hard to get results and they are excited about the student learning gains. Teachers talked about how they underestimated students' ability to do the work. Also, students are beginning to assume more ownership for the learning and teachers are allowing it to happen. In most classrooms, students are on-task and engaged in the learning. Still, in many classrooms we observed whole class teacher-directed instruction with questions and answers being the primary method of student engagement. While students are organized in partners and in groups to facilitate collaborative small group learning, most of the work continues to be individual and independent. In the DuFour schools there is more student-centered work.

Teachers reported in interviews that they were trying to differentiate instruction. Some examples we observed included: flexible grouping based on weekly assessments and focused teaching, rotations to stations, different texts for different students, different questions for

different groups, student choice of assignments, and teacher conferencing. Still, differentiation continues to be a challenge for many teachers. They spoke about not knowing how to differentiate effectively and efficiently. There is a need for common language and understanding about differentiation and clear, concrete strategies to guide teachers.

Most schools have intervention strategies embedded in the school schedule. Some schools offer this every day while others focus interventions and differentiation weekly. Overall, intervention programs seem to be more organized and more effective than last year. Teachers and principals spoke positively about the WIN (What I Need) Program that provides additional support for students before and after school. WIN sessions are offered three days a week for two hours. Classroom teachers are engaged in providing the extra intervention. Food and transportation are provided for students.

Formative assessment appears to be on the increase across schools. As part of the PLC work teachers are developing common formative assessments and making instructional adjustments based on the analysis of student work and data. The district assessment system is also providing feedback and direction related to student learning. The diagnostic and proficiency assessments are conducted four times (two before Christmas and two after). This year there is more flexibility, with schools having the choice to use school developed or district diagnostic assessments.

The pressure to develop or adapt curriculum, or to simply find high quality Common Core aligned instructional resources, was the most prominent need identified by educators in our interviews. Everyone acknowledged that curriculum is too slow coming and this is a major concern from the Boardroom to the classroom. Finding more time for team planning and collective learning was the second most frequently expressed need by teachers and teacher leaders. Teachers are very focused on curriculum development and there is limited time to focus more on instructional changes. Each school is working independently to develop curriculum units and as one coach commented, "It feels like we are isolated islands." There does not appear to be a strategy for sharing the curriculum work across schools to both lighten the load and accelerate implementation.

Achievement results indicate that JCPS is struggling with developing strong student reading proficiency at the elementary level. Educators spoke about the need to work smarter and in a more concentrated way across classrooms and schools. Many JCPS students enter kindergarten with major gaps in their reading readiness. This will be a challenging intervention journey. The district seems to be further ahead with math implementation and achievement levels.

ELA/Literacy Observations

Teachers are embracing the standards and making the instructional shifts. They are moving away from textbooks and are now planning based on the Common Core Standards. They reported that they are doing close reading, asking text-dependent questions, and having students cite evidence. Educators are intentional about using informational texts and primary documents. Scholastic Scope, Time for Kids, and National Geographic are proving to be good sources for informational texts. For the most part, classroom libraries have a balance of fiction and non-fiction texts. Some teachers are purposefully pairing fiction and non-fiction texts on a topic. There appears to be an increase in higher-order and open-ended questioning.

Learning targets are consistently posted in student-friendly “I Can” statements. Teachers are referring to the targets at the beginning and end of lessons. The student learning tasks are more aligned to the learning targets. In addition, there is an increase in the use of anchor charts. There is clear evidence in many classrooms that teachers have developed these with students. In some cases the anchor chart outlines a learning routine (i.e., RACE, SUN, CUBES, CAFÉ, accountable talk, etc.). In other cases the anchor charts focus on the content in the unit. These provide guidance to direct student learning.

There is more purposeful attention to vocabulary work. Most classes have word walls and we observed clear evidence of a focus on academic vocabulary. In many classrooms there is a deliberate effort to build students’ vocabulary. Some coaches reported that the school is systematically implementing a vocabulary program. Teachers mentioned that the new

Journey's Literacy Series has a good section on vocabulary, although in some classrooms, teachers are still focused on the traditional spelling list for the week.

The posting of student work is very inconsistent across schools. In some schools, student work is posted outside every classroom with learning targets and teacher feedback. On the other end of the spectrum, there are schools with very limited student work posted and no teacher feedback.

Literacy strategies are being embedded in science and social studies units. In addition, science and social studies content is being used in ELA classes. In social studies the focus is on reading first – working with primary documents, close reading and analysis, asking text-based questions, and citing evidence. The plan is to move to writing next. Science is focused on writing with an emphasis on notebooks and vocabulary development. As you go up in the grades, some teachers are pushing back saying “I am not a reading teacher.”

Half of the schools indicated that they are focusing more intentionally on writing and we observed evidence of this in student work that was posted and in notebooks and journals. One school's motto about writing is “every student, every day, in every content area.” Teachers are using a range of graphic organizers to help students organize their thoughts during the writing process.

Math Observations

Generally teachers are making the shifts and are focused on the right standards for the grade level. Many teachers are still primarily focused on procedural understanding and fluency. Teachers are trying to emphasize conceptual understanding, but this is a problem especially at the elementary level. We think there is a connection between procedural teaching and teachers' lack of content knowledge. You need to have a deep knowledge of mathematical content to teach for conceptual understanding of complex ideas. It appears that much teacher questioning is still focused on having students explain how they arrived at their answer (procedural) rather than their understanding of the mathematical concepts.

Teachers are slowly getting to know the eight mathematical strategies. We observed manipulatives and math tools being used appropriately. In many classes students are being encouraged to solve problems in multiple ways. Students are engaged in reasoning and justifying their answers. Many classrooms have math word walls and teachers and students are using precise mathematical language. Some classrooms have math anchor charts to guide student learning. Many teachers and schools are using interactive math notebooks. The main way real world connections are being made is through word problems.

Teachers appreciate the math professional development that is being offered. They spoke highly about the summer Math Solutions Institute and follow-up sessions, the series of after school CPM training, the Vanderbilt partnership professional development series on

mathematical practices, the full day session in August on coherence, scaffolding, and common formative assessments, and the content sessions provided by the curriculum specialist.

The district is ready to rollout the Math RTI strategy with MATS that identify concrete, semi-concrete, abstract, and formative assessment strategies for math concepts and topics K-8. Some schools are implementing math intervention programs such as Math Recovery, Success Maker, Math Counts, and Do the Math.

There are a variety of math program choices at the elementary and middle school levels including: CPM Core Content, Carnegie Learning, Math in Focus, Connected Math 2, Connected Math 3, Glenco, and Go Math. The transition from programs to standards shaping the curriculum is challenging for many teachers. They are struggling with making the shift from textbook teaching, chapter by chapter, to having to search for resources to address standards. They want systematically organized packages of resources aligned to the Common Core standards.

There were four math challenges consistently reported by teachers in interviews. They reported that students have gaps in their fundamental mathematical skills and are struggling with the amount of reading in mathematics, given their low reading levels. In addition, students' lack of stamina and motivation to persevere is a challenge. Finally, some schools talked about the challenge of getting to all the standards within the time available.

Recommendations

- 1. Address the Common Core curriculum issue.** JCPS needs to tackle head-on the problem of Common Core aligned curriculum coming too slowly. This is a major resource issue that is creating great frustration and it is increasing the inequities inside the district. Release or hire content experts at the district level to do this curriculum development work in collaboration with teacher teams who can review the work, not write curriculum units. Alternatively, this work can be done during the summer when people can focus, and have time and energy. Continue to explore purchasing curriculum resources considered to be Kentucky Common Core aligned for all schools. Search for curriculum units within JCPS schools or from other districts, and share them. Develop a coherent and comprehensive strategy for curriculum development across the system.
- 2. Explore and implement vocabulary programs.** All schools need a systematic strategy for vocabulary development. Teachers need to work together at grade levels and across grade levels to routinely address vocabulary in all subject areas. They need to consistently make reference to vocabulary during lessons. For example, consider Word Nerds and Marzano's new book Vocabulary for the Common Core.
- 3. Continue to focus systematically on the implementation of the eight mathematical practices.** Help teachers understand the mathematical practices and the associated strategies for using each practice. Explain and model what teachers need to know and be able to do to implement the practices. Ensure that teachers explicitly teach the

practices to students. Increase the use of mathematical anchor charts and post the mathematical practices.

4. **Continue to support teachers as they move from implementing programs to standards-focused instruction.** It is important to remind principals and teachers to follow the curriculum maps when planning lessons and units in order to create more consistency and coherence across schools, Achievement Areas, and the district. This will benefit both students and teachers.

5. **Rethink adult learning time.** JCPS has managed to provide a reasonable amount of time for PLCs and grade level meetings when compared to other districts. Many schools have also creatively scheduled additional time for teachers to meet for planning and sharing. In some schools, teachers have one-half day a week for professional learning. We were really impressed with this commitment to support educators. Yet, many educators at the school and district level still believe leadership needs to rethink time for adult learning and doing the challenging curriculum, instruction, and assessment work.

6. **Provide intensive and on-going professional learning opportunities for Goal Clarity Coaches** to expand their content knowledge, pedagogical strategies, and coaching skills. They are critical players in your reform initiatives and their expertise is fundamental to your success with instructional improvement. Develop a Goal Clarity Coach Professional Learning Community or Academy where these teacher leaders can continue to deepen

their knowledge and expand and refine their coaching skills. Expose the coaches to national level instructors with a proven track record for providing excellent professional development for coaches. Provide mentors for Goal Clarity Coaches new to their role. Organize networking opportunities for all coaches within JCPS and with other school districts who have established successful coaching programs.

7. **Consider hiring content coaches in math, science, and literacy** and assigning them to each Achievement Area. These content coaches can serve as resource people for teachers and principals struggling with interpreting the standards, content knowledge, and pedagogical issues. They can also be a valuable resource for Goal Clarity Coaches working outside their content expertise and to help lead the curriculum development work.

8. **Provide more district-level high quality professional development** conducted by national level consultants who can bring their expertise and experience to JCPS educators. Many teachers and teacher leaders explicitly identified differentiation as a pressing need. They want to understand how to differentiate instruction to meet the wide ranging and diverse needs of students. In addition, develop a repertoire of high student engagement strategies to support the shift from teacher-directed instruction to student-centered differentiated learning. Also, teachers want to visit other schools and engage in cross-district sharing.

9. Think about ways to effectively implement the Next Generation Science Standards.

Develop a coherent and well-paced implementation plan related to the Next Generation Science Standards keeping in mind the demands already in play with the math and literacy implementation. Strategically guide this science implementation and help practitioners understand what has changed and how the practices across math, literacy, and science connect. Perhaps partner schools or create networks of schools to share the learning and to support one another throughout the implementation process.

10. Continue to focus on internal and external communication. JCPS has done an

admirable job communicating with the community about the new standards and the implications for students. Continue to share timely and relevant information about the standards work inside the system and outside to parents and business leaders. There is a concern that there are mixed messages being given to schools from district office about the standards work. Clearly identify the messages you want to deliver and who will be your messengers. People are getting confused because there are multiple people delivering different messages. In addition, develop strategies for curriculum specialists to communicate with Achievement Area Assistant Superintendents and Goal Clarity Coaches.

Summary

JCPS is a moving and improving district. Our team has collected a significant amount of evidence over the years to support this conclusion about your system. There is a high level of commitment to the Common Core at the classroom, school, district, and state levels. Teachers and leaders at all levels believe the Common Core is good for students, and they are working very hard to achieve more success for more students. The common sense of direction in JCPS is also fueling increased teacher collaboration within schools and we believe this is contributing to the gains in student achievement.

Almost every person interviewed spoke about the importance of the GE Foundation support for JCPS. They feel the district is in a good place to move forward with the Common Core implementation because of the grant work done over the past number of years. People commented, "The district is better because of GE." "It opened up the opportunity to be better academically and focused on professional development." "The grant work gave us a push, focus, support, and direction."

At this point in time, there is a crucial need to stop and reflect on the overall Common Core implementation strategy. Putting the resources and supports out in schools is proving to be a good idea. Teachers and principals really appreciate the time for PLCs and grade level planning, the elementary assistant principals, and the Goal Clarity Coaches. On the other hand, this move has increased the work pressure and the responsibility at the school level to do complex work with what is perceived by many as limited support.

The district needs to pay particular attention to the social-emotional dynamics of the change process at this point in time. We know leading change is more than a cognitive or action-oriented exercise. It is also about building and maintaining relationships with people who are expected to change and do the hard work. This is about winning and continuing to motivate the hearts, minds, and spirits of people to stay with you throughout these complex transitions and demands. Teachers are working hard and they are getting tired, discouraged, and overwhelmed. We heard this language throughout our review. It seems that the district is at a critical tipping point where how the district manages adult motivation and learning will play an increasingly important role in your future success.

It is important for JCPS to continue to consider the six critical components that organizations need to address when effectively leading and managing complex change: vision, skills, resources, incentives, action planning, and evaluation. When vision is not in place you get confusion. When skills are missing you get anxiety. When resources are not in place it leads to frustration. Without incentives the change is gradual, and when there are no action plans you get many false starts. Finally, without evaluation you have unknown impact.