Minnesota Department of Education

Meta-Analysis Report of Schools

September 2010

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Summary

Cambridge Education LLC was invited by the Minnesota State Department of Education to review thirty-four schools that they had identified as being 'Persistently Low Performing'.

These 34 schools met one or more of the following selection criteria:

1. There were 10 Elementary Schools, in receipt of Title 1 funding, not making AYP, whose performance data put them in the bottom five percent of schools in the state;

2. There were 3 Secondary Schools, in receipt of Title 1 funding, not making AYP, whose performance data puts them in the bottom five percent of schools in the state;

3. There were 8 Secondary Schools, in receipt of Title 1 funding, not making ATP, whose graduation rates were less than sixty percent;

4. There were 13 Secondary Schools, not receiving Title 1 funding, whose performance data puts them in the bottom five percent of schools in the state.

Twelve of these schools were Charter Schools while the remaining twenty-two were conventional public schools. Twenty of the schools were in the greater metropolitan area covered by Minneapolis and St Paul while the remaining fourteen schools were located outside this metropolitan area, several of them some considerable distance from the twin cities.

Cambridge Education developed evaluation criteria, scoring rubric and all other necessary review documentation based on the criteria developed by Mass Insight as part of 'The Turnaround Challenge'. These criteria are very similar to those used by the Indiana State Department of Education in a similar study carried out in conjunction with Cambridge Education in 2009.

Twenty-eight of the schools received a full review of their effectiveness. Most schools were visited by two Cambridge Education reviewers while a small number of very small settings/schools were visited by just one Cambridge Education reviewer. The six schools in the group that were administered by Minneapolis Public Schools did not receive a full review since they had been visited earlier in the year by another group of Cambridge Education consultants using a different set of criteria. For these six schools the consultants analyzed and recorded the outcomes of the previous review and only returned to the schools for a minimal period to gain answers to the questions not previously asked.

School Review Information

The Cambridge Education review process involved detailed evaluation and study of what was working well in schools and where there were opportunities for improvement. Review teams consisted of a mixture of full-time Cambridge Education employees together with English and American associate consultants. All consultants have wide ranging international experience of school review processes.

Information was gathered from a wide range of different sources, including lesson observations, student test and assessment data, school improvement plans, curriculum planning, students' work, attendance and behavior data and a range of other documentation relating to student growth and progress. Schools were also asked to complete a self-evaluation form in which they articulated their perception of the school's strengths and weaknesses and where they evaluated themselves to be on the Domain Judgments. During the review process, interviews were held with principals, school leadership teams, students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders.

School reviews reported findings under the following main Domain headings:

Domain 1: Readiness to Learn

Domain 2: Readiness to Teach

Domain 3: Readiness to Act

Domains include clusters of sub-criteria grouped together to encourage systems thinking and a focus on the impact of all actions on student outcomes, learning and achievement.

Each Domain and sub-domain received an evaluation grade from the following possible outcomes:

Scoring Key		Rating Description
1	Unacceptable	The school shows no attempt to meet the standard.
2	Poor	The school has made minimal progress towards the standard.
3	Fair	The school is making progress towards the standard.
4	Acceptable	The school meets the standard.

The reports included an OAS (Overall Average Score) for each Domain and an average score for each sub-domain.

General Emerging themes

Strengths to build on

- A small number of schools meet the 'fair' or 'acceptable' standard and demonstrate a number of good practices across Domains that should serve as a benchmark for other schools.

- There are pockets of good progress and achievement in a number of schools. The aim is for such practice to be far more widespread and consistent.

- The Readiness to Learn Domain is the stronger Domain of the three. In many schools, behavior is good, students have positive attitudes to work and enjoy coming to school. Relationships are often a strong feature.

- Many schools provide a safe and secure learning environment and most staff members show general care and respect for the students in their care.

- Many schools offer a curriculum that is aligned to State standards with the better schools adding a more innovative and exciting approach to content breadth, scheduling and enrichment activities both on and off the school site.

- There are some exemplars of exciting and vibrant instructional practice serving as models for what highly effective student learning and achievement should look like and demonstrate the level that all teachers should strive to reach.

- A number of schools seek to build strong and effective partnerships with parents and the wider community that brings an added dimension to students' learning and lives.

- The leadership in a small number of schools is highly effective because it is based on high expectations, a 'no blame' culture and a missionary zeal to improve student achievement.

- Many principals have the respect of the school community and have a realistic understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the schools they lead.

- There is a shared commitment and collaboration amongst many leaders and staff to make schools better places to learn. The instigation and embedding of effective strategies to bring about sustained improvement is less secure.

- There are some shining examples of professional development opportunities being tailored to meet the individual needs of teachers and the identified priorities of the school.

- Many schools provide an 'open door' policy for parents and channels of communication between home and school are often effective, cordial and productive.

Domain 1

Readiness to Learn OAS 2.61	
1.1	**Safety, Discipline, and Engagement (2.76)**
Is the school culture environment safe and conducive to learning?	
1.1a	Students are effectively encouraged to behave well, relate well to others and to have positive attitudes toward learning. **(3.09)**
1.1b	Classrooms and hallways provide an attractive and stimulating environment that fosters high academic and personal expectations. **(2.55)**
1.1c	School routines and rules are implemented consistently and communicated clearly to students, parents and staff. **(3.00)**
1.1d	The school has effective measures for promoting good attendance and eliminating truancy and tardiness. **(2.79)**
Do students feel secure and inspired to learn?	
1.1e	A robust core program ensures that students develop key learning and personal skills. **(2.45)**
1.1f	The school provides a well-rounded curriculum and enrichment activities add interest and relevance. **(2.85)**
1.1g	Career education and personal goal setting are used to raise student aspirations and motivation. **(2.39)**
1.2	**Action Against Adversity (2.58)**
Does the school directly address students' poverty- driven deficits?	
1.2a	The school knows and understands the personal as well as academic needs of the students in order to address the effects of students' poverty head-on. **(2.70)**
1.2b	The school addresses the needs of families so that they can better support student learning. **(2.36)**
1.2c	The school develops students' skills, behaviors and values that enable them to effectively advocate for themselves. **(2.70)**
1.3	**Close Student- Adult Relationships (2.79)**
Do students have positive and enduring mentor/ teacher relationships?	
1.3a	The school works with parents to build positive relationships and to engage them as partners in their children's learning. **(2.55)**
1.3b	The school is successful in implementing a variety of strategies specifically designed to promote a sense of connection between students and adults. **(3.15)**

Emerging Strengths:

- Many students behave well, relate well to staff and classmates and show positive attitudes to school and to learning.

- Relationships in many schools are positive and staff show care and respect for students. These strengths help to create an environment that is conducive to learning.

- Attendance in most schools is good or improving and schools work hard at sustaining this and promoting the importance of arriving at school on time.

- The curriculum offered in many schools is aligned to State standards and is suitably broad and balanced.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- A minority of students in a number of the schools reviewed behave inappropriately.

- Classrooms and hallways are not used consistently enough to promote high academic and personal expectations.

- Too little emphasis is given to setting individual goals for students to raise aspirations and motivation levels. In some schools career guidance is not specific or helpful enough.

- Schools are not effective enough at developing student learning and personal skills to help them become more independent learners, to advocate for themselves, and to be better equipped for college or the world of work.

- Too few courses or workshops are provided for parents to help them become more proactive partners in their child's learning and academic education.

Commentary

The Readiness to Learn Domain is the strongest of the three Domains. However, there is still a good deal of work to be done if student achievement is to improve at a more significant rate than is currently the case.

The picture that emerges in many schools is of a body of students who behave well. Many students show good levels of respect to adults and their peers and good levels of racial harmony are prevalent in many buildings. Relationships between adults and students are often good. All these factors lead to an environment that is more often than not calm and productive and conducive to effective learning. Students feel safe and secure in most buildings and know that there is always someone to turn if they have any worries or concerns. Most staff members show a real sense of care and concern for the students they teach.

However a minority of students in some schools present more challenging behavior and at times seek to disrupt the learning of others. In most instances this behavior is managed well because there is a consistency in how rules, procedures and sanctions are communicated and implemented. When issues persist, it is because this consistency is lacking from adult to adult and students are swift to capitalize on the shortcomings.

Schools work hard at promoting the importance of good attendance and eliminating truancy and tardiness. In many instances they are successful or are certainly ensuring that attendance is on an upward trajectory. Once in schools, many students state that they enjoy being there, even if the learning opportunities are not as effective, challenging or motivating as they should be. A minority of staff members display student work in classrooms and hallways and provide an attractive environment that fosters and promotes high academic and personal expectations. In these classrooms and hallways, student work is prominently displayed, work is scored against rubrics, guidance for improvement is given and personal mottos and values espoused, understood and followed. However, teachers who recognize and celebrate student success, while giving clear pointers for personal and academic improvement and advancement, are in the minority..

More often than not schools provide a curriculum that is closely aligned to State standards and seek to offer a broad and balanced range of learning experiences across different content areas. Some schools offer specialist content areas. In the more successful schools the range of activities on offer includes physical, creative, aesthetic and technological and these are presented in a manner that motivates and enthuses students in equal measure. Add to this a wide range of enrichment activities both on and off the school site and a recipe for success emerges. Another very important ingredient for continued and future success is the necessity for high quality career guidance programs. There are a small number of shining examples but not enough. Another important ingredient that is missing in many schools is individualized goal setting. Too few schools are actively involved in setting personal goals for students that are reviewed on a regular basis. Long term goals, such as attending college, are in place but shorter, more personalized goal setting is not evident. The best practice sees goals being discussed with students, progress regularly reviewed and students playing an active role in setting goals of their own. This practice needs to be the norm.

Schools seek to reach out to parents and to ensure that lines of communication are established which enable parents to contact or approach the school whenever needed. Parents appreciate this. Some parents would welcome more information relating directly to their child's educational progress. School leaders and staff are well aware of the socio-economic and health and welfare problems that are faced by many families. Links with social and medical services are utilized to try and meet these difficulties head-on. Some schools are far more effective in their efforts than others. The aspect in need of sustained improvement lies in better helping

parents to support their child's learning. There is the necessity to provide a far ranging array of activities and workshops to guide parents on how they can support the work of the school and how they can help their child's academic development at home. This will make the partnership between home and school a genuinely effective, productive and lasting one that can only add to the academic advancement of each and every child.

Domain 2	
Readiness to Teach OAS 2.00	
2.1	**Shared Responsibility for Achievement (2.06)**
Does the school have a strong organizational culture, characterized by trust, respect and mutual responsibility?	
2.1a	The principal ensures that there is a strong accountability for student achievement throughout the school. **(2.06)**
2.1b	The staff feel deep accountability and a missionary zeal for student achievement. **(2.39)**
2.1c	A shared commitment to a vision of the school includes challenging goals for all students. **(2.12)**
2.1d	The local education authority drives the accountability agenda. **(2.09)**
2.2	**Personalization of Instruction (1.97)**
Are diagnostic assessments used frequently and accurately to inform instructional decisions and promote student learning?	
2.2a	The school utilizes a coherent system to provide detailed tracking and analysis of assessment results. **(2.12)**
2.2b	Teachers use data gathered from multiple assessments to plan instruction and activities that match the learning needs of students. **(1.97)**
2.2c	Teachers give feedback to students and involve them in the assessment of their work and in the setting of achievement goals. **(2.00)**
2.2d	The schedule is used flexibly to ensure that individual student needs are met effectively. **(2.39)**
2.2e	The overall impact of planning, instruction and assessment leads to effective student learning. **(1.94)**
2.3	**Professional Teaching Culture (2.12)**
Does the professional culture promote faculty and staff participation, collaboration and training to enhance student learning?	
2.3a	The faculty works together, incessantly and naturally to help each other improve their practice. **(2.52)**
2.3b	The principal uses classroom observation and the analysis of learning outcomes to improve teaching and learning. **(1.94)**
2.3c	Professional development is job-embedded and directly linked to changing instructional practice in order to improve student achievement. **(2.12)**

Emerging Strengths:

- There is some good, and at times better instruction and learning that raises expectations that all teachers should strive to reach.

- Many teachers want to do a good job, want to improve, and show a willingness to collaborate with and learn from colleagues.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- The quality of instruction and learning is not yet good enough to bring about rapid and sustained improvement in student achievement.

- Leaders and teachers are not held directly accountable enough for the progress and achievement of the students they teach.

- Goals set for students are not challenging enough.

- Too few opportunities are provided for students to be active participants in the learning process or to take a far greater responsibility for their own learning.

- Procedures for analyzing assessment data and for tracking student progress are not robust or effective enough to help student achievement to improve.

- Assessment and other data is not utilized well enough to plan, guide or drive instruction and learning.

- Too few principals and other school leaders carry out rigorous and regular lesson observations or analyze other student learning outcomes to identify strengths, tackle weaknesses and provide constructive feedback.

- The local education authority is not consistently driving the accountability agenda.

Commentary

The quality of instruction and learning is too variable and inconsistent and is often simply not good enough to enable students to achieve well or to make up lost ground. In the best schools, instruction is of a higher quality and consequently students make better progress. There are pockets of good instruction and learning in some schools. Where learning is at its strongest, teachers set high expectations, work is well matched to the different needs and abilities of students and tasks are interesting and relevant. There is also a very good balance struck between direct instruction, independent and collaborative work and the pace of the lesson. The result is students are enthused, motivated, engaged and learning. These strengths are

currently too thinly spread and inconsistent. Gains that may be made in one class or one grade may be quickly lost in the next.

At present, there is not a high enough sense of responsibility or accountability for student achievement. In too few schools, procedures are in place to ensure teachers are held directly accountable for the progress and achievement of the students. While most schools are adept at collating data from a wide range of tests and other assessments, the information is not analyzed rigorously enough to look at the performance and progress of students by for example, grade, class, ethnicity, gender or ability. In too few schools, the progress of students is linked directly to the quality of teaching and learning.   In those schools where this exemplar practice occurs, there is a significant difference in student outcomes.   However, the accountability issue stretches further because principals are not always held directly accountable either by boards or by the local education authority for the performance of the school. Greater accountability at all levels, including students taking a greater responsibility for their own learning, is a significant issue to address if student achievement is to increase at a faster rate than is currently the case.

There is a tangible commitment from leaders and teachers to want to do their best for students. This is not in doubt.   Nevertheless, systems are not established in enough schools to closely track the performance and progress of individual students on a regular basis and to put in place strategic interventions when progress is not good enough. Data is often available to teachers but too few utilize the data to plan work that is matched well to student need or ability or to drive the quality of learning and instruction.   Accomplished teachers do this automatically and this results in accelerated student learning and achievement.

The most successful schools in the district are fully cognizant of the importance of goal setting. This is at all levels, at school level, faculty level, teacher level and at student level. The goals set are challenging but achievable, attainable and reviewable. However, the setting of such goals for students is not evident in many schools in the district. Another noticeable omission in many schools is the strategy of students playing a more active role in the learning process and in taking a more equal share of the responsibility for learning. For this to happen there has to be a reduction in the number of lessons that are dominated by 'teacher talk'. Opportunities have to be provided for more discussion and dialog and more opportunities for students to work collaboratively. Questioning has to be of high quality in order to promote participation and higher order thinking, problem solving and enquiry skills. Students need to have a strong awareness of what they are learning and why. The posting of learning intentions should not be a compliance issue. Students should be fully aware of them and they should be re-visited during and at the end of the lesson. All of these components help to transfer some of the onus onto the students. Equally important and a component that is missing in many classrooms in the district is feedback. Too often feedback is over- praiseworthy or conversely very little of it

is constructive. In too many instances, students are not given clear indicators of what they need to do to improve their work or why a piece of work is good. This lack of feedback prevents students from taking ownership of making their work better.

Teachers in many schools show a readiness to work together and to learn from one another. Where such procedures are in place, there is a greater sense of shared vision and a realization that such activities can lead to improvements in instruction, learning and student achievement. Opportunities for peer observations that occur in some schools are good examples of teachers working and learning together. Such schools are also more likely to provide more differentiated and targeted professional development. These schools recognize the necessity to provide professional development that is not generic but closely matched to the individual needs of the teacher, while also being aligned with identified school priorities.

A significant aspect in need of improvement revolves around the practice and impact of lesson observations. There are a small number of schools where lesson observations are used effectively to bring about improvements in the quality of instruction and learning. However, this is not the picture across the district. There are not enough principals or other school leaders who carry out regular and rigorous observations, provide constructive feedback and directly link the quality of what is observed to student achievement and performance. Where 'walkthroughs' are utilized, they do not always have a specific focus or are not linked to identified weaknesses in learning. In addition, evaluation of instruction and learning by looking at students' work, teachers' planning or talking to students are not used to help bring about improvements. A far more robust approach to monitoring and evaluation is called for so that school leaders gain a more analytical and strategic overview of where attention needs to be directed. This will inform where good practice can be disseminated, where student performance is strongest or weakest and what the professional development needs of the school and individual teachers should focus on.

Domain 3	
Readiness to Act OAS 2.21	
3.1	**Resource Authority (2.33)**
Does the principal have the freedom to make streamlined, mission-driven decisions regarding people, time, money, and program?	
3.1a	The principal has the authority to select and assign staff to positions in the school without regard to seniority. **(2.67)**
3.1b	The school has developed adequate human resource systems. **(2.24)**
3.1c	The principal has the authority to implement controversial yet innovative practices. **(2.30)**
3.1d	The local education authority enables the principal to have the freedom to make decisions. **(2.61)**
3.1e	The local education authority directs resources, including staffing, to schools differentiated on the basis of need. **(2.24)**
3.2	**Resource Ingenuity (2.39)**
Is the principal adept at securing additional resources and leveraging partner relationships?	
3.2a	External partnerships have been strategically developed to engender academic improvement. **(2.48)**
3.2b	The community is encouraged to participate in the decision making and improvement work of the school. **(2.24)**
3.2c	The principal promotes resourcefulness and ingenuity in order to meet student needs. **(2.48)**
3.2d	The local education authority has district-wide structures and strategies to maximize external resources. **(2.21)**
3.3	**Agility in the Face of Turbulence (2.30)**
Is the principal flexible and inventive in responding to conflicts and challenges?	
3.3a	The principal has the capacity to ensure school improvement. **(2.48)**
3.3b	The principal provides competent stewardship and oversight of the school. **(2.42)**
3.3c	Decisions are made and plans are developed on the basis of rigorous monitoring and evaluation. **(1.97)**
3.3d	Key faculty members have the capacity to support the work that is needed. **(2.36)**
3.3e	The principal reshapes and incorporates local projects and special initiatives to meet students' needs. **(2.39)**
3.3f	The local education authority has the capacity to drive school improvement initiatives. **(2.24)**
3.3g	The local education authority supports and enables flexibility and inventiveness within the school. **(2.27)**

Emerging Strengths:

- Leadership in a small number of schools is innovative, dynamic and contributes significantly to improving student achievement.

- In most instances, principals have the autonomy and the authority to select and assign staff without regard to higher authority.

- Principals and other school leaders fervently want to make their schools better places to learn.

Opportunities for Improvement:

- There is a lack of strategic planning and thinking on how to bring about school improvement.

- As there are few robust systems in place for monitoring and evaluating school, student or staff performance, key decisions about school improvement are not made on the strongest evidence.

- School improvement planning lacks a strategic overview, challenging goals, clearly specified success criteria and interim goals and benchmarks to monitor and evaluate progress.

- Principals are prevented from implementing innovative practices such as performance related pay structures.

- Parents and the wider community are not involved enough in decision-making procedures.

- Although many partnerships are established with businesses and the wider community, the impact on student achievement is not evaluated.

- The local education authority is not always at the forefront of driving school improvement, holding schools to account or directing support and resources where the need is greatest.

Commentary

In some schools there is a commitment and desire to improve the quality of education on offer and to improve student achievement. Principals want to make the schools they lead better places to learn and achieve. In many instances, the routines and structures that are in place enable schools to run smoothly on a day-to-day basis. In a small number of schools, leadership is dynamic, innovative and securely centered on improving student achievement. However, in other schools, while there is a passion and commitment to wanting to make schools better, this is not always reflected in school improvement planning or the accuracy and effectiveness of

self-evaluation. Detailed school improvement planning is not an embedded strategy in enough schools. There is a lack of clearly defined school priorities, challenging goals, success criteria and interim benchmarks to evaluate ongoing progress towards priorities. Some schools need to ensure that a clear vision and climate for change is established and all stakeholders are involved. This lack of shared vision diminishes the school's capacity to function as a totally cohesive unit focused solely on improving the life chances of students. Some schools need to ensure that their self-evaluation is realistic because in some instances the appraisal of how well they are performing is unrealistic and inaccurate.   Conversely, the better schools know exactly what their strengths and weaknesses are, but more importantly, they demonstrate a track record of bringing about improvement on identified priorities. It is this track record that demonstrates the capacity for further and sustained improvement.

In most instances, principals have the authority to select and assign staff to positions in their school without regard to higher authority.   However, this is not always the case and appointments are made that are not best suited to school or student needs. These situations are often beyond the principal's control. Principals would also welcome the opportunity to implement more innovative practices such as relating teacher pay more directly to student performance and to introduce more flexible and attractive recruitment and retention packages.

An area that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency is the necessity to introduce a far more robust approach to monitoring and evaluation. A lack of distributed leadership in a number of schools means that there are not enough leaders in the school with the requisite skills to monitor and evaluate school and student performance.   At present teaching and learning are not evaluated well enough, data is not always analyzed thoroughly and the impact of initiatives in terms of student achievement are not always measured. These shortcomings mean that key decisions are being made without full regard to the potential evidence available and this impacts adversely on schools' capacity to improve at an accelerated rate.

Schools often put a good deal of effort into establishing and sustaining relationships and partnerships with parents and the wider and business community.   Many schools carry out parental surveys. The next stage of development for schools is to help parents play a more active role in their child's learning; for parents to contribute more to the decision making processes of the school and for the impact of community and business links to be better evaluated in terms of what they contribute to students' academic and personal achievement.

The local education authority has active involvement in schools but the impact of this involvement is not consistently evidenced in terms of improving school, teacher or student performance. This is because the local education authority is not always playing a significant enough role in holding principals or teachers to account, in driving the school improvement agenda or in directing resources and support on a differentiated basis so that the schools in most need receive the greatest and most effective input. Where the local education authority

operates in this manner, principals recognize the significant difference that is made to student achievement.

Recommendations

Opportunities for improvement

- Improve the achievement of all students and ensure that good progress is consistently the norm.

- Ensure that schools set a clear vision that includes all stakeholders that a climate for positive change is established in every school.

- Equip school leaders with the necessary skills to analyze data rigorously and effectively and use the information to set challenging goals at school, grade and class level and to directly hold teachers to account for the academic performance of the students they teach.

- Plan and deliver high quality professional development for teachers that enables them to analyze and utilize data to inform instruction and learning and ensures that they match work to the individual needs and abilities of all students.

- Plan and deliver high quality professional development for teachers that is specifically geared to raise student expectations and use a wider range of instructional strategies that motivate, engage and enthuse students in equal measure.

- Ensure that all schools provide a curriculum that is innovative, challenging and relevant which recognizes the diverse needs and abilities of all students.

- Provide high quality training for principals and school leaders that centers on strategic school improvement planning, effective self-evaluation, the setting of challenging goals at all levels and establishes interim benchmarks to measure progress.

- Enable principals and school leaders to establish rigorous and robust systems and procedures for monitoring and evaluating school performance at every level.

- Provide high quality training for principals and other personnel to enable them to carry out effective classroom observations, analyses of student outcomes and provide feedback that brings about improvement in instruction and learning.

- Use distributed leadership more effectively so that leaders have a bigger impact on school improvement, monitoring and evaluating school performance and student achievement.

- Insist that all classrooms and hallways exude high academic and personal expectations.

- Plan and deliver high quality professional development for teachers that enables them to develop students' ability to work independently and collaboratively and to develop students' readiness to play a more active role in their own learning and achievement.

- Develop strategies and initiatives that enable parents to play a more significant role in their child's learning, the school's decision making process and how links with business and the wider community are evaluated in terms of students' academic and personal development.

- Ensure that the local education authority plays their role to the full in holding schools to account for their performance, strategic school improvement planning and that resources and support are targeted to where the need is greatest.