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Just for the Kids, Michigan

Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

C.L.K. Elementary School, Public Schools of Calumet
Deckerville Elementary School, Deckerville Community School District
Joyce Elementary School, Detroit City School District
North Godwin Elementary School, Godwin Heights Public Schools
Randels Elementary School, Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools

For more information: Contact Janet Spence, Director of Communications
National Center for Educational Accountability - 4030-2 W. Braker Lane; Austin, Texas 78759
phone: 800.762.4645 or 512.232.0770; fax: 512.232.0777; jspence@just4kids.org or see www.just4kids.org.

Just for the Kids, Michigan

Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

The Institute

The Michigan Best Practice Institute was part of a larger national research study to investigate the practices of schools that consistently outperformed their peers. Research teams studied schools in 20 states to identify key practices of consistently higher performing schools in a variety of policy contexts.

In Michigan, researchers studied five consistently higher performing elementary schools to learn how they had attained and sustained their level of higher performance. Schools were identified through an in-depth analysis of academic achievement developed by the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA) using data publicly available from the state.

The 2005 Michigan Best Practice Institute was sponsored by Just for the Kids-Michigan affiliate (JFTK-MI) and received additional funding from The Broad Foundation. JFTK-MI is a collaboration of the Michigan Business Leaders for Educational Excellence and the National Center for Educational Accountability.

The Summary

A research team conducted a day-long series of focus groups with teachers, principals, and district administrators to study the classroom-, school-, and district-level practices contributing to each school's success. NCEA's Best Practice Framework provided the structure for each focus group. NCEA analyzed transcripts of the focus groups to prepare this summary report. This report presents a brief description of each higher performing school, followed by the Best Practice Findings in Michigan.

The School Identification Process

NCEA used publicly available student achievement data from the Michigan Department of Education to identify schools that consistently outperformed other schools with similar demographics in at least five of seven subject areas in the 2001-02, 2002-03, and 2003-04 school years: mathematics, reading, English Language Arts, listening, writing, science, and social studies. The analysis included data from the fourth- and fifth-grade Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP).

To identify the schools, NCEA conducted a separate analysis for each subject (mathematics, reading, English Language Arts, listening, writing, science, and social studies) and year (2002, 2003, and 2004) to learn which schools outperformed their demographic peers on the percentage of students meeting the standard on the state exam.[1] NCEA used a Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analysis to compare each school's percent of students meeting the standard with the percent that was "predicted" or "typical" for a school in the state with the same demographics. The demographic and

[1] The benchmark standard varied by subject and year. The following table summarizes the standards used.

Subject	2002		2003		2004	
Grade	4	5	4	5	4	5
Mathematics	Met Standard and above		Met Standard and above		Met Standard and above	
Reading	Satisfactory		Met Standard and above		Met Standard and above	
English Language Arts	N/A		Met Standard and above		Met Standard and above	
Writing	Proficient		Met Standard and above		Met Standard and above	
Listening	N/A		Met Standards		Met Standards	
Science	Met Standard and above		Met Standard and above		Met Standard and above	
Social Studies	Met Standard and above		Met Standard and above		Met Standards and above	

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other variables used in this analysis were each school's percentage of low-income, African American, Hispanic, and Asian students; the size of the school; and the percentage of students tested in the subject and year in question. Normally, NCEA also prefers to take students' prior year test scores and length of enrollment in the same school into account, but that longitudinal information was not available in Michigan.

NCEA ranked each school against the elementary schools in the rest of the state based on the extent to which it outperformed its "predicted" percent of students meeting the standard. For example, a school that outperformed 97% of the schools in "performance relative to predicted" in fourth-grade writing in 2004 received a percentile rank of 97 for that subject and year. These ranks were averaged separately for each subject across the two or three years to produce an overall average performance rank by subject. To be selected as higher performing for the purposes of this study, schools had to have overall average percentile ranks above 75 in five of the seven tested subjects: mathematics, reading, English Language Arts, writing, listening, science, and social studies. In addition, schools were selected to participate in this Best Practice Institute with attention to their urban/rural status, size, and geographic location.

The Higher Performing Schools Studied

School	District	2004 School Enrollment		2004 School-Wide Demographics						
		Grade Span	No. of Students	African American	Hispanic	White	Asian	Other	Low Income	ELL
C.L.K. Elementary School	Public Schools of Calumet	1-5	553	0.2%	0.2%	98.6%	0.7%	0.3%	59.3%	N/A
Deckerville Elementary School	Deckerville Community School District	K-6	420	0.7%	8.3%	89.5%	1.2%	0.3%	82.8%	N/A
Joyce Elementary School	Detroit City School District	PK-6	436	99.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	86.6%	N/A
North Godwin Elementary School	Godwin Heights Public Schools	PK-5	384	13.3%	25.3%	55.7%	5.2%	0.5%	73.2%	N/A
Randels Elementary School	Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools	K-6	718	41.8%	2.5%	48.9%	1.7%	5.1%	44.3%	N/A

Student enrollment and demographic data are taken from the Just for the Kids-MI 2004 website. The Institute was conducted in summer 2005.

For additional information about the identification process and selection criteria in Michigan, please visit http://www.just4kids.org/highperforming/general_text.cfm?state=Michigan&text=Michigan_e_identification_criteria.

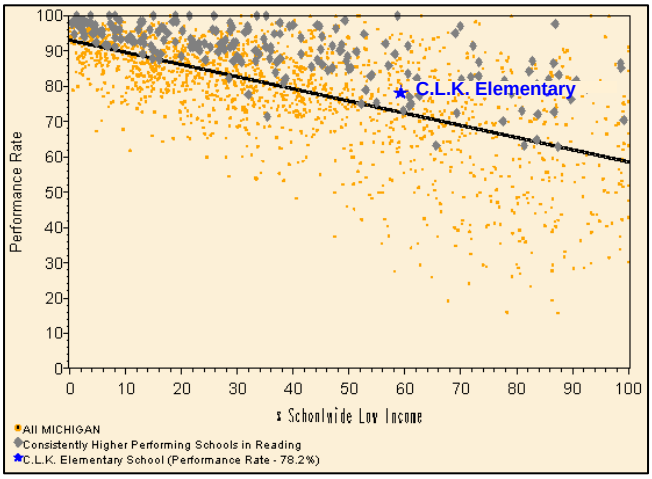
C.L.K. Elementary School
Public Schools of Calumet

Just for the Kids, Michigan
NCEA Executive Summary

The School

C.L.K. Elementary School, which serves 553 first- through fifth-grade students, is the only elementary school in the Public Schools of Calumet (1,300 students). C.L.K.'s student population is 98.6% White, 0.7% Asian, 0.2% African American, 0.2% Hispanic, and 0.3% other. Within this student population, 59.3% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade Reading



Consistent Higher Performance

C.L.K. Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in all seven subject areas: mathematics, reading, English Language Arts, writing, listening, science, and social studies. The analysis included all fourth- and fifth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, C.L.K. Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 78.4 in mathematics, 77.6 in reading, 84.1 in English Language Arts, 86.3 in writing, 76.0 in listening, 79.9 in science, and 86.1 in social studies.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 data with the Institute occurring during the summer of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank		2003 Percentile Rank		2004 Percentile Rank		Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
Grade	4	5	4	5	4	5	
Mathematics	95	N/A	70	N/A	66	N/A	78.4
Reading	95	N/A	85	N/A	51	N/A	77.6
English Language Arts	N/A	N/A	95	N/A	75	N/A	84.1
Writing	N/A	70	93	N/A	97	N/A	86.3
Listening	N/A	N/A	97	N/A	59	N/A	76.0
Science	N/A	58	N/A	92	N/A	88	79.9
Social Studies	N/A	75	N/A	91	N/A	92	86.1

*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights.
For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for C.L.K. Elementary School, please visit www.just4kids.org.

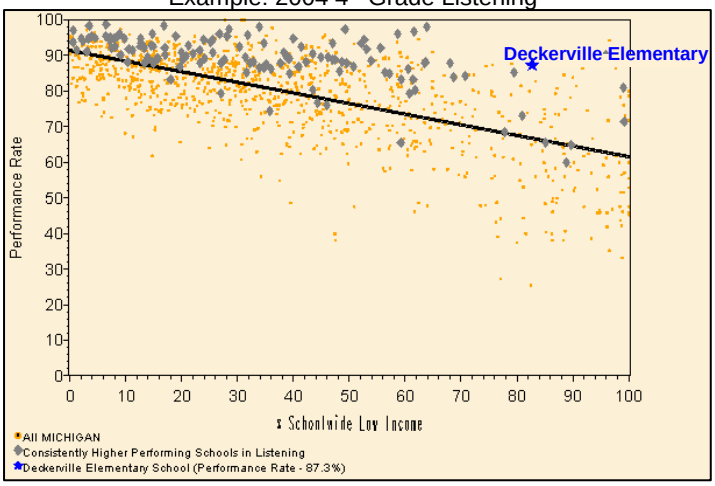
Deckerville Elementary School
Deckerville Community School District

Just for the Kids, Michigan
NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Deckerville Elementary School, which serves 420 kindergarten through sixth-grade students, is the only elementary school in the Deckerville Community School District (820 students). Deckerville's student population is 89.5% White, 8.3% Hispanic, 1.2% Asian, 0.7% African American, and 0.3% other. Within this student population, 82.8% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade Listening



Consistent Higher Performance

Deckerville Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in six of seven subject areas: mathematics, reading, English Language Arts, listening, science, and social studies. The analysis included all fourth- and fifth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Deckerville Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 82.7 in mathematics, 85.0 in reading, 79.6 in English Language Arts, 87.6 in listening, 79.0 in science, and 91.8 in social studies.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 data with the Institute occurring during the summer of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank		2003 Percentile Rank		2004 Percentile Rank		Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
Grade	4	5	4	5	4	5	
Mathematics	90	N/A	85	N/A	73	N/A	82.7
Reading	93	N/A	73	N/A	88	N/A	85.0
English Language Arts	N/A	N/A	76	N/A	83	N/A	79.6
Listening	N/A	N/A	85	N/A	90	N/A	87.6
Science	N/A	72	N/A	84	N/A	81	79.0
Social Studies	N/A	97	N/A	91	N/A	87	91.8

*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights.
For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Deckerville Elementary School, please visit www.just4kids.org.

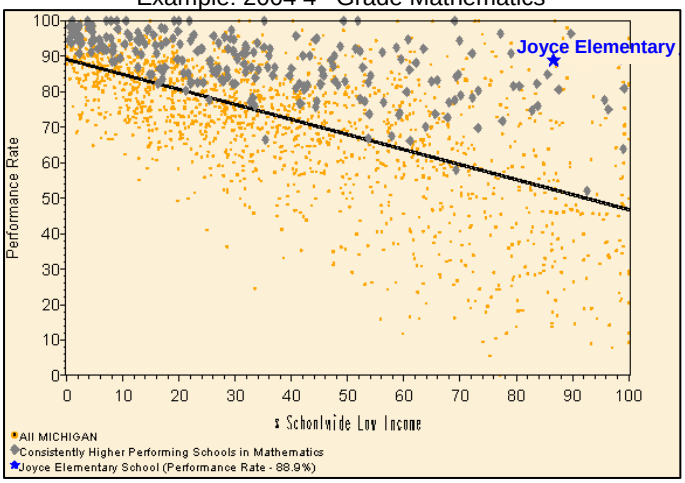
Joyce Elementary School
Detroit City School District

Just for the Kids, Michigan
NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Joyce Elementary School, which serves 436 pre-kindergarten through sixth-grade students, is 1 of 256 elementary schools in the Detroit City School District (153,034 students). Joyce's student population is 99.8% African American and 0.2% other. Within this student population, 86.6% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade Mathematics



Consistent Higher Performance

Joyce Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in five of seven subject areas: mathematics, science, social studies, reading, and English Language Arts. The analysis included all fourth- and fifth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Joyce Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 96.1 in mathematics, 91.0 in reading, 95.0 in English Language Arts, 94.0 in science, and 89.7 in social studies.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 data with the Institute occurring during the summer of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank		2003 Percentile Rank		2004 Percentile Rank		Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
Grade	4	5	4	5	4	5	
Mathematics	93	N/A	98	N/A	98	N/A	96.1
Reading	80	N/A	97	N/A	98	N/A	91.0
English Language Arts	N/A	N/A	94	N/A	96	N/A	95.0
Science	N/A	93	N/A	95	N/A	94	94.0
Social Studies	N/A	80	N/A	96	N/A	94	89.7

*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights.
For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Joyce Elementary School, please visit www.just4kids.org.

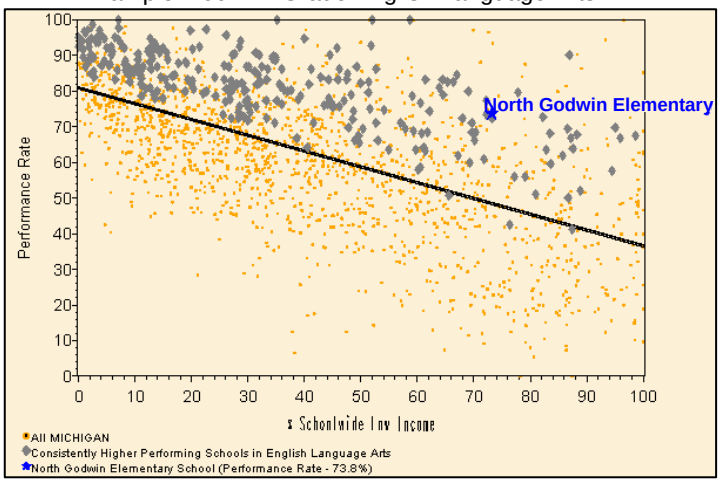
North Godwin Elementary School
Godwin Heights Public Schools

Just for the Kids, Michigan
NCEA Executive Summary

The School

North Godwin Elementary School, which serves 384 pre-kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is one of three elementary schools in Godwin Heights Public Schools (2,267 students). North Godwin's student population is 55.7% White, 25.3% Hispanic, 13.3% African American, 5.2% Asian, and 0.5% other. Within this student population, 73.2% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade English Language Arts



Consistent Higher Performance

North Godwin Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in five of seven subject areas: mathematics, reading, English Language Arts, science, and social studies. The analysis included all fourth- and fifth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, North Godwin Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 83.9 in mathematics, 86.4 in reading, 90.8 in English Language Arts, 78.4 in science, and 76.5 in social studies.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 data with the Institute occurring during the summer of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank		2003 Percentile Rank		2004 Percentile Rank		Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
Grade	4	5	4	5	4	5	
Mathematics	86	N/A	90	N/A	76	N/A	83.9
Reading	85	N/A	91	N/A	84	N/A	86.4
English Language Arts	N/A	N/A	94	N/A	88	N/A	90.8
Science	N/A	56	N/A	88	N/A	90	78.4
Social Studies	N/A	56	N/A	84	N/A	91	76.5

*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights.
For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for North Godwin Elementary School, please visit www.just4kids.org.

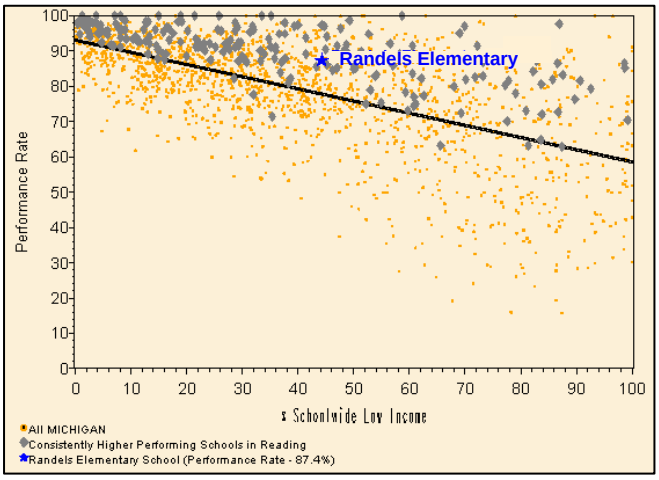
Randels Elementary School
Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools

Just for the Kids, Michigan
NCEA Executive Summary

The School

Randels Elementary School, which serves 718 kindergarten through sixth-grade students, is one of six elementary schools in Carman-Ainsworth Community Schools (5,363 students). Randels's student population is 48.9% White, 41.8% African American, 2.5% Hispanic, 1.7% Asian, and 5.1% other. Within this student population, 44.3% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4th Grade Reading



Consistent Higher Performance

Randels Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in all seven subject areas: mathematics, reading, English Language Arts, writing, listening, science, and social studies. The analysis included all fourth- and fifth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each year, Randels Elementary School demonstrated overall average performance ranks of 81.9 in mathematics, 90.3 in reading, 97.0 in English Language Arts, 86.7 in writing, 75.1 in listening, 93.4 in science, and 88.3 in social studies.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 data with the Institute occurring during the summer of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank		2003 Percentile Rank		2004 Percentile Rank		Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
Grade	4	5	4	5	4	5	
Mathematics	82	N/A	85	N/A	79	N/A	81.9
Reading	84	N/A	93	N/A	95	N/A	90.3
English Language Arts	N/A	N/A	97	N/A	97	N/A	97.0
Writing	N/A	71	99	N/A	96	N/A	86.7
Listening	N/A	N/A	83	N/A	68	N/A	75.1
Science	N/A	92	N/A	93	N/A	96	93.4
Social Studies	N/A	94	N/A	78	N/A	94	88.3

*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights.
For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Randels Elementary School, please visit www.just4kids.org.

Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute Findings

Based on the Themes of The JFTK Framework

Five organizing themes provided the structure for studying the practices of consistently higher performing schools. The themes are listed below.

1. Curriculum and Academic Goals
2. Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building
3. Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements
4. Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data
5. Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

These themes are used below to summarize the findings of this study. The themes represent the broad topics that connect best practices across different school system levels—district, school, and classroom. Together, these themes capture the primary instructional activities undertaken by school systems.

The first theme described in The JFTK Best Practice Framework forms the foundation of The Framework. Each of the other four themes rests upon the assumption that there is absolute clarity about what is to be taught and learned by grade level—pre-K-12. Therefore, Curriculum and Academic Goals forms the base of The Framework. Building upon that base, higher performing schools are deliberate about selecting and developing their human resources (Theme Two: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building) and equipping all staff with evidence-based tools and strategies to deliver the curriculum (Theme Three: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements). With people, tools, and strategies in place, higher performing schools regularly monitor student progress (Theme Four: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data). Finally, higher performing schools are quick to respond to student achievement data—recognizing success and intervening or adjusting whenever necessary to ensure all students reach the stated standards (Theme Five: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment).

Theme One: Curriculum and Academic Goals

"What is Taught and Learned"

This theme focuses on the learning target. What is it that we expect all students to know and be able to do by grade and subject? Consistently higher performing school systems have clear academic targets from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Principals and teachers understand the learning goals and understand that these goals are for <u>all</u> students and are non-negotiable.

Specific Michigan Findings: Curriculum and Academic Goals

- **Schools use a more detailed local district curriculum based on the Michigan Curriculum Framework. The state framework provide content standards, benchmark learning objectives, and more recently, K-8 English Language Arts and Mathematics Grade Level Content Expectations (GLCE).**
  - Consistently higher performing school staff reported that their districts began with the state standards and worked backwards to build detailed curriculum maps using grade-level expectations. Although some stakeholders expressed frustration at continuing changes in

state standards that require them to revise their work, most understand that the state must continue to refine the standards and they adjust accordingly.

- Emphasizing the importance of aligning curriculum with the state standards, one teacher stated, "The state standards direct everything, and we are constantly trying to change and adapt. In order for students to get what they need and for us to perform on the state tests, we have to align our curriculum and adapt."

- "The state has done a very good job of setting the curriculum up with what they call GLCE, Grade Level Content Expectations. There has been some change in Michigan. Sometimes we start something and have switched horses, but it has been pretty consistent over the last few years getting what we feel our students need and will be tested on, whether it be the reading or writing skills," stated an administrator.

- Curriculum development primarily originates at the district level, through a process that includes district staff, principals, and teachers. Some staff members from smaller districts reported using a county-wide process to coordinate curriculum development efforts within the surrounding area.

- **School-level leaders ensure uniform implementation of curriculum through district-developed pacing guides. These guides clearly outline what is to be taught and learned in specific time periods, typically based on nine-week instructional units. Teachers indicated that pacing guides are helpful in delineating what is to be taught and are especially useful for new teachers.**

  - School leaders and teachers stressed the importance of aligning curriculum and of building curriculum maps that outline grade-level expectations. Most participants called these curriculum maps "pacing guides" and will have them in place this year.

  - Instructional units within curriculum maps and pacing guides vary. For example, some schools have guides divided by grading period, while others have daily pacing guides. The purpose of all curriculum guides, however, is the same: to clearly communicate teaching and learning expectations and to guide teachers in pacing instructional activities. One principal remarked, "I think I can speak for the teachers who are relieved because they really know where to go."

  - School leaders acknowledged that some flexibility in the implementation of curriculum maps and guides based on student differences is anticipated, but the primary expectation is that teachers will stay within the guidelines as much as possible. One principal described her policy on pacing guides, "The pacing guide gives them a flow, and it really helps my younger teachers. I don't hold them right to the letter of that, but I do make them date when they have taught particular objectives, and they turn it in to me on a periodic basis so I know we are meeting those objectives."

  - Classroom teachers appreciate having curriculum and pacing guides. They feel the structure is useful for new teachers and is particularly important for schools and districts with transient populations. One teacher stated, "They want everybody to be on the same page at the same time because we have a lot of students who move back and forth, and they want them to be able to go from one fourth-grade classroom on the east side to another one on the west side and still not miss much. They tell you exactly what story you are on, what page, what objective you are covering."

- **Curricular revision is described as a fluid, ongoing process. Review of student performance data, test item analysis, and teacher input are integral parts of this revision process.**

  - Having a systematic method for reviewing and revising curriculum is a crucial step in the curriculum development process. While curricular revision systems vary slightly among the

consistently higher performing schools, all systems include collaboration among district staff, principals, and teachers. Much of the process hinges upon reviewing student performance data in order to adjust grade-level and course expectations. A principal illustrated how data were used to guide curriculum revision. He stated, "I use our assessments to evaluate our curriculum. Bottom line is if every year you are scoring poorly in a certain area . . . we just got killed in writing for years in details, details, details! And finally this year, we did really well in that area, [and] it was because we made some real changes [in how we taught writing]."

- Teachers and school leaders meet a few times a year to discuss performance data and curriculum revisions. One administrator explained, "My curriculum director for the district put my kindergarten and first-grade teachers together and we had substitutes so that they could spend the day meeting with each consecutive grade level. She did that K–12 throughout the district. So we just hired subs throughout the year, and I would say that teachers were out of the classroom at least five days just doing that."

- Teachers also highlighted the practice of analyzing data in teams to inform the curricular development and revision process. Several teachers mentioned sitting down with colleagues and performing gap analyses to inform the curriculum revision process. As one teacher described, "We are given days where we just sit down and do gap analyses. They will bring in a substitute, and you lock the doors and say, look we did poorly on this and the rest of the state did well, so you have to change something. Every year we look at the gap analysis."

- Although some teachers referred to curriculum revision as mainly the job of district-level staff, they also stressed that teachers played an integral role in providing feedback and suggestions based on data and on their experiences in the classroom.

- **Horizontal and vertical teacher team meetings are used to review alignment of curriculum across grades and subjects. Teachers asserted that collaborative curricular planning is helpful for addressing instruction with highly mobile students.**

  - In addition to curriculum maps and pacing guides, teachers and leaders at all levels asserted the importance of having horizontal (grade-level) and vertical (cross-section of multiple grades) team meetings. An important outcome of these meetings is that teachers have a working knowledge not only of their own grade level or subject, but also of the grade levels or subjects that precede or follow theirs. One principal explained, "We have meetings now where the kindergarten teachers meet in the same room as the first-grade teachers so they know what is going on with each other, and the first-grade teachers will meet with the second-grade teachers so then there is no duplication of K, 1, 2 and 3. The second-grade teachers know exactly what is being taught in first grade, and they know exactly what is being taught in third grade."

  - Common teacher planning times ensure adequate time for team meetings. One principal stated that having common planning times is "the best thing we ever did" for encouraging teachers to collaborate.

  - Further stressing the need for alignment between grades, some administrators discussed the importance of connecting lower grades to higher grades. One administrator stated, "I really saw a need for us to become a K–12 district and for elementary people to talk to high school people and so forth. It became apparent to me I needed to get K–6 and 7–12 people together."

  - Teachers agreed that collaboration was key to instructional alignment both within and across grades. One teacher remarked, "We are working smarter. We make copies of materials for each other and teach in teams." Another teacher described why teachers in her school held themselves accountable for students' transition to the next grade. She stated, "We worked really hard the past couple of years to involve the lower-grade teachers

and the specialists because we sort of felt that the fourth and fifth grades kind of get nailed with this and take the brunt. We said, you know, this is supposed to be a culminating test of what they have learned from preschool all the way through fourth grade, so we want the first-, second-, and third-grade teachers to take some ownership for this."

Theme Two: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

"Selecting and Developing Leaders and Teachers"
This second theme focuses on the selection and development of a school system's most precious commodity—people. Once the academic goals of the system are clear, the leaders and teachers are selected and given professional development opportunities to make these goals a reality for every learner in the system.

Specific Michigan Findings: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

- **Principal selection is an inclusive process involving numerous stakeholders.**
  - Most district and school administrators of consistently higher performing schools described an inclusive principal selection process involving numerous stakeholders throughout the district. All schools have a selection committee that brings their top three choices for the principalship to the superintendent. One principal described the overall selection process as a chain, stating, "The biggest responsibility of the board is to hire a competent superintendent, and the biggest responsibility of central administration is to hire competent principals, and et cetera, on down the line."
  - While all Institute participants agreed that hiring strong principals was crucial, leaders from one district mentioned their difficulty in attracting strong principal candidates due to their location and lack of strong union support for administrators.
- **Internal leadership development programs provided by districts help produce principal candidates who match school needs.**
  - Building leadership from within the system is expected. One administrator commented, "The good thing about hiring from within is you can watch people grow in their leadership skills and start thinking about future placements. We then grow those skills with professional development to prepare them for the principalship."
  - Internal leadership development appears to be a common practice in most of the districts and schools participating in the Institute. Most administrators interviewed felt that internal principal candidates not only helped maintain the culture of the district but also were inclined to stay in their positions.
- **New principals are well supported by their districts through training and mentors. District leaders accept responsibility for building the capacity of all principals to ensure strong and skilled school leadership.**
  - New and experienced principals receive training and support through monthly meetings, conferences, mentors, and collaboration with other principals. All district members agreed that principal support is extremely important, particularly for new principals.
  - One administrator said, "We have based everything we do for principals on the philosophy that they are the most important people and we want them to be able to work with their staff as an instructional leader, not as a manager."

- **After initial screening, teachers are selected through multi-disciplinary committees comprised of teachers, and sometimes parents, to ensure a good fit within the existing school team and community. Selected teachers tend to stay within the system resulting in superior staff stability and longevity.**

  - Teacher selection typically begins with initial screening through the district's human resources department and then moves to school-level interviews by committees. Teachers are often members of these committees, particularly in schools where teachers work in teams. Several schools mentioned involving parents and community members as well. Some principals expressed concern that they had to take teachers placed by the district in times of staff reduction, but most felt that they had the opportunity to move a teacher who had been improperly placed.

  - Principals focus on past performance as a method for selecting teachers whenever possible. One principal explained, "The best scenario is to see them teach in a student teaching situation. If not, we go out and observe them teaching using our summer school program because that is when we do most of our hiring."

  - Most schools reported having a stable staff of experienced teachers. Retention strategies range from focusing on teacher recognition to having policies that allow hiring spouses and providing daycare for staff members. Some principals suggested that teacher incentives could be funded using the principal's budget, PTA, and donations from local businesses.

  - Principals feel their teachers stay in their schools because they like the curriculum and the support they receive for instruction. When asked about reasons for staying, one teacher responded, "I enjoy going to school every day, and there is seldom a day that I haven't enjoyed 99 percent of the time. You are excited when you go and when the day is over, you put in a long day, but it is all worthwhile." Another teacher commented, "The kids have to want to be there, or they are not going to learn anything; so it is my job to make sure that they want to be there." Teachers also mentioned that they appreciate receiving recognition for their work and having principals who understand personal needs.

- **Teacher professional development is carefully designed to ensure teachers receive training that is relevant and useful. Additional support is provided directly in the classroom.**

  - New teachers appear to be largely supported through training and mentors. However, not all schools have formal mentoring programs. Professional development among the schools appears to be well coordinated, tying training to district goals and using data to determine which topics would be the most useful.

  - Professional development appears to be equally balanced between the district and schools. Schools that have difficulty obtaining training due to their physical location or lack of funding employ creative solutions, including teacher-led satellite workshops with neighboring districts. Another interesting model is what one principal described as "the Breakfast Club," where the staff select a book to read and discuss together over breakfast every other week or once a month. At the end of the book, they meet at someone's house or at a restaurant. The principal felt that it made a huge difference with his staff.

  - Instructional specialists often support teachers directly in the classroom by providing model lessons and assistance with planning instruction.

- **Teacher collaboration is considered a key support by teachers and is highly valued. Schools and districts facilitate and encourage collaboration.**

  - Collaboration occurs through professional development opportunities, weekly meetings, and informal daily meetings between teachers, both on the same grade level and in vertical teams aligned by consecutive grades or by subject.

- Teachers find that collaborating with each other not only gives them valuable information, ideas, and materials but also helps them align instruction across school sites. One teacher commented, “Our district has come to the realization that we are the professionals, and we are the experts, and we are going to feed off each other. You are not required to meet, but you naturally do. This next year they are releasing all the teachers for one hour each week to [do] our planning so that we are meeting with the fifth-grade teachers and the third-grade teachers, so we are doing the vertical, not just the horizontal. We review what we are teaching, what assessments we are giving, and what we are doing with kids that are not meeting the standards. As a team, these are our three driving questions. The goal is [that] we are all giving the same assessments, [and] we are all looking at data and doing interventions.”

- The provision of common planning time is the most successful method to ensure teachers are able to meet weekly, if not daily. Creative school scheduling, such as using special area teachers during recess, is another method for providing time for teachers to meet.

Theme Three: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

"The Right Stuff—Time and Tools"
This theme focuses on the "things" that higher performing school systems use—the arrangement of time, the instructional resources and materials, technology, etc. Strong instructional leaders and highly qualified teachers need evidence-based tools and resources to reach high standards with every learner.

Specific Michigan Findings: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

- **Instructional programs are selected after a substantial period of research and local piloting.**

  - District and school administrators are quick to acknowledge the importance of involving stakeholders in both the selection and piloting of potential instructional materials. One district administrator described a lengthy process that includes principals and teachers: “Schools will look at their data and come to me to ask what is out there they could use. I will then do the research and come up with five or six things that are considered best practices. ... I then work with the principal and teachers who are particularly strong in that area to focus on two or three things that would work for them. We then either bring in presenters or distribute sample texts so teachers can have a look at them before completing their evaluation. We use a formal evaluation which the teachers work through to check that the samples meet the benchmarks or the KC4 [Kent County Collaborative Core Curriculum]. The teachers then vote on the items, and we send the selection choice to the district school improvement team for approval who then passes their recommendation on to the superintendent.”

  - Similarly, a principal described a very formalized and rigorous process for adopting a new reading series. According to the principal, study groups pilot different sets of materials before presenting their recommendations to a committee of stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, teacher union representatives, and various community members. The committee meets monthly to review updates about the piloted materials and to make a final adoption recommendation to the board. This process is now being repeated with the potential adoption of a new mathematics series.

  - While needs assessments and stakeholder input are vital to the selection process, numerous other variables also affect the decision to select one program or practice over another. Sometimes districts and schools have to look to the future to see which selections

would provide the biggest bang for their buck. One district administrator commented, "I think financially you have to use your money wisely in putting programs into place. We have been using *CCC-Reading* [Computer Curriculum Corporation—Reading] for ten years, and we just spent $15,000 for the newest update despite having to weather some really tough financial times. However, we have found that in doing so we could reduce our special education costs because students' reading remediation needs were being met, and they no longer needed special education services. We now have something like 80 percent of our kids passing, which is a 60 percent increase from the previous percent passing rate. We can [attribute] that all to the program."

  - Other variables that affect the decision to continue with a particular program include the available training, supports, and battery of assessments available from the Michigan Department of Education to complement the program.

- **Program selection is based on the review of student performance data and input from teachers piloting the program.**

  - Instructional selections often begin with frequent needs assessments to determine where student performance is in most need of improvement.

  - Programs are carefully monitored to determine their impact on student performance and are adjusted based on needs assessments. For example, one principal used assessments to discover and correct a small issue with a relatively large impact. "Our math scores were not accelerating so I started to look at our math program and conducted a little research on it. I found that it was one of the top two or three in the state so I dug a little deeper and found that the problem was that our materials were outdated and our teachers hadn't had any in-service updates on using the program. I learned that the only thing I had to do to accelerate those math scores was to bring the *Everyday Math* consultants into our building along with new materials to make a 16 percent point gain," he stated.

  - Another principal reported that, in using the *Reading Recovery* program, he was part of a consortium that meets every year to discuss their success with the program. He added that his school is continually self-assessing and disaggregating data to determine whether achievement gaps are programmatic or are isolated events needing remediation.

  - District-, school-, and classroom-level staff reported that data drove all instructional choices. For example, one district administrator commented, "I think that before you go charging in to make a curriculum adjustment, you first have to find out where your weak areas are. We do that by getting data and taking a deep, hard look at it."

- **School administrators hold teachers accountable for the faithful implementation of instructional programs. Teachers and administrators agreed that the success of a given program rests on fidelity of implementation.**

  - One teacher noted that the success of any given program rested on the ability and desire of school staff to implement all components of the program. She believed that the reason her school was recognized as a high performer and other schools in the district was because her school's administration requires the faithful implementation of all components of the curriculum, whereas other schools are not enforcing the wholesale use of those programs selected for district-wide implementation. The teacher added that, as a result of implementing all components of the district curriculum over the course of the past three years, the majority of her school's students are reading at grade level, and there is greater camaraderie among vertical teams because students are being adequately prepared for the next grade level.

  - The evaluation of any program or practice is part of an iterative cycle of faithfully implementing all components of the instructional program.

- **Scripted programs—particularly for reading—are reported to be successful with struggling students and provide a model for new teachers to follow.**

  - The majority of interviewees acknowledged that they used some form of a packaged instructional program to help supplement and/or guide their instructional practices. Some of the programs identified include *Accelerated Reader* and *Accelerated Math*, *Corrective Reading, Open Court Reading, Reading Recovery, SuccessMaker, Everyday Math,* and *Renaissance Math and Reading*.

  - One principal explained that the utility in using one of these prescriptive programs is that it not only ensures that all students, regardless of mobility, receive the same instructional program, but it also affords new teachers a framework to guide their instruction during those critical first years of teaching. This framework then becomes the building block that both new and veteran teachers use to implement all components of the selected program.

  - With the adoption of *Open Court Reading*, teachers in one district are all teaching reading according to the scripted program for the same amount of time during morning instruction. Other higher performing schools use district-mandated *Accelerated Reader* and *Accelerated Math* programs that require teachers to teach both subjects for 60 minutes every day.

Theme Four: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

"Knowing the Learners and the Numbers"
After clearly identifying what is to be taught and learned by grade and subject and ensuring that the schools are equipped with the staff and the tools to successfully deliver the curriculum, the school system then asks and answers an important question: "How are we going to know if students learned what we said they would learn?"

Specific Michigan Findings: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

- **Data monitoring systems include multiple and varied assessments of student learning. These assessments provide benchmarks against the state standards and are used to detect learning difficulties and to inform early intervention.**

  - There was a deep understanding among interviewees that assessment is an ongoing activity. A variety of assessments are being used at both district and school levels, including assessments tied to the *Kent County Collaborative Core Curriculum* (KC4), the *Northwest Evaluation Assessment* (NWEA), the *Terra Nova*, the *Michigan Literacy Progress Profile*, and district-developed quarterly assessments. Several of the schools have numerous reading assessments, particularly targeted for grades K–2.

  - Numerous assessments are used to benchmark state standards, detect instructional and learning problems, and identify the need for intervention as early as possible. One administrator said, “We will know right away in the first quarter. We will look at the assessments as a grade level and find out which students need help and get them remediation.”

  - An administrator felt that the numerous assessments give everyone in the system an honest reflection on instruction, saying, “You like to think that you are really pouring your guts into your job, and most people can see that [in the data]. If [they] don’t, sometimes they have a valid point that you have to consider.”

- **Teachers and administrators are regularly involved in the analysis of the school's student achievement data, particularly in relation to school and district goals.**

  - Dependence on the systemic use of data to improve student performance is a "given" according to all participants in the Institute. Accurate and timely data are essential to help educators develop goals that are embedded in district and/or school improvement plans.

  - In determining school improvement goals, selected teams of stakeholders pore over student achievement data and determine the strategies and interventions necessary to make improvements. For example, one teacher reported, "We have three goals: improving our problem solving, reading comprehension, and writing skills across our campus. Every teacher in our building is on a committee to improve one of these three areas, with each committee consisting of 12 to 15 members and one or two leading the committee. Basically, the committee looks at all the data to find weaknesses and develops targets over the course of a five-year cycle. For those years in between, we are working on strategies and interventions to make sure that we are making progress towards those targets."

- **Disaggregated data review is on-going year-round, rather than an isolated annual activity. Data are used to drive district and school activities such as curriculum development and revision, program selection, and student interventions.**

  - Using data to determine goals or targets is just the first step in systemic reform. School and district committees are also actively using disaggregated data to inform their curriculum development and revision processes. For example, after disaggregating their data, one school found that their students were having difficulty across the content areas with reading charts. With this knowledge, the school built a focus on that skill into their curriculum to close the gap.

  - Data review has led both district- and school-level staff to adopt instructional programs and practices to remediate and accelerate the instruction for their students. Most of the consistently higher performing schools are in districts that have adopted instructional programs such as *Reading Recovery, Accelerated Reader,* and *Accelerated Math*. These programs are intended to help students regain their footing with the pace of the curriculum. They also include assessment activities which allow educators to monitor progress regularly throughout the year and to make instructional adjustments as necessary.

- **Teacher performance is monitored through the review of student performance data and the use of both formal and informal classroom observations.**

  - When discussing monitoring of teachers, administrators primarily mentioned the use of data analysis to determine which teachers are struggling and not moving their students forward. Administrators described constantly diving into the data to determine whether areas of weakness have any patterns that are tied to a certain objective, grade level, or teacher. For example, one administrator stated that data examination is very simple, "You can go through teacher A, B, and C's data and see that teacher C is not pulling his weight because his students represent the 33 percent who are not passing. We have all had those situations where there is one weak person on the grade-level team, and you have to sit down with them and work it out because it is not fair for 33 percent of the kids not to get it."

  - In conjunction with data analysis, administrators monitor classrooms to ensure that teaching is student-centered. One principal, summing up for the group, commented that he is not looking so much at the teaching but at the learning going on in the classroom. He stated, "When I look at my star teachers, they're really concentrating on the learning of the student whereas my teachers who struggle are, at times, completely oblivious to what is happening at the student level."

- The majority of teachers indicated that their principals conduct both formal and informal walkthroughs throughout the year to monitor their instruction. One teacher commented, "Our principal makes sure that he gets around to your class for at least one formal evaluation, but he is there more often than that to evaluate and see what is going on in the classroom. Also, every time he visits, he will set up a time for you to see him and discuss what techniques you were using and how you were doing. If the visit is a formal evaluation, he will write it up and go over it thoroughly with you to make sure that you understand his comments before turning it in."

- Teachers indicated that walkthroughs had become fairly routine. Since principals are constantly visible in the schools, students are not concerned about why a principal is visiting their classroom. While all teachers reported that informal observations were fairly routine, some teachers reported differences in the frequency of more formal observations. One teacher said, "For tenured teachers, formal evaluations are scheduled every three years, while non-tenured teachers are evaluated three times a year. During the non-evaluation years, we have to write up our goals and go over them at the end of the year with the principal to make sure we are meeting our targets." Another teacher reported that her school uses the same evaluation cycle but added that her principal performs a formal evaluation for every teacher every year, regardless of the teacher's level of experience.

Theme Five: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

"Ensuring All Children Learn"
The most important question of all follows the monitoring of student performance: "What are we going to do if students do not learn the knowledge and skills we said they would learn?" Higher performing school systems have *pyramids of intervention* that provide immediate and intense intervention at multiple levels when learning is interrupted.

Specific Michigan Findings: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

- **School- and classroom-level interventions are largely seen as supportive and useful, rather than punitive. Districts attempt to provide creative, personalized interventions.**

  - State report cards and federal AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) status are used to identify schools in need of improvement. Working in concert with the school to build an individualized plan, one district administrator reported, "There is no magic formula, no silver bullet. ... If there are needs, then we will look at those on an individual, customized basis to determine a plan of action."

  - After making an improvement plan, district and school administrators decide on accountability measures and action steps to help guide the improvement process and provide support in implementing the plan. For example, one district administrator explained that they had recently partnered principals of struggling schools with principals from higher performing schools. This provides support for the struggling principals and facilitates the transmission of best practices across schools.

  - District administrators, principals, and teachers use data to pinpoint areas of weakness within a school. For example, one administrator indicated that they had struggled in the past with their writing scores until they examined their data and discovered that students were struggling with detail-oriented questions. Based on that data, the school staff rallied together and made changes to the curriculum and instructional practices, which helped to improve their students' writing scores.

- **Struggling teachers are provided additional support and mentors.**

  - School leaders indicated that they use student achievement data to pinpoint all areas of needed improvement, whether that be a school-wide issue, a grade- or subject-level problem, or an individual teacher. For struggling teachers, one administrator reported, "If they are having any trouble at all, a mentor is assigned to assist them in whatever particular area they are having difficulty with and works with them regularly to assist them in making necessary improvements." The administrator added that struggling teachers are also provided professional development opportunities including opportunities to observe master teachers. Since teachers represent a weighty investment, the administrator remarked that "it is very important that if there is a possibility of salvaging this career or this person we have hired and made a commitment to, we will extend every effort."

  - District administrators, principals, and teachers who have witnessed or participated in teacher intervention processes indicated that the intervention process itself was not a "bad thing." One teacher explained, "You look at data together and are guided in necessary changes. I haven't felt intimidated by the process. I've felt nurtured by the support, resources, et cetera, provided. You just have to go in knowing that the stakes are high, and principals are looking out for the best interest of the kids because that is their job. If you don't respect that or are unwilling to help them out then you shouldn't be teaching."

- **Student interventions are often focused on reading. Many schools develop a wide array of comprehensive reading programs designed to meet the needs of each student.**

  - District administrators, principals, and teachers noted that basic literacy is the building block for all future learning and, as such, the primary focus of their interventions. They also noted that without the most basic literacy skills, students have difficulty learning and performing proficiently on state accountability tests.

  - School staff reported the development of comprehensive reading programs that include the services of reading specialists. In most cases, reading specialists provide "pull-out" services where students attend all regular classes to help accelerate their acquisition of reading and writing skills. Alternatively, at least one school developed a "push-in" model where reading specialists and trained para-professionals work in the classroom with students using the *Michigan Literacy Progress Profile* model.

  - In conjunction with services provided by reading support specialists, many of the schools adopt instructional programs and practices that offer remediation activities for reading. For example, one school adopted *Open Court Reading*, which allows teachers to incorporate *Corrective Reading* remediation during workshop time. Other schools use different programs with similar goals. A district administrator reported, "In our elementary school, we use *Reading Recovery* and it has just done wonderful things for our reading scores. We have also instituted transition groups where a trainer takes students in first grade and stays with them through fourth grade to make sure they are meeting their targets consistently. We have also adopted *SuccessMaker*, which generates all sorts of reports comparing students' progress to Michigan standards. Teachers are using that data to determine which objectives they need to go back and re-teach."

- **Numerous interventions are available for struggling students whose needs require attention beyond the scope of the regular school schedule. Saturday school, before and after school tutoring, and parent outreach programs are considered successful intervention programs.**

  - Interventions that extend student learning time and provide direct one-on-one support to struggling students are available. One school created a mandatory Saturday school for students whose performance dropped below acceptable levels. In coordination with school-level efforts, the district also provides a summer school program for students having

difficulty making adequate progress during the school year. According to a district administrator, “Students identified as not making adequate progress have been selected to attend summer school two weeks prior to the beginning of school because we know that with the tests coming in October, if we can get them in right before school starts rather than in June or July as we had in previous years, the chances of them remembering and being prepared for the MEAP [Michigan Educational Assessment Program] [are] greater.”

- In addition to extended-week and extended-year programs, some schools opt for extended-day programs where students attend after-school reading programs or work with tutors. Some schools elicit support from the community to help create after-school programs for students. One district administrator reported, “We have three churches that offer after-school and evening programs for our students. They work with our kids to provide assistance and have developed programs where students have the opportunity to perform in theater productions or other sponsored activities.”

- Various outreach programs aimed at making parents part of the larger school community are used. One administrator explained, “We felt that there was a need to get parents more actively involved in their child’s education, so we devised some methods to reach out to parents to get them into the building. We use all kinds of gimmicks like ‘Muffins for Moms’ and ‘Donuts for Dads’; and amazingly we have something like 80 percent participation, where parents will come in and grab some food before sitting down and talking with their child’s teacher. It is amazing then how the follow-up calls come in because parents begin to feel comfortable calling on their child’s teachers. We also do workshops for parents during “Parent Nights,” where different subject areas will present information to the parents. These programs have been very successful and have a positive impact on the kids.”

Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute Conclusion

Based on the Themes of The JFTK Framework

The NCEA analysis identified five consistently higher performing elementary schools in Michigan. District, school, and classroom representatives from each school participated in a series of five focus groups organized by the themes of The JFTK Best Practice Framework. Summaries of the findings of those focus groups are presented below by theme.

The Findings

Curriculum and Academic Goals

Despite the differences in geography or student demographics, the five higher performing schools at the Michigan Best Practice Institute were uniform in describing an integrated, systemic approach to increasing student achievement. This approach involved developing well-articulated and well-aligned academic goals that were presented through a written and detailed curriculum based on the state standards. Even though concern was expressed regarding "shifts" in the state standards, the school systems showed the capacity to adjust quickly and maintain focus.

Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

Principal and teacher recruitment and selection processes were well-defined. These processes were inclusive of numerous stakeholders and highly structured. Internal leadership development programs produced instructional leaders particularly well-suited to individual schools. Professional development was based on student performance data and was enhanced by formal mentoring processes. Collaboration among teachers was cited as a "key" factor in capacity building.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

Instructional programs and practices were selected through thoughtful, purposeful processes. More structured programs had been selected to address early reading skills. Teachers and leaders alike were aware of the importance of faithful implementation of the programs. Training and monitoring were used to ensure this fidelity.

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

While the sophistication of the systems used to store and share data varied widely, the use of the data did not. Student assessment was described as ongoing and continuous with educators "poring over the data" to determine student learning needs as well as the strategies to address them.

Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

Early reading skills were closely monitored and often the focus of intervention. Interventions, supported at the district, school, and classroom levels, were creative and personalized. While interventions often required additional time outside the school day (i.e., Saturday school, before- and after-school tutoring), the interventions were widely viewed as supportive rather than punitive.

Next Steps

NCEA's state-study protocol assumes that the state framework of best practices will be built based on a three-year study of consistently higher performing and average-performing schools at the elementary-school level (Year One), middle-school level (Year Two), and high-school level (Year Three). Based on this protocol, JFTK-MI's next step will be to leverage the results of this Elementary Best Practice Institute to conduct a full study of higher performing elementary schools in Michigan, including a comparison with average-performing schools, in order to distinguish unique practices of the higher performing schools. Then, JFTK-MI should continue to build upon those findings by conducting the study of consistently higher performing and average-performing middle and high schools using the same framework of best practices.

One of the dangers of studying consistently higher performing schools is drawing conclusions based on a single school example. To avoid this danger, the conclusions for the JFTK–Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005, focus on a description of the practices that are most consistent across the higher performing schools in this study. Without a comparison group of average-performing schools, we cannot highlight only those practices that were found to be systemically different in the higher performing schools as a group. Therefore, the conclusions from the JFTK–Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute have also been informed by the findings from a much larger body of schools studied (300+ across five years and twenty states), which included average-performing comparison schools, to help determine meaning in the context of Michigan.