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Public Consulting Group
200 International Drive, Suite 201
Portsmouth, NH USA 03801
603 427 0206

West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District, NJ

K-12 Language Arts Program Evaluation

July 2012

Bethany Rice, Ed.D.

West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District
505 Village Road W
West Windsor NJ 08550



www.pcgeducation.com

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Executive Summary

In fall 2012, the West Windsor-Plainsboro School District contracted with Public Consulting Group (PCG Education) to conduct a Language Arts Program Evaluation for grades K–12. This included four early elementary schools, two upper elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools. In preparation for the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, this report outlines the current strengths and areas for development for the collective K–12 schools in the district. The purposes of this program evaluation include:

- Analysis of student performance in reading and writing based on current summative assessment data sources
- Review of current literacy practices and identification of programmatic strengths and challenges
- Recommendations to build a coherent system of literacy uses and supports to increase the number of students who achieve proficiency on state literacy assessments

To address the purposes of this review, PCG Education collected and analyzed data from a number of related sources:

- Assessments of student performance in literacy, which included:
 - New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) Grades 3–8 (2009–2011)
 - High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) Grades 11–12 (2009–2011)
 - Advanced Placement (AP) English Examinations: Language Composition and Literature Composition (2010–2011)
- School Capacity Profiles completed by 10 schools in the district
- School Information Checklists completed by 10 school principals
- Focus groups and interviews with teachers, specialists, and school administrators at all schools
- Parent focus groups (one for K–5 and one for 6–12)
- Student focus groups conducted at all schools
- Classroom observation data from 50 classrooms throughout the district. Observations completed at every school
- Review of pertinent documents including student writing samples, letters from participants, and curriculum maps

A summary of student performance data at each grade level reveals the following information about student proficiency in literacy in West Windsor-Plainsboro:

- **Grades 3–8:** Students participate in the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge in grades 3–8. The students in West Windsor-Plainsboro School District consistently outperform their peers statewide. For instance, in 2011 the district reported 86% of their

third grade students as *proficient* or *advanced*, as compared to the state with 60% of students identified as *proficient* or *advanced*. The district continues to outperform the state at other grade levels as well. While these results are commendable, there are pockets of grade level performance in need of improvement. For example, the transition from fifth to sixth grade appears to challenge students, as evidenced by a higher percentage of students identified as *partially proficient* in sixth grade. In 2010, 16% of fifth graders were *partially proficient*, as compared to 24% of sixth graders identified as *partially proficient* in 2011. While this transition is markedly difficult for many adolescents, not just those in the West Windsor-Plainsboro schools, the district would be remiss not to examine the trend further. Additional information is needed to determine the root cause of the decline in performance, but examining the transition from one school to the next will provide a starting place. Looking at student placement and instructional strategies will also afford the district with important information about student progress over time.

- **Grades 11–12:** Students take the High School Proficiency Assessment in eleventh grade. If they do not meet proficiency, students are assigned to a review course, and they can retake the examination in twelfth grade. The scores for the district are consistent across the three years reported. The 2012 data was not available for this report. In 2011, High School North assessed 405 students and High School South assessed 404 students. At each school, 3% (n=13) of the students scored as *partially proficient*. That 97% of students in both schools achieve proficiency is exceedingly strong performance worthy of commendation. This is in contrast to 11% of high school students that are *partially proficient* statewide.
- **Advanced Placement Examinations:** Several students opt to participate in Advanced Placement courses. At the conclusion of the course, students may choose to take the accompanying assessment. For the purposes of this review, English Literature Composition and English Language Composition are the only two assessments reported. As a result of the consistently strong scores, the district received several honors from the College Board. Most students participating in the AP program and assessment earn college credit.

An analysis of district capacity, based on the data sources described above, reveals the following themes for focus: curriculum and instruction, resources for struggling learners, assessment and data use, student transitions, collaboration and communication, and materials and technology. Within each area, issues are examined across each grade span; K–3, 4–5, 6–8, and 9–12.

In response to an analysis of data relative to the themes mentioned above, PCG Education makes the following recommendations to improve student achievement in literacy, build an effective support system for all learners, teachers, and administrators; ultimately preparing students to be college and career ready when they graduate from high school.

Curriculum and Instruction

- *Establish consistency with the workshop model.* Consistency of use with the workshop model will improve results throughout the district. Establishing expectations for use in the classroom and providing school leaders with district support will increase consistency greatly. Conducting classroom walkthroughs on an ongoing basis and doing lesson studies will provide support to teachers using the workshop model.
- *Realign the high school curriculum with the NJ Common Core State Standard for English Language Arts (NJCCSS) to create common texts, performance tasks, and writing opportunities (including time to revise/edit).* The standards require the reading of increasingly complex literary and informational texts, with an increasing emphasis on literary nonfiction and discipline-specific sources. As the district prepares curriculum maps for secondary schools, planning for and implementing additional texts and tasks must address increased rigor as students engage in close reading of text. Placing an emphasis on writing to persuade and inform as well as to narrate, the writing process, and varying the length of assignments will allow students to demonstrate a wider range of skills.
- *Write curriculum for language use and vocabulary aligned to NJ Common Core State Standards for language.* Creating a specific curriculum to address these areas will improve student outcomes and will better align the English/language arts curriculum to the Common Core State Standards. The Standards require a knowledge and precise use of language, specifically while reading, writing, and speaking. Strengthening the curriculum to address these increased demands will benefit all students.
- *Increase literacy skills across all content areas, particularly at the secondary level.* In school year 2011–2012, the middle school literacy instructional time was reduced to 52 minutes, placing greater demands on language arts teachers. Providing an extended block of time, a minimum of 80 minutes, will allow English teachers to engage students in reading and writing in greater depth. This time could also be spent team-teach with history or science teachers to cover academic writing, textbook reading or other related skills. Increased rigor in middle school reading and writing requires a schedule that supports the greater demands. All content areas are responsible for developing literacy skills.

Resources for Struggling Learners

- *Design a consistent district protocol for use with the referral committee at each school.* Currently each committee uses its own procedures to identify students and provide support. This creates many inconsistencies in the way schools support struggling learners. Designing a protocol to guide the referral committee will ensure that students' needs are met equitably throughout the district. The protocol will also include guidelines for committee participation.

- *Implement a Response to Instruction and Intervention program in all schools, particularly at the secondary level.* Even with the addition of purposeful strategies, some students will require other support structures to be successful. Currently, there is no Response to Intervention system in place in the secondary schools. Establishing tier two and tier three interventions will increase the likelihood of student success.
- *Establish structures to provide support for struggling learners during the school day, particularly in grades 4–12 (literacy lab, supported study halls, etc).* While peer tutoring can be positive, formal support structures are needed to assist struggling learners. Implementing literacy labs, basic skills sessions, or supported study halls will provide additional support to students during the school day.
- *Provide professional development on effective strategy use for all content area teachers.* The NJ CCSS-ELA infuse literacy into all content area classrooms, not just in English or language arts. Content area teachers will require instructional strategies to support literacy development. The increased rigor of texts and writing opportunities will pose a challenge for many students. Implementing effective, purposeful strategies within the content area classroom will allow students to access materials, texts, and the overall curriculum with greater ease.

Assessment and Data Use

- *Create a districtwide comprehensive assessment framework that specifies performance assessments, interim assessments, and summative assessments for each grade span (K–3, 4–5, 6–8, 9–12).* The district currently lacks an assessment framework to monitor and measure progress. Assessment practices vary greatly from school to school, aside from the required state standards-based measures. Creating an assessment framework inclusive of formative and summative measures will allow the district to track, monitor, and measure student achievement over time.
- *Design performance tasks aligned to the NJ CCSS-ELA, common to each grade level.* The standards require that students read increasingly complex literary and informational text. Performance assessment using common tasks and rubrics aligned with the standards help students gain facility with the academic demands of the curriculum and prepare students to be college and career ready. Creating common performance tasks will increase consistency across the district and provide data to inform instruction.
- *Support increased use of formative data to guide instruction.* Use of data to inform instruction is limited in the district's secondary schools. This can be attributed to the limited use of assessments and limited access to data. Establishing data use protocols will increase data use, allowing teachers to alter their instruction to meet the changing needs of students, as indicated by the data.

- *Create a positive culture for data use at each school and at the district level.* Setting expectations for data use and implementing protocols will also help to create a positive culture for data use. Providing comfortable, supportive venues will allow teachers to access and discuss their data without judgment.

Student Transitions

- *Design and implement a district transition plan.* With ten schools in the district, students undergo several transitions throughout their academic career. Establishing and using a district transition plan will assist this complicated process. The plan will include measures for student placement, teacher communication, and student data procedures. Consistent use of the plan will support both students and teachers.
- *Develop a student portfolio or reporting process to facilitate transitions.* Placement cards are currently used to identify student progress and needs; however, their use is inconsistent at best. Developing a student portfolio that follows the student from grade to grade will show achievement and progress over time and will allow teachers to make the best instructional and placement decisions for each student.
- *Implement articulation time for teachers at the beginning and end of the school year.* In addition to the placement cards, teachers need face-to-face time to discuss each student and their individual needs. This time will also allow teachers to discuss the curriculum covered and address any other pertinent issues. In addition, providing this time at the beginning and end of the year is important for collegiality and collaboration.
- *Create a transition committee at each school to discuss student needs.* Each school has their own version of a “transition committee.” In most schools, the guidance counselor and the principal are the team representatives. Expanding participation to include teachers, specialists, and special educators will provide a well-rounded picture of students. It will also increase shared responsibility.

Collaboration and Communication

- *Form literacy leadership teams at each school and one at the district level to facilitate ongoing communication.* The literacy leadership team serves many purposes within the school and the district as a whole. The team establishes literacy-based priorities and goals for the year, monitors progress, and helps to develop professional development opportunities for teachers. Every school in the district will benefit greatly from establishing a literacy leadership team.
- *Implement parental communication protocols to keep parents adequately informed about literacy initiatives, events, and student progress.* Research consistently demonstrates that strengthening home and school connections leads to increased student success. When parents and teachers work together to meet the needs of students, support extends into all

facets of life, ensuring reliable transitions between home and school environments. Consistent communication helps to build these partnerships. The West Windsor-Plainsboro School District lacks a protocol for parent communication.

- *Establish regular times for communication and collaboration among language arts/English teachers within the contracted school day (once a week at a minimum).* Regular communication and collaboration between teachers within a school and across buildings occurs infrequently if at all. With ten schools in the district, teachers will need frequent opportunities to collaborate, share materials, and create common assessments. This will also facilitate increased collegiality and teamwork between teachers in different buildings, strengthening the overall culture of the district.
- *Facilitate ongoing learning opportunities for parents around the workshop model and other district initiatives.* Supportive and involved parents, like those in the district, require ongoing communication and educational opportunities. Educating parents about the workshop model and sharing aspects of it with them will increase support and decrease resistance. Facilitating ongoing learning opportunities for parents will achieve this goal.

Materials and Technology

- *Conduct a technology audit to determine accurate technology needs at each school and in each classroom within the district.* The district invested in a lot of impressive technology. The resources are not equally distributed across schools and classrooms. Conducting a technology audit will allow the district to identify gaps in coverage and provide all teachers with the necessary resources.
- *Provide professional development to teachers on using technology in the classroom to enhance and support instruction.* Several new initiatives are addressed in this report. Teachers and administrators will need focused professional development to implement technology with fidelity. While the district can guide professional development days in the school calendar, training will be school specific, based on the faculty members in the building. Differentiation applies to teacher development as well as to student instruction.
- *Revise curriculum documents to include additional technology instruction and opportunities to use technology within the subject areas, including English/language arts.* Students need ongoing opportunities to learn about and use technology to research, produce, and present information. Revising the English/language arts curriculum to include a variety of learning experiences using technology will better prepare students for college and careers.
- *Allocate necessary funds to update the text collection to include informational sources, NJ CCSS-ELA recommended texts, and leveled texts for middle and high school struggling learners.* The standards require that students read with comprehension increasingly complex literary and informational text, and encourage the use of common performance assessments and standards-aligned rubrics to monitor students' developing proficiency and

gauge preparation for college and careers. As the district creates Common Core curriculum maps, planning for and implementing instructional practices that increase rigor will ensure that students achieve proficiency and graduate from high school with the skills they need for postsecondary success.

Introduction

During the 2011–2012 school year, the West Windsor-Plainsboro School District contracted with Public Consulting Group (PCG Education) to conduct a district literacy program review for grades K–12. There are currently four early elementary schools in the district: Dutch Neck, Maurice Hawk, Town Center, and Wicoff. There are two upper elementary schools: Millstone River and Village School, as well as two middle schools: Community Middle School and Grover Middle School. Two high schools also serve the students in the district: High School South and High School North. The purposes of this district report include:

- Provide an overview of student performance in reading and writing at each school, grades K–12, based on current summative assessment data sources
- Review the current literacy practices and provide programmatic strengths and areas for improvement at the district level
- Recommendations to build a districtwide literacy support system to increase the number of students achieving proficiency on state literacy assessments

The New Jersey Common Core State Standards (NJ-CCSS) call for a “cradle to college” education for all students. The standards include 21st century literacy and language skills needed to achieve success at home and in the workplace. The successful integration of these standards will help to ensure that students leave school prepared to be informed, engaged members of society.

Overview of the Methodology for the K–12 Language Arts Program Evaluation

A district or school program evaluation is both a science and an art. As a science, it involves analysis of quantitative data (e.g., student achievement, survey data) and the presentation of that data in clear, accessible formats that provide new, deep, and actionable understandings.

As an art, a program evaluation involves gathering qualitative data from a wide range of perspectives and voices, through interviews, focus groups, and observations; and then analyzing that data to determine themes and draw conclusions about actual practice in the school or district. The analysis of both the qualitative and quantitative data gathered throughout a program evaluation to identify themes, implications, conclusions, and recommendations requires experience in the fields of evaluation and education to create a clear, usable, and logical report that brings a complex, multi-faceted picture into focus.

Analysis of Student Performance Data

This review includes a number of student performance assessments, including the following:

- New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK) Grades 3–8
- High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) Grades 11–12
- Advanced Placement Assessments: Language Composition and Literature Composition

This report includes data from 2009, 2010, and 2011. Results are reported at the school, district, and the state level. The data used in this report were provided by the district. State data were obtained from the New Jersey Department of Education office of assessment website.

Data Collection Sources

School Capacity Profile

In order to establish a school's readiness to improve and sustain literacy support and development, the school capacity profile is used to evaluate the teachers' perception of the school's strengths and barriers to literacy-based improvement. The tool is administered and discussed by the literacy leadership team at each school. The tool evaluates five areas of literacy support, including school culture, school policies and procedures, structural supports for literacy, resource capacity, and a tiered system of curriculum delivery. The results of the school capacity profile for each school can be found in the appendix.

Five Areas of Literacy Support	
School culture—beliefs and expectations about literacy	The professional culture and belief systems of a school are an essential foundation for establishing a schoolwide focus on literacy
School policies and procedures	The complex nature of addressing student literacy requires policies and procedures that can be drawn upon to support a schoolwide, multifaceted approach
Structural supports for literacy	Research has pointed to several structural supports critical in supporting teacher efforts to improve student literacy across the content areas
Resource capacity	A school's capacity to improve and enhance student literacy is dependent upon adequate resource support
Tiered curriculum delivery	A system of supports that address the specific needs of students for whom reading is a challenge

Focus Groups and Interviews

School-based focus groups and interviews were conducted at each school in the district. Teachers from each grade level in the elementary schools and the language arts/English departments at the middle and high schools participated in the focus groups and discussed their practice, their challenges, and ways in which the district could support them in building the literacy and learning skills of their students. Student focus groups also occurred at each school. Small groups of students participated in focus groups to describe the literacy events and practices at their school. School administrators took part in individual and or small group interviews. When possible, media specialists and literacy specialists also participated in the interview process. Additional data were acquired through phone interviews with district and school level administrators. Finally, in the evening, two parent focus groups also highlighted district literacy strengths and areas for development.

Classroom Observation Visits

Classroom observations occurred at all schools. Visits to a selection of classes highlighted instructional practices and areas for development. Time spent in each classroom ranged from 15–18 minutes. Approximately 50 classrooms participated in the observation process. Notes were collected during each visit to track overall themes, classroom demographics, and overall engagement and motivation.

School Information Checklists

Each principal completed the information checklist prior to the school visit. This tool highlights school demographics, and outlines assessment, professional development, and intervention resources. The information provides an overview of available resources in relation to the school population.

Document Review

Additional documents collected during the onsite visit also provided information about literacy programming at the district. Documents included student writing samples, letters from participants, and curriculum documents. Informational sheets were also collected from each parent focus group. These documents provided demographic information about attendees, as well as information about school services used.

Student Achievement Data

Grades 3–8

The New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge began in 2003 as a result of No Child Left Behind. It requires students in grades three through eight to participate in standardized testing each year. For the purposes of this report, language arts and literacy assessments will be used to

determine student proficiency in these areas. Assessments are also administered in mathematics and science, but those scores were not used for the purposes of this evaluation.

The examination requires students to read selected passages, respond to questions, and write to designated prompts. Students receive a score for each area. Overall student scores indicate placement in one of three levels; *proficient/advanced* (250–300 scale score), *proficient* (200–249), and *partially proficient* (100–199). Schools are encouraged to use the results to make targeted instructional improvements.

Grade 3

In 2011, a total of 679 third grade students participated in the NJASK grade 3 assessment. Four schools administered the examination. Figure 1 shows the state, district, and school specific percentages for each category of proficiency. As indicated, 14% (n=95) of students at the district level scored as *partially proficient* in 2011. Dutch Neck and Town Center schools both reported 17% of their student population scoring as *partially proficient*. Maurice Hawk, with the largest group of grade 3 students, had only 7% of students at the *partially proficient* level. Wicoff, with the smallest group, indicated 15% of students were *partially proficient*.

The 2010 scores revealed similar results. The district reported a slightly larger third grade class with 724 total students. From this class, 15% (n= 109) of students scored as *partially proficient*. Wicoff School, reporting 98 third grade students, indicated 20% (n=20) of students were *partially proficient*. Maurice Hawk, with 227 students, recorded 10% (n=23) of students as *partially proficient*. Town Center reported 18% (n=37) of students at this level. Finally, 15% (n=29) of Dutch Neck's third graders scored as *partially proficient*. Figure 2 illustrates the 2010 NJASK scores for grade 3 students in the district. These scores closely resemble ones recorded in 2011.

In 2009 the district assessed 728 third grade students. This group of students reported the smallest number of *partially proficient* students across a three year span. Only 9% (n=66) of students scored in this range. Dutch Neck and Maurice Hawk, reporting the largest numbers of third graders, both had 7% of their population score in the *partially proficient* range. Town Center reported 13% (n= 26) and Wicoff 9% (n= 9) as *partially proficient*. These percentages were the lowest on record for the years identified for the purposes of this report. Figure 3 illustrates the state, district, and school specific averages for the 2009 NJASK results.

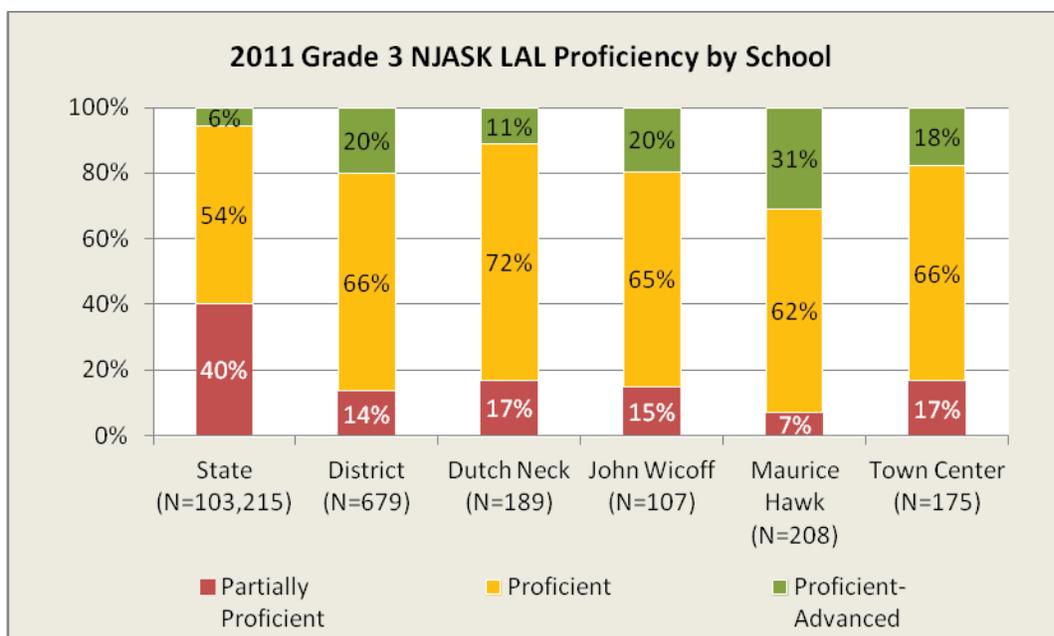


Figure 1. 2011 NJASK Grade 3 Results

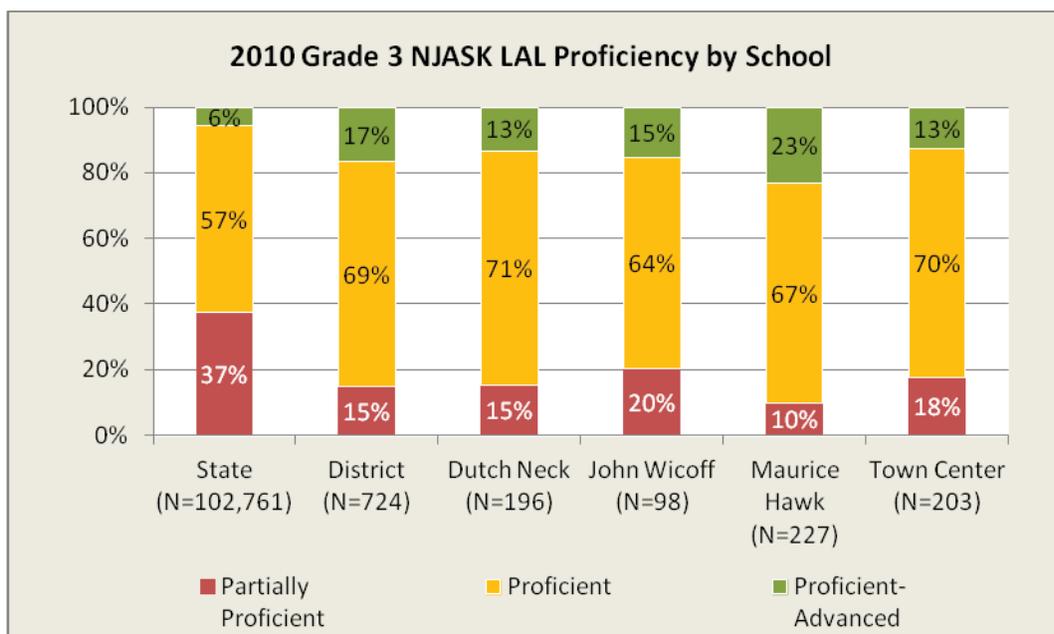


Figure 2. 2010 NJASK Grade 3 Results

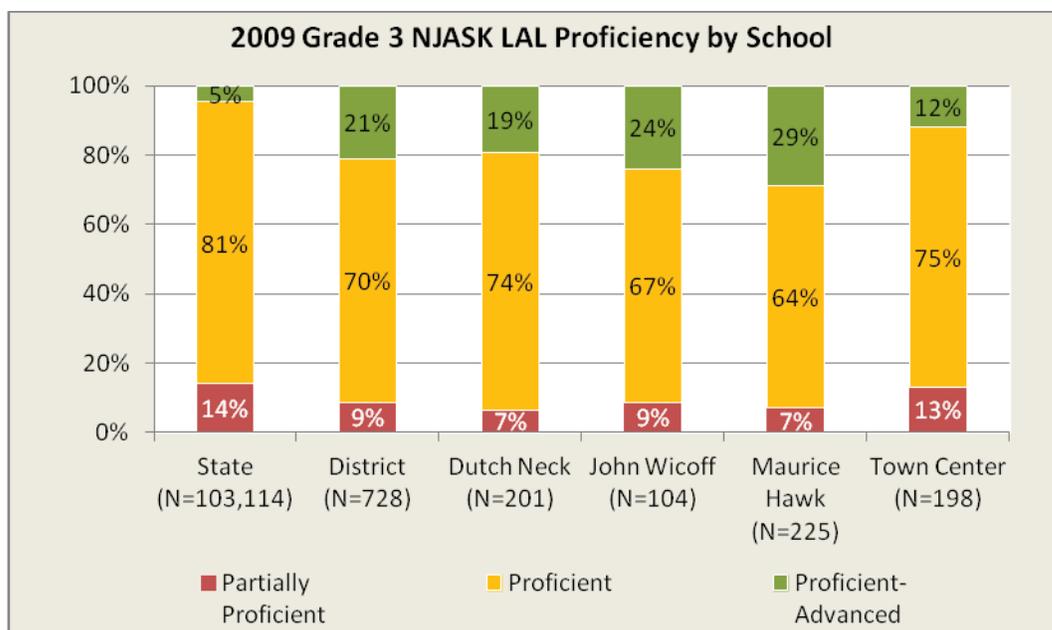


Figure 3. 2009 NJASK Grade 3 Results

In 2010 and 2011, students in the district outperformed their peers statewide, yet in 2009, this was not the case with students identified as *partially proficient*. Improvements were made and the district made gains on the state over the next two years. While the scores have remained consistent from 2010 to 2011, the increase in students scoring at *partially proficient* is a trend to watch closely in 2012 and beyond. The West Windsor-Plainsboro School District has an opportunity to provide targeted support to students to increase the achievement of all.

Grade 4

Students transition from one of four early elementary schools to one of two upper elementary schools. West Windsor-Plainsboro students either attend Millstone River or Village School for fourth and fifth grades. In 2011, there were 719 fourth grade students assessed in the district. From this group, 396 students attended Millstone River and 323 students at Village. Interestingly, 14% (n=101) of students districtwide scored as *partially proficient*. This remained consistent at Village School (14% or n=45) and was 13% (n= 52) at Millstone River. Figure 4 illustrates the NJASK reported scores for the 2011 school year.

In 2010, the district assessed 743 students in fourth grade. Millstone River had a slightly higher number of students with 431, compared to Village School with 312 students. The average percentage of students scoring as *partially proficient* remained close at 16% (n=69) and 14% (n= 44) respectively. Figure 5 demonstrates the NJASK scores for 2010. The district average remained consistent as well from 2010 to 2011. These scores improved slightly from the 2009 school year.

The 2009 NJASK examination reported the highest percentage of *partially proficient* students for the district. The district tested 677 fourth grade students, and 17% (n= 115) of those were *partially proficient*. The school percentages were consistent with Millstone River reporting 17% (n=61) and Village 18%

(n=56) of students as *partially proficient*. Slight improvements are noted from 2009 to 2010. The scores remained consistent from 2010 to 2011, failing to demonstrate continued growth. Also in 2009, the district and the state recorded similar scores for students identified as *partially proficient*.

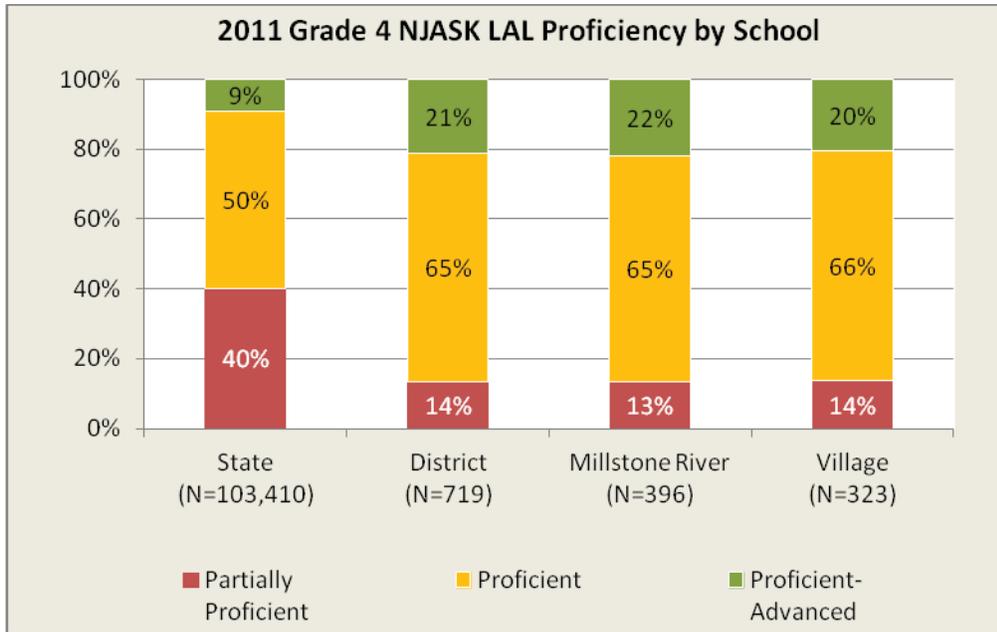


Figure 4. 2011 NJASK Grade 4 Results

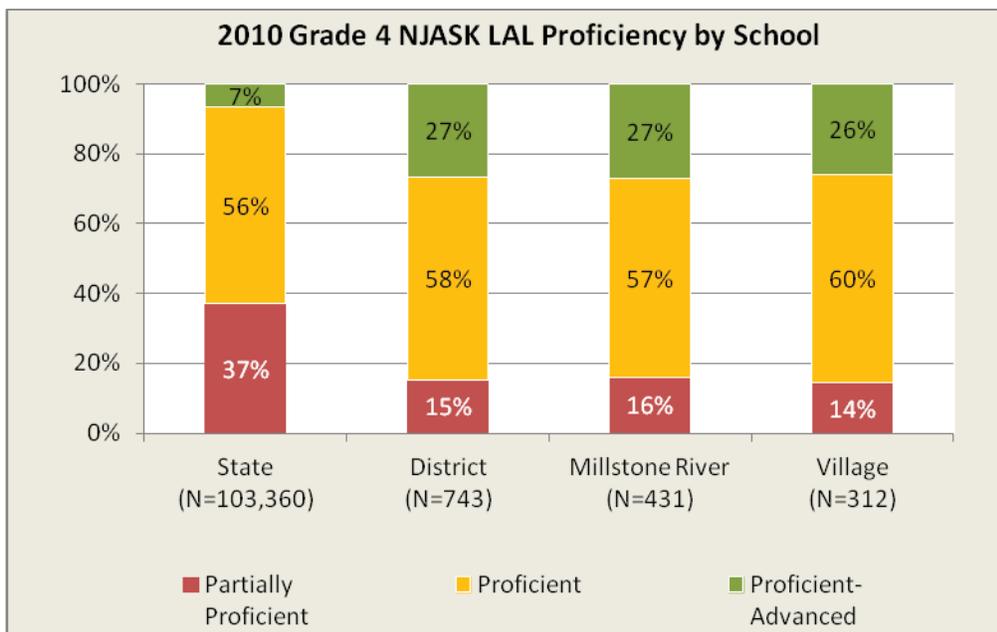


Figure 5. 2010 NJASK Grade 4 Results

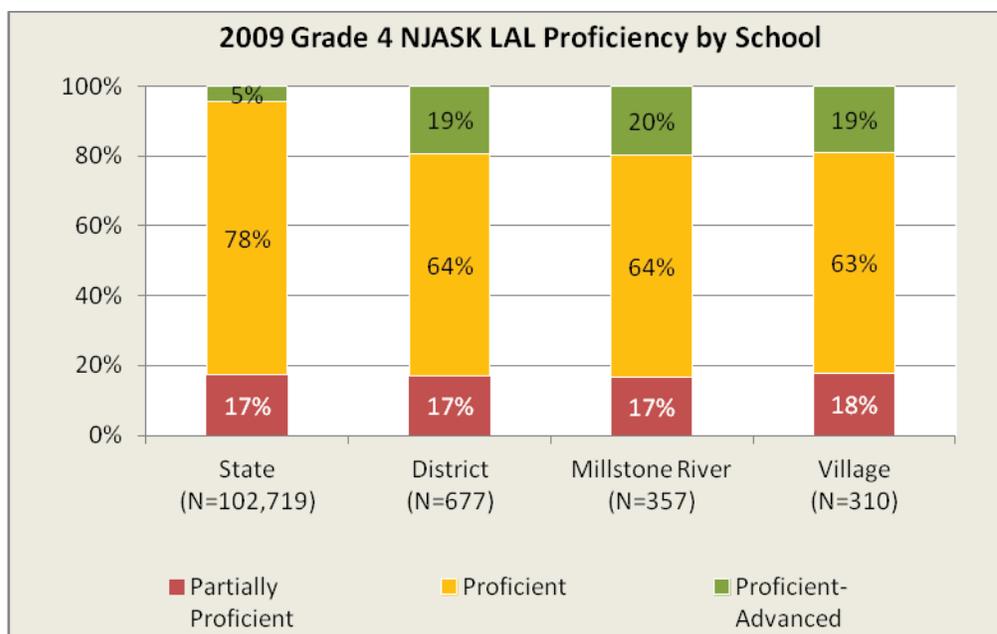


Figure 6. 2009 NJASK Grade 4 Results

During 2010 and 2011, the district did outperform the state in terms of having a greater number of *proficient* and *advanced* students and few *partially proficient* students. This was not the case in 2009. While many West Windsor-Plainsboro students are *proficient* or *advanced*, there are still students only meeting partial proficiency. The percentage of students demonstrating partial proficiency, while improving slightly, did not demonstrate growth over time. This is a something for the district to continue to address. Examining the 2012 scores will provide additional information and will help dictate future actions.

Grade 5

Similarly to fourth grade, students continue their course of study at either Millstone River or Village School. The majority of students remain at the same school for fifth grade. In 2011, the district administered the assessment to 737 students in fifth grade. From this group, 13% (n=96) of students tested scored as *partially proficient*. At the school specific level, Millstone River had a slightly larger population than the Village School. Millstone River tested 426 students with 14% (n=60) of students identified as *partially proficient*. The Village School assessed 311 students with 11% (n=34) as *partially proficient*. Two student scores are absent from this group, but identified as not meeting proficiency. Figure 7 outlines the NJASK scores for fifth graders in 2011.

In 2010, the West Windsor-Plainsboro School District assessed 714 fifth grade students. At the district level, 16% (n=114) of the student population demonstrated partial proficiency on the Language Arts and Literacy assessment. The overall student population was closely divided between the two upper elementary schools. Millstone River tested 379 students, 15% (n=57) of which indicated partial proficiency. The Village School assessed 335 students and 17% (n=57) of these children were *partially proficient*. Figure 8 demonstrates the district and school specific scores for

fifth graders in 2010. When compared to the state averages, the district and the schools outperform their peers statewide.

During the 2009 school year, 693 fifth grade students in the district participated in the NJASK Language Arts and Literacy assessment. From this group, 13% (n=90) of students were identified as *partially proficient*. Millstone River assessed 364 fifth grade students with 14% (n=51) scoring as *partially proficient*. The Village school administered 329 assessments and reported 12% (n=39) of students as *partially proficient*. The district averages remain consistent from 2009–2011, yet do not indicate significant improvements toward helping *partially proficient* students achieve gains. Figure 9 illustrates state, district, and school specific results for the 2009 NJASK assessment. While students in the district are above state averages, improvements can be made to address the needs of students identified as not meeting proficiency. These students require additional support to make academic gains.

When comparing state and district scores, the district reported significantly better percentages of students identified as *partially proficient*. This was consistent across the three years studied. In some instances, the state averages for *partially proficient* were double those recorded by the district. In addition, the district had a higher percentage of students scoring at the *advanced* level each year noted.

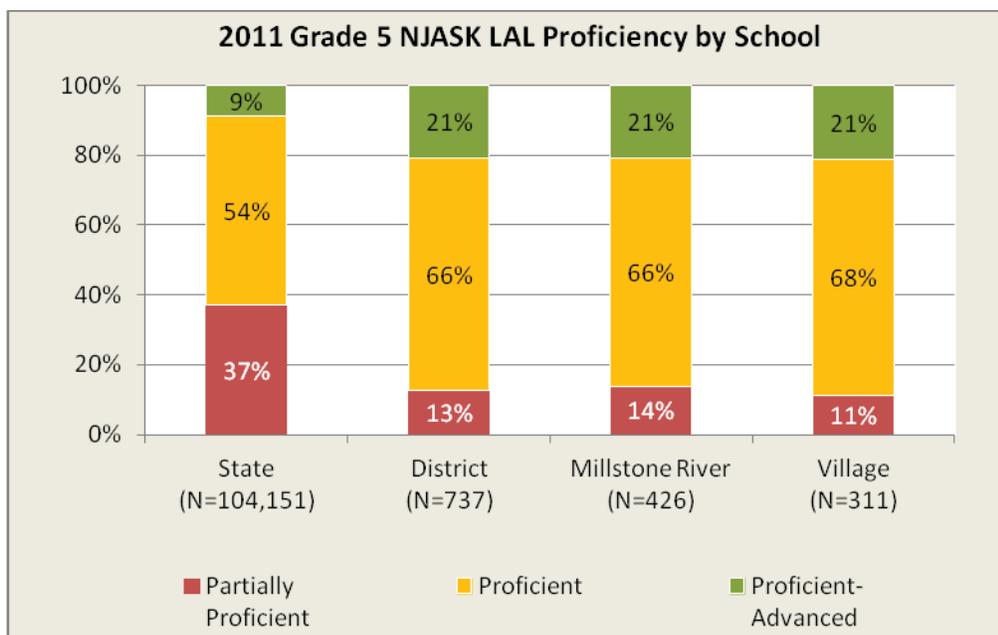


Figure 7. 2011 NJASK Grade 5 Results

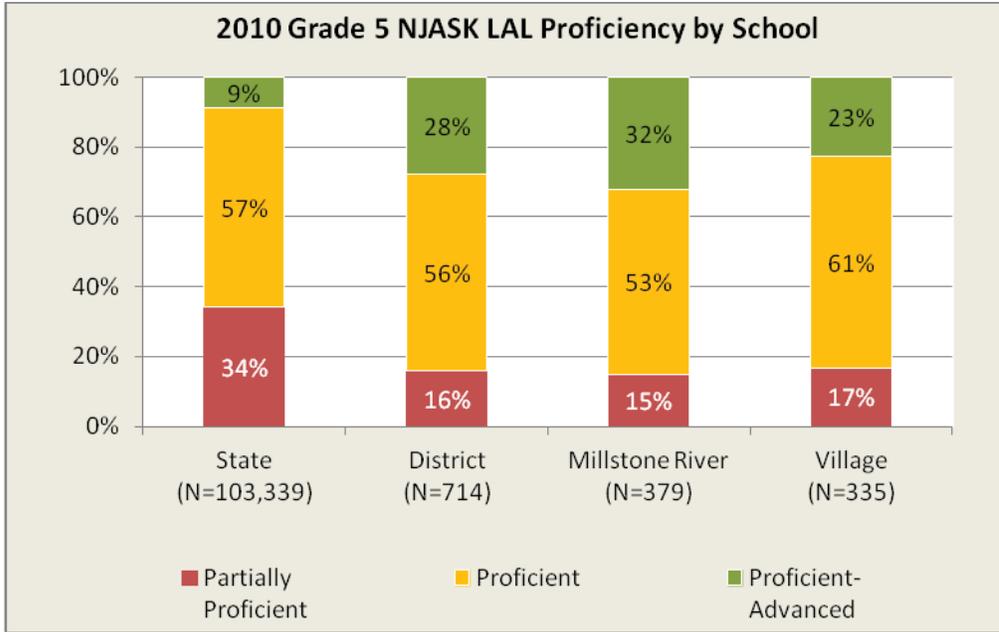


Figure 8. 2010 NJASK Grade 5 Results

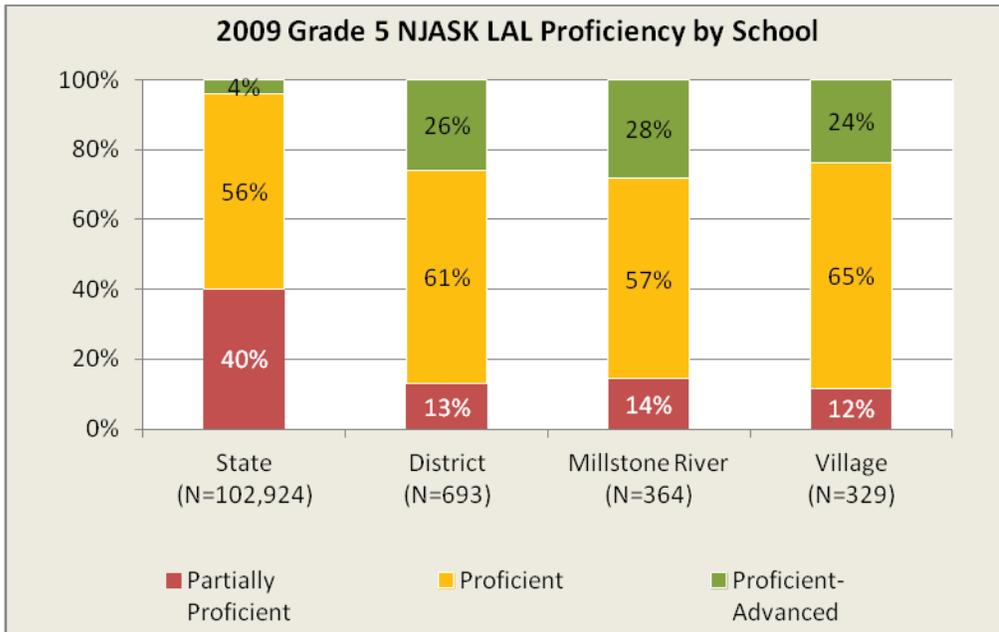


Figure 9. 2009 NJASK Grade 5 Results

Grade 6

After completing fourth and fifth grades in the upper elementary schools, students transition to one of two middle schools in the district. Students are divided equally between the two schools. Community Middle School and Grover Middle School educate students in grades six through eight. In general, students remain at the same middle school for all three years.

The grade six results across three years demonstrate a significant increase in the percentage of *partially proficient* students. In 2011, the district assessed 733 students in sixth grade. From this group, 24% (n=176) of students were considered *partially proficient*. When examining school specific results, Community Middle School reported 25% (n=91) of tested sixth grade students as *partially proficient*. Grover Middle School assessed 371 students, and 22% (n=82) of the group was *partially proficient*. Three students were not included in school specific data. Figure 10 demonstrates the sixth grade NJASK scores for 2011.

In 2010, 717 students participated in the NJASK assessment. While 75% of these students were *proficient* or *proficient/advanced*, 25% (n=179) of students scored as *partially proficient*. By school, Community Middle School tested 389 students, of which 24% (n=93) were *partially proficient*. At Grover Middle School, 328 students completed NJASK, and 26% (n=86) of the group also indicated partial proficiency. Figure 11 illustrates the state, district, and school specific scores for sixth graders in 2010. The 2010 and 2011 scores indicate a higher number of *partially proficient* students than in 2009.

The district administered the 2009 NJASK examination to 805 sixth grade students. From this group, 17% (n=137) of students scored at the *partially proficient* level. Also interesting to note, only 9% (n=72) of participants scored as *proficient/advanced*. The school specific data mirrors the district scores. At Community Middle School, 414 sixth grade students took the assessment, and 17% (n=71) demonstrated *partially proficient* skills. Grover Middle School administered 391 assessments, and 16% (n=63) of this group scored as *partially proficient*. Three (3) student scores were absent from this group, but were identified as *partially proficient*. Figure 12 shows the 2009 data for these groups of students.

There is an important trend to note relative to the grade 6 NJASK data. The percentage of students scoring as *partially proficient* rose from 2009 to 2011. There is also an increase from fifth to sixth grade as well. While cohort analysis was not available for this study, noticeable differences exist in proficiency levels from fifth to sixth grade. This transition is often challenging for students, but more information is needed to determine possible causes.

When comparing district to state averages across three years, the district outperforms the state in all categories. For instance, in 2011, 35% of students statewide scored as *partially proficient*, whereas only 24% of students in the district reported similar scores. This trend is noted across each of the three years studied. The gap between the state and district averages narrows slightly in 2010. The scores in West Windsor-Plainsboro are consistently higher than state averages.

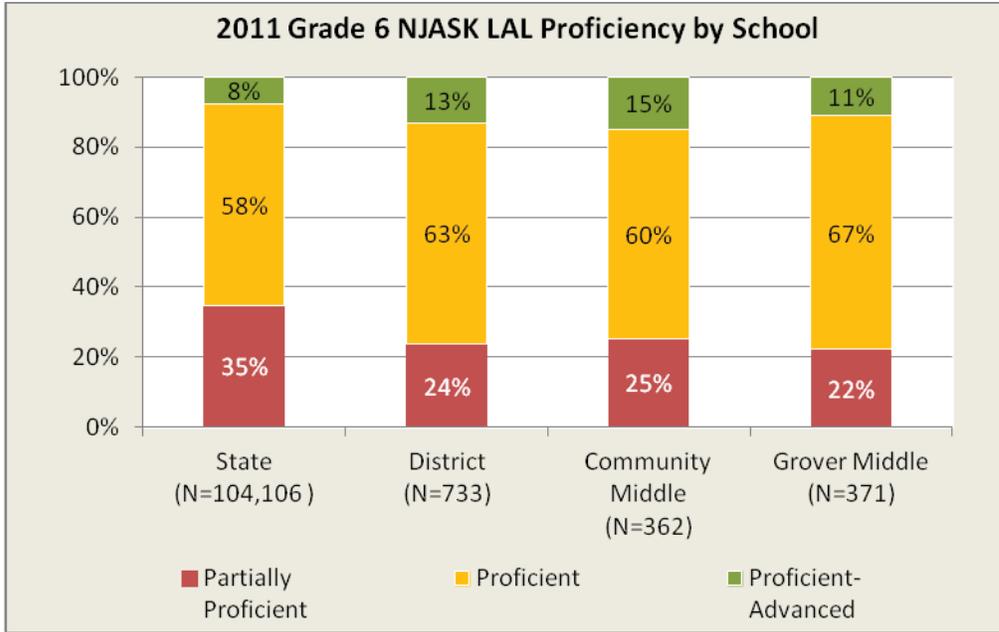


Figure 10. 2011 NJASK Grade 6 Results

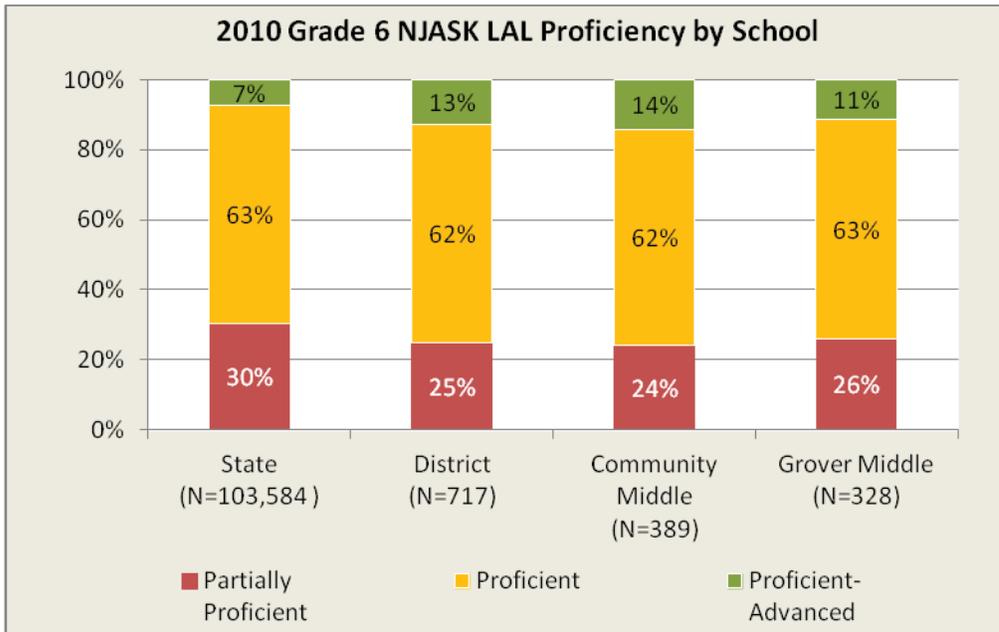


Figure 11. 2010 NJASK Grade 6 Results

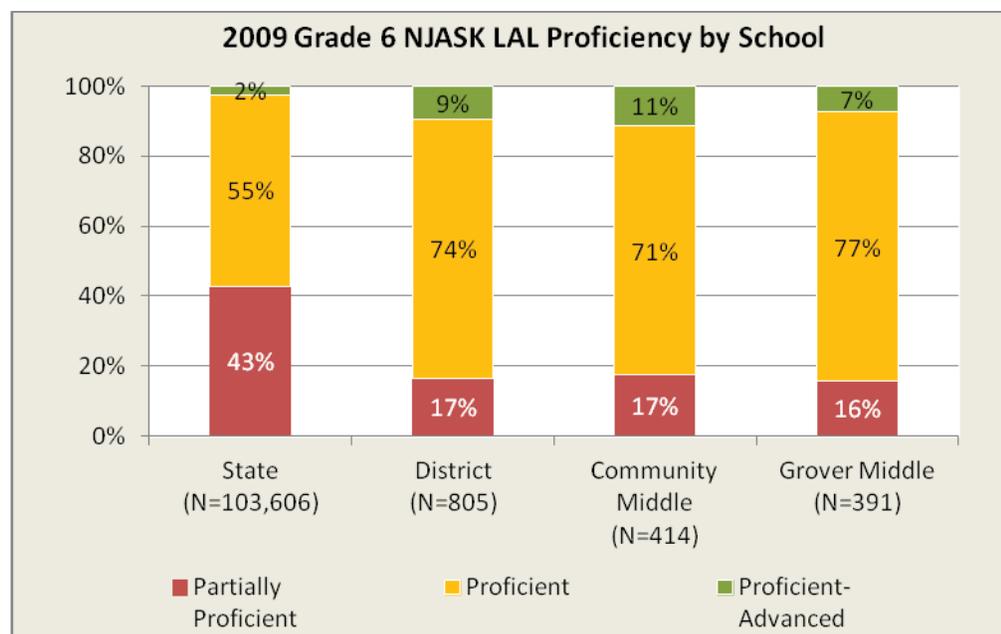


Figure 12. 2009 NJASK Grade 6 Results

Grade 7

Most students in the district remain at the same middle school for seventh grade as they attended for sixth grade. In 2011, the district assessed 740 seventh grade students with 13% (n=100) of this group demonstrating partial proficiency. At the school level, Community Middle School tested 405 students with 13% (n=53) of the group identified as *partially proficient*. The results at Grover Middle School indicated 14% (n=47) of 335 students scored as *partially proficient*. Figure 13 illustrates the 2011 NJASK results for the state, the district, and the individual middle schools within the district.

In 2010, the district administered the NJASK to 835 seventh grade students. From this group, 8% (n=67) of students scored as *partially proficient*. At the school level, Community Middle School assessed 431 students, 8% (n=35) of whom recorded *partially proficient* scores. Grover Middle School evaluated 404 seventh grade students with 7% (n=28) of participants scoring as *partially proficient*. Four (4) scores were not identified to one particular school, but were included in the district count. Figure 14 represents the 2010 NJASK scores for grade seven students in the district.

The 2009 school year illustrated similar results. The district and school specific scores remain consistent across a three-year time span. During 2009, the district evaluated 778 seventh grade students. From this group, 9% (n=70) of students earned *partially proficient* scores. Community Middle School reported a slightly larger testing group with 407 students with 13% (n=52) scoring as *partially proficient*. At Grover Middle School, 371 students participated in NJASK testing. Only 5% (n=18) of students were identified as *partially proficient* on this assessment. Figure 15 provides the results for the state, the district, and each individual middle school within the district.

An interesting trend to note is the improvement in scores from sixth to seventh grade. As mentioned previously, the scores for *partially proficient* students increased as they moved from fifth

to sixth grades. This was consistent across a three-year span, however, there is a noted improvement made from sixth to seventh grade. This improvement is also consistent across each of the three years studied (2009–2011). When it becomes available, examining the 2012 data will provide additional information about the consistency of this trend.

When compared to state averages for partial proficiency, the district outperforms the state across each of the three years studied. The state average for partial proficiency is more than double the district and school averages. Students in West Windsor-Plainsboro consistently demonstrate higher levels of proficiency than their peers statewide.

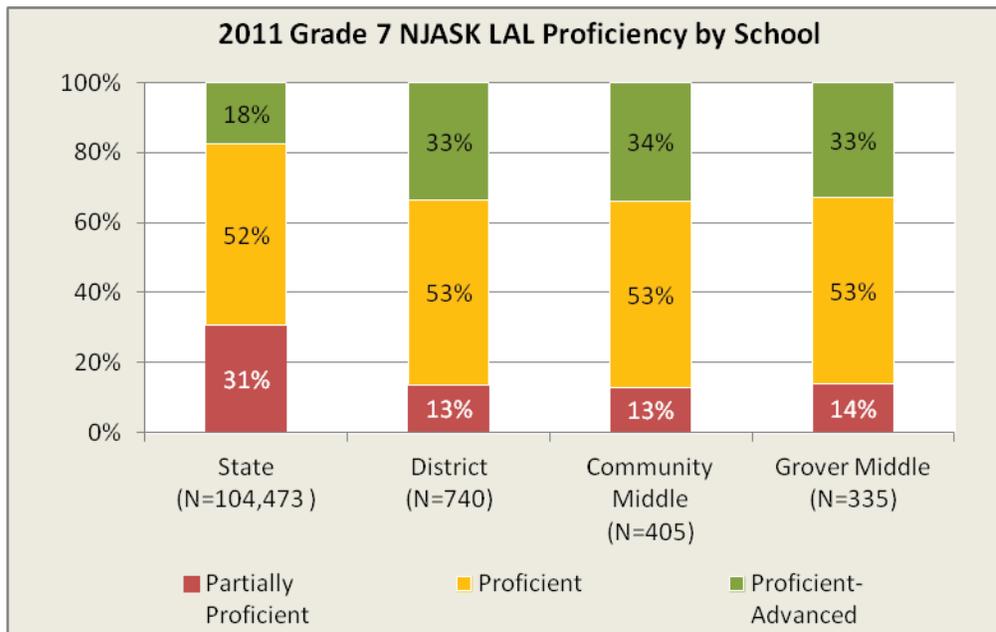


Figure 13. 2011 NJASK Grade 7 Results

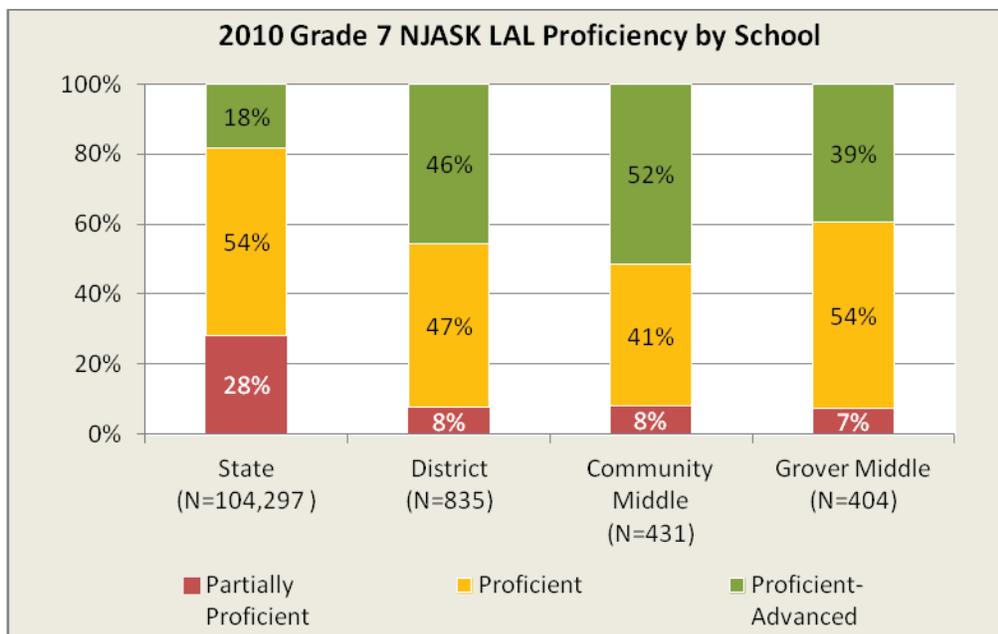


Figure 14. 2010 NJASK Grade 7 Results

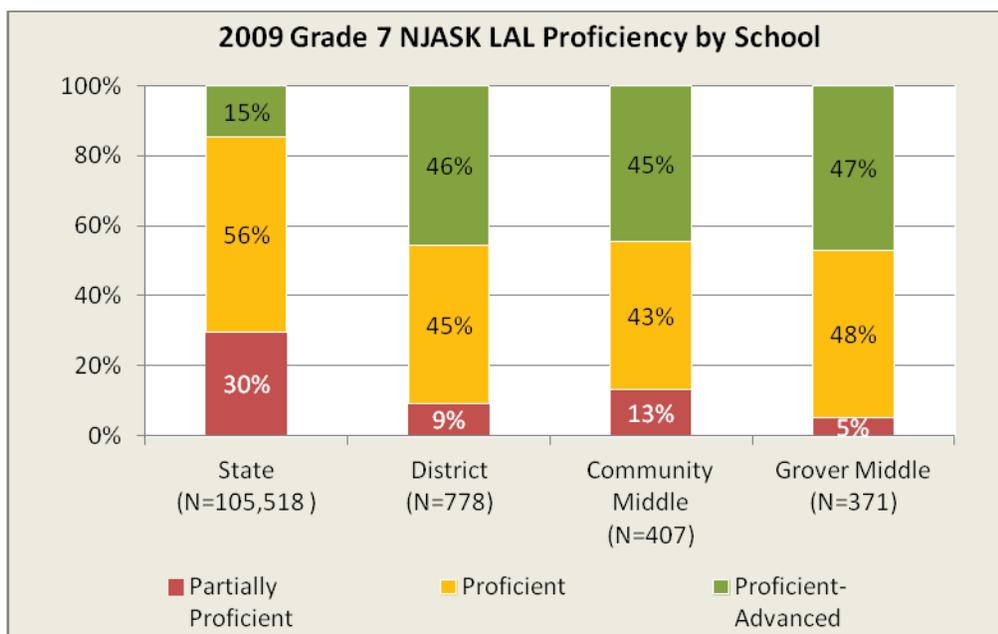


Figure 15. 2009 NJASK Grade 7 Results

Grade 8

While the percentage of *partially proficient* students increased in sixth grade, the eighth grade scores reveal consistent improvements. As mentioned in the seventh grade analysis, improvement was noted when examining the sixth and seventh grade scores. This trend continues when analyzing the eighth grade scores across a three-year span.

In 2011, the district assessed 840 eighth grade students. From this group, 4% (n=34) of students scored as *partially proficient* on the Language Arts and Literacy evaluation. The students in the district outperform their peers statewide. At the school specific level, Community Middle School administered the test to 434 students in eighth grade. From this group, 4% (n=18) of students scored as *partially proficient*. Grover Middle School evaluated 408 students with 3% (n=13) of scores being identified as *partially proficient*. Three (3) students' scores reported at the district level, but were not assigned to one specific school. These scores are represented in the district data only. Figure 16 illustrates the eighth grade NJASK results for 2011.

During the 2010 school year, the district administered the NJASK to 773 eighth grade students. Similarly to 2011, only 4% (n=35) of students reported *partially proficient* scores. At the school level, Community Middle School assessed 402 students with 5% (n=20) of them indicating partial proficiency. Grover Middle school had a slightly smaller number with 371 students participating in the eighth grade NJASK in 2010. From this group, 4% (n=15) of students recorded scores in the *partially proficient* range. Figure 17 shows the 2010 NJASK scores for eighth grade students in the state, district, and at middle schools within the district.

The 2009 school year reveals similar results to those identified in 2010 and 2011. The district remains consistent in their levels of proficiency. Students continue to outperform their peers statewide on this assessment. In 2009, the district evaluated 794 students with only 4% (n=32) of these scores being *partially proficient*. At the state level, 19% of students were identified as *partially proficient*. The district outperforms the state each year studied. When examining school level scores, Community Middle School assessed 407 students with only 4% (n=16) of students identified as *partially proficient*. At Grover Middle School, 387 students participated in the NJASK assessment, and 4% (n=16) of this group scored in the *partially proficient* range. Figure 18 shows the 2009 results.

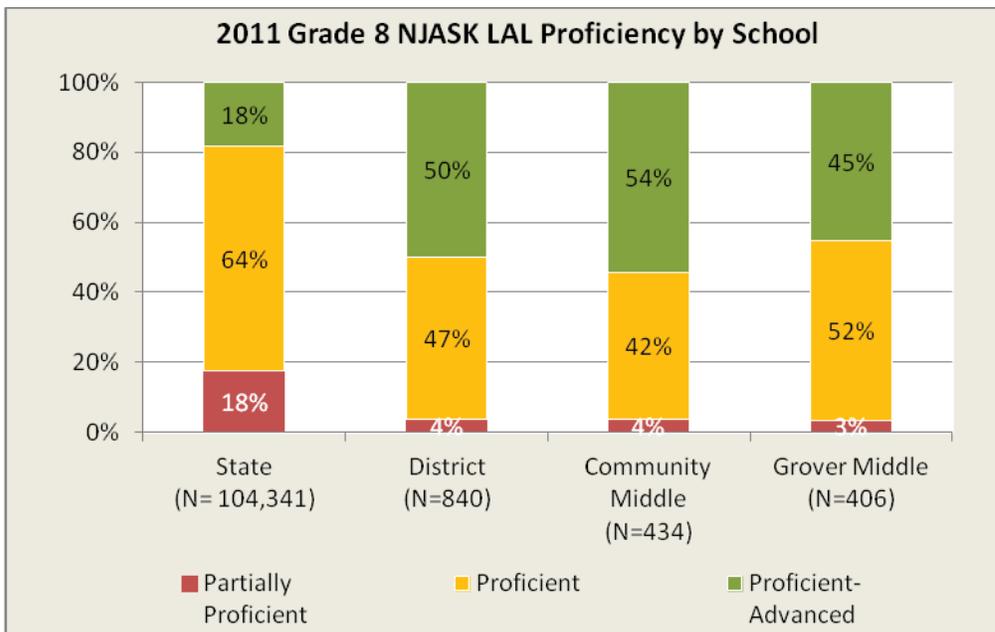


Figure 16. 2011 NJASK Grade 8 Results

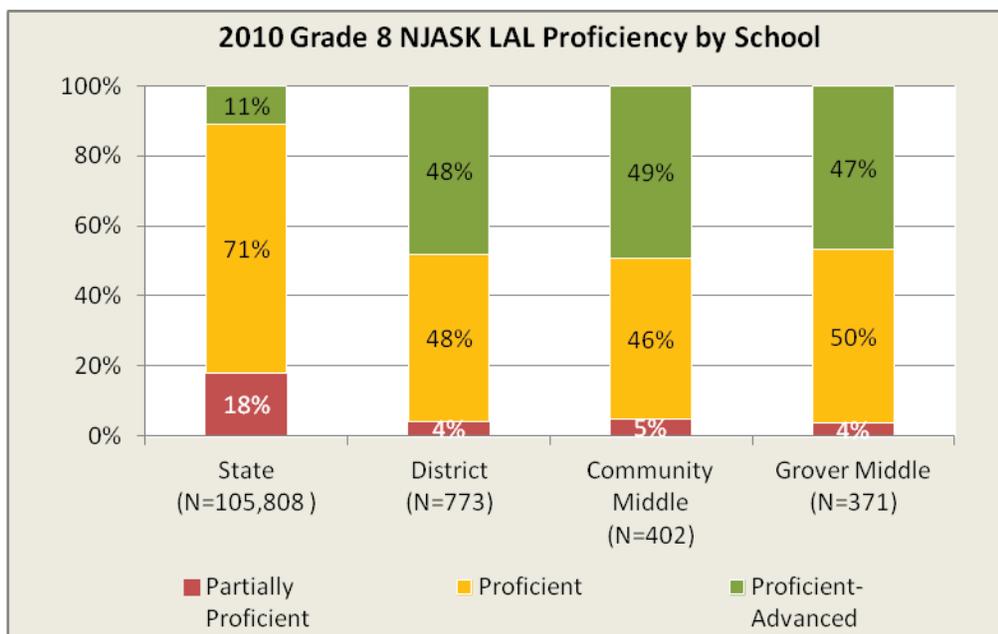


Figure 17. 2010 NJASK Grade 8 Results

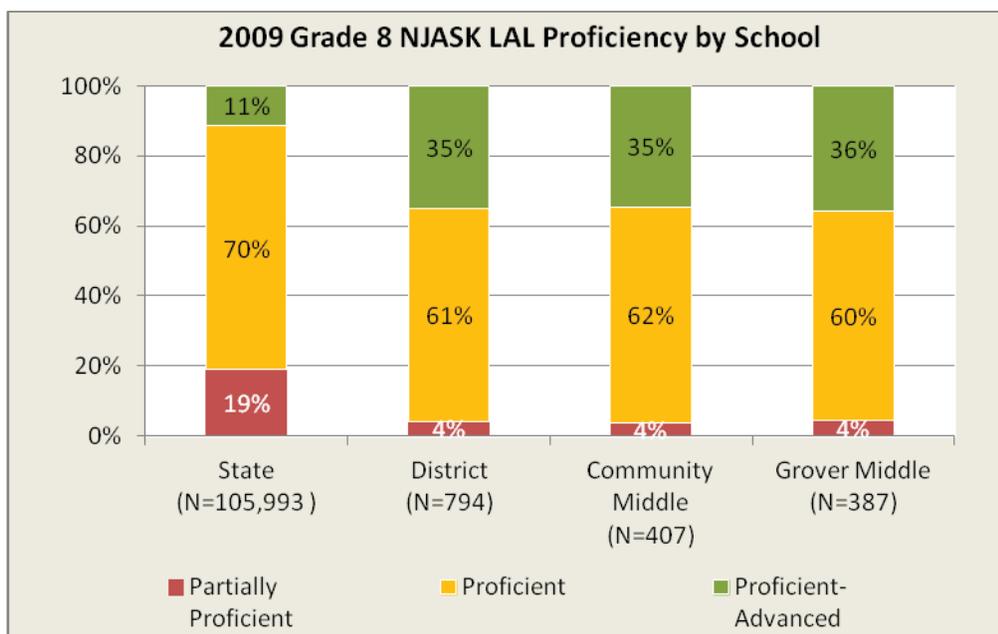


Figure 18. 2009 NJASK Grade 8 Results

Summary for Grades 3-8

The students in West Windsor-Plainsboro School District consistently outperform their peers statewide. The district reports higher numbers of *proficient* and *proficient/advanced* scores and lower percentages of students identified as *partially proficient*. While these are favorable results, there is a need to focus on the transition from fifth to sixth grades because of increased percentages of students that are *partially proficient* in grade six.

Additional information is needed to determine the cause of these scores, but examining features of the grades 5 and 6 instructional program provide a starting place. Looking at student placement and instructional strategies provide the district with important information about student progress over time.

It is also important to examine the 2012 scores to determine whether progress is sustained over time. In some instances, the district averages were on par with the state in 2009 with growth demonstrated in the years to follow. Ensuring the continuance of growth will be important to maintain student achievement over time. While the students in West Windsor-Plainsboro are achieving above state averages, it will behoove the district to examine carefully instructional practices and transitions between schools to ensure that there are no gaps in learning. This will help to ensure continued success.

High School Student Achievement Data

Grades 9–12

Students do not participate in state required testing in ninth and tenth grades. In eleventh grade, students take the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA) that assesses achievement in three areas: reading, writing, and mathematics. Students who do not pass the HSPA during their junior year receive remedial support and retake the assessment during their senior year. In addition to HSPA, Advanced Placement students can participate in the AP assessments to earn college credit. HSPA scores for 2009–2011 and AP English scores in Language Composition and Literature Composition for 2010 and 2011 will be analyzed in this section.

High School Proficiency Assessment

In 2011, High School North evaluated 405 students and High School South assessed 404 students. At each school, 3% (n=13) of the students scored as *partially proficient*. These students required additional remediation before taking the assessment again during their senior year. Those scores are not available at this time. At the state level, 11% of students taking the assessment scored as *partially proficient*. Both high schools outperformed the state averages. Figure 19 illustrates the scores for each high school in relation to the average state scores.

During the 2010 school year, both high schools recorded consistent results. High School North assessed 358 students with 3% (n=11) of this population identified as *partially proficient*. High School South evaluated a slightly larger population of 415 students with the same 3% (n=13) of students scoring as *partially proficient*. Both schools outperformed the state, where 11% of students identified as *partially proficient*. Figure 20 shows the HSPA data for 2010.

In 2009, the percentages of *partially proficient* students were slightly higher at both high schools. At High School North, 411 students took the HSPA examination and 7% (n=29) scored as *partially proficient*. High School South administered 392 assessments with 6% (n= 23) of participants identifying as *partially proficient*. Despite higher percentages, both school still outperformed their

peers statewide. At the state level, 16% of test participants identified as *partially proficient*. Figure 21 highlights the scores for each school and at the state level for the 2009 school year.

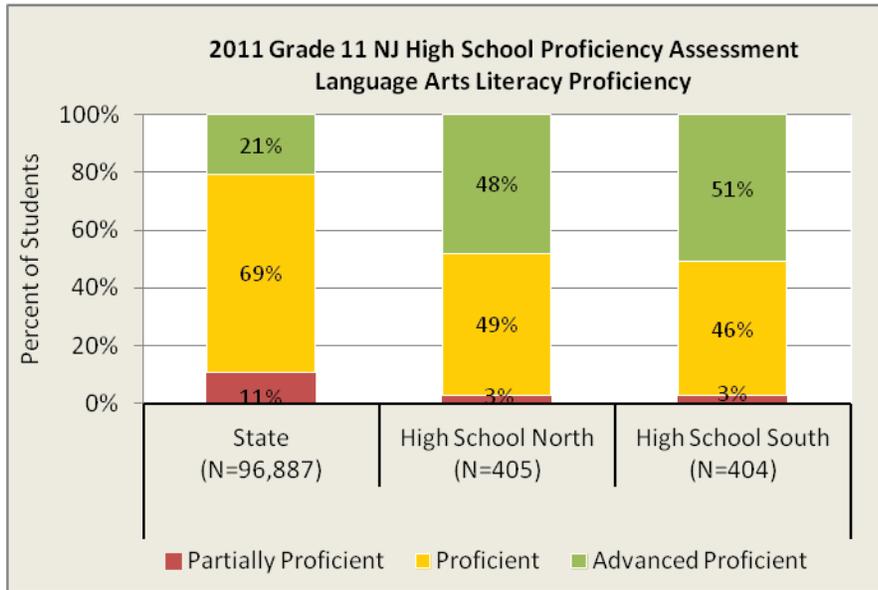


Figure 19. 2011 Grade 11 HSPA Results

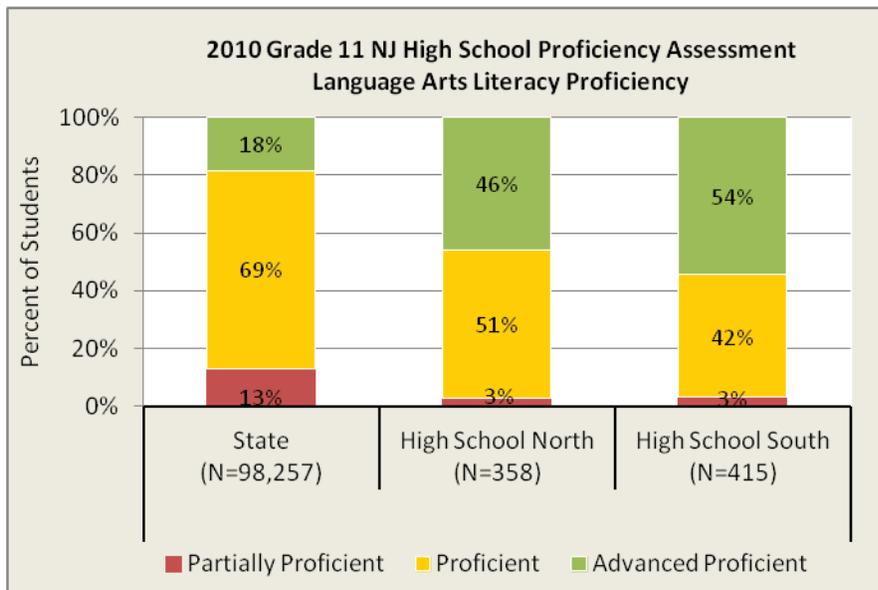


Figure 20. 2010 Grade 11 HSPA Results

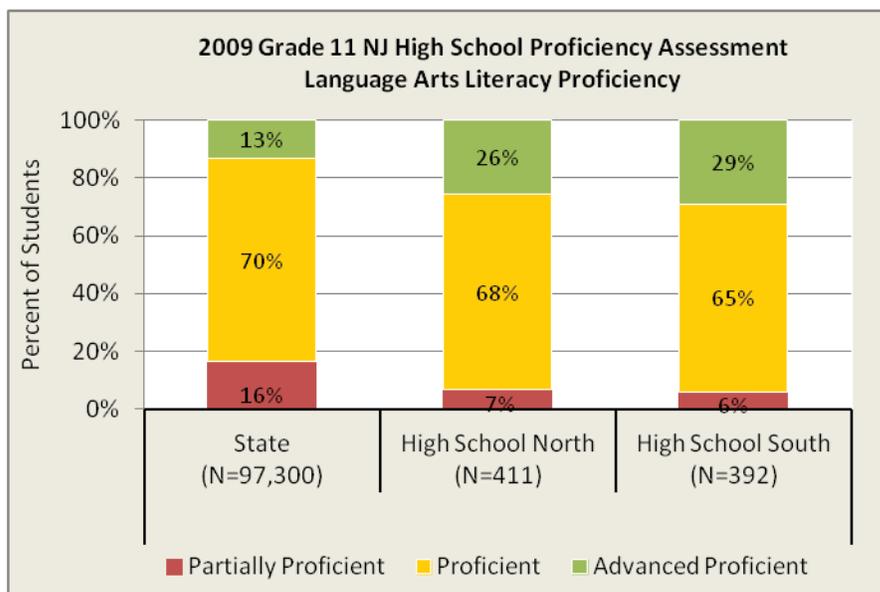


Figure 21. 2009 Grade 11 HSPA Results

Advanced Placement Assessments

Students may opt to participate in Advanced Placement classes if they meet the set requirements. In May, Advanced Placement assessments are administered in each subject area offered. Students scoring a three (3) or higher can potentially earn college credit for participating in the class and the assessment. Two AP assessments will be discussed in this report: English Language Composition and English Literature Composition.

The English Language Composition had greater participation than Literature Composition at both schools in 2010 and 2011. At High School South, 114 students participated in the 2011 AP examination. All but one student scored a three (3) or higher. In fact, 47% (n=54) scored a five (5) on the assessment, 39% (n=45) earned a four (4) and 12% (n=14) received a three (3). A smaller number of students participated in the assessment at High School North. During 2011, 70 students at North took the examination. From this group, all but one (1) student earned a three (3) or better. A total of 63% (n=44) of students earned a five (5), 27% (n=19) scored a four (4), and 9% (n=6) received a three (3).

In 2010, both schools had fewer students participate in the English Language Composition assessment. At High School South, 123 students elected to participate with only four (4) students (3%) earning a two (2). From this group 12% (n=15) of students earned a three (3), 33% (n=40) received a four (4), and 52% (n=64) achieved a score of five (5). High School North had fewer students participate, but comparable results. At North, 64 students completed the assessment in 2010. From this group, only one (1) student (2%) scored a two (2). From the remaining students, 11% (n=7) earned a three (3), 36% (n=23) of students earned a four (4), and 52% (n=33) achieved a five (5). Table 1 illustrates the scores for both 2010 and 2011 AP English Language Composition examination.

Table 1. 2010-2011 English Language Composition Advanced Placement Participation and Scores West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District, NJ										
2011										
	Average Score	Total Tested	5		4		3		2	
	#	#	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
High School South	4.333	114	54	47%	45	39%	14	12%	1	1%
High School North	4.514	70	44	63%	19	27%	6	9%	1	1%
2010										
High School South	4.333	123	64	52%	40	33%	15	12%	4	3%
High School North	4.375	64	33	52%	23	36%	7	11%	1	2%

Table 1. 2010–2011 English Language Composition AP Results

The high schools also offer English Literature Composition Advanced Placement assessment. Fewer students at both high schools participate in this course and examination. In 2011, only 30 students at High School South and 21 students at High School North participated in the examination. All students scored a three or higher at both schools. At South, 20% (n=6) of the group earned a three (3), 43% (n=13) scored a four (4), and 37% (n=11) achieved a five (5) on the 2011 examination. High School North had only one student (n=1) earn a three (3). The remaining students earned a four (62%, n=13) or a five (33%, n=7).

In 2010, both high schools recorded similar results. At High School South 33 students participated in the examination. All participants earned a three or above. From this group, 18% (n=6) earned a three (3), 33% (n=11) scored a four (4), and 48% (n=16) achieved a five (5). High School North administered 30 assessments in 2010. Only 3% (n=1) of participants earned a two (2). From the remaining students, 23% (n=7) scored a three (3), 43% (n=13) earned a four (4), and 30% (n=9) achieved a five (5). Table 2 illustrates the results for the 2011 and 2010 AP English Literature Composition Assessment.

Table 2. 2010-2011 English Literature Composition Advanced Placement Participation and Scores West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District, NJ										
2011										
	Average Score	Total Tested	5		4		3		2	
	#	#	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
High School South	4.167	30	11	37%	13	43%	6	20%	---	---
High School North	4.286	21	7	33%	13	62%	1	5%	---	---
2010										
High School South	4.303	33	16	48%	11	33%	6	18%	---	---
High School North	4.000	30	9	30%	13	43%	7	23%	1	3%

Table 2. 2010–2011 English Literature Composition AP Results

Themes

Curriculum and Instruction

Grades K–3

West Windsor-Plainsboro School District currently uses a workshop model adapted from Teachers College at Columbia University. This began as a voluntary, teacher-led initiative, but in recent years expanded to a districtwide requirement. The model, based on the work of Lucy Calkins, provides student-centered reading and writing instruction using mini-lessons, whole class learning opportunities such as read-alouds and independent practice. The workshop is represented in district curriculum documents and visible through classroom instruction.

Administrators and teachers in the K–3 schools spoke highly about the resources and opportunities provided by the workshop model. One principal said, *“I feel like my teachers breathe, eat, and live literacy. It’s so important to them.”* Teachers also recognized their collective dedication to literacy, especially around creating a common language. A teacher from Wicoff School noted, *“Our kids love to read and write. They really embrace it. They see themselves as readers and writers. That comes from our language and the language we use with them. They are excited about literacy because we are excited about it.”*

The workshop model is used consistently in kindergarten through third grade, across the four early elementary schools in the district. Several classroom visits revealed workshop focused instruction and practices. The student focus groups indicated that children select their own books based on their reading level. Students identified these books as “just right” books. Each student kept several “just right” books in personal bags or bins at their desk. While reading, students used methods such as post-its, turn and talk, and posed questions to one another. These skills, sometimes modeled by the classroom teacher, were infused into the reading instruction in many classrooms.

Teacher focus groups and administrative interviews indicated the workshop model became a districtwide precedent in recent years. Teachers infuse the workshop methods into their instruction with the support of their peers and administrators. One administrator said, *“We made using the workshop model a priority this year. We had to make sure it was clear for all of the teachers. Teachers look at the kids as readers and writers. They will address them as so.”* The teachers in Dutch Neck reinforced this sentiment saying, *“The literacy focus of the district is the workshop model. As a result of changes and the adoption of CCSS, it behooves us to make the workshop model work—use a common language.”* Another elementary teacher remarked, *“As a school we are finally coming to a place where we are all on the same page. We are now getting consistency with kids who have now all had workshop. We have a consistent language being used.”*

While the teachers supported the adoption of the workshop model, they also presented several concerns about its sustainability. The structure of the workshop model allows for whole group, small group, and individual instruction on a rotating basis. While the teachers indicated many benefits to

this approach, they also expressed concern about the feasibility of it with 27–30 students per classroom. Others indicated time constraints as a significant issue. One teacher noted, *“It is difficult to get to the reading workshop in depth and the writing workshop also.”* While some teachers mentioned infusing literacy into all subject areas, others felt neglectful of social studies, science, and other social aspects of education. One administrator remarked, *“Some of what we hear from the naysayers is that it is too prescriptive. We have to keep helping them to see their autonomy and their choices. What I should add is helping them to see how workshop could be interrelated with other subject areas.”* Teachers in kindergarten through third grade appeared to view reading and writing instruction in isolation from other content material.

Writing instruction based on the workshop model focuses on process, as well as product, but relies heavily on peer revision and editing. The mini lessons attempt to bridge instructional gaps, but elements of the writing process can go underdeveloped over time. One administrator recognized some of these gaps, but noted the importance of developing writing habits. She said, *“Sometimes the Type A comes out and we worry about grammar and punctuation, but now we have come into the vision of developing the love of writing, reading, and literacy as a whole. Get them into it first and then work from there.”* This sentiment is evident in classrooms throughout the district. Several visits demonstrated a love for reading and writing, with rich products displayed in hallways, classrooms, and offices; however, skills lessons based on the mechanics of writing were absent. A balanced literacy approach ideally addresses the technical aspect of writing along with the creative side.

Grades 4–5

The consistency of the workshop approach waned in fourth and fifth grade, depending upon the school and the individual classroom teachers. Interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations revealed that the culture of literacy varied greatly at each of the two upper elementary schools. One school firmly applied the workshop model and felt strongly about a balanced literacy approach. The other school recognized and acknowledged its challenges with the model, but continues to struggle with its application. This disparity creates different learning experiences for students in the district. While it may not surface as students attend the schools, it will certainly generate issues as students enter middle school. With two different sending schools, the middle school teachers expect a certain level of consistency from the curriculum and classroom instruction. While styles may vary by teacher, the content and the framework of instruction require consistency. This is a concern for the district to proactively address.

Two different school cultures exist at the fourth and fifth grade levels. One school administrator felt confident about literacy initiatives at the school. This principal noted, *“It’s a very strong culture in terms of a balanced literacy approach with the readers and writers workshop as a part of that. Teachers’ commitment to literacy is the greatest strength.”* The second school expressed different sentiments about the workshop model and literacy instruction, however, did note a positive shift. This leader commented, *“They understand that this is not optional. They all understand but their level of acceptance varies. There is a culture of fear in the building. There are people who are taken*

to task by their colleagues for participating in this work and support it. I think that is getting better. It is amazing compared to when I started." The principals both have a thorough understanding of their school environments. The levels of acceptance and participation in the readers and writers workshop varied by school. This was also evident in focus groups and in classroom observations.

Differentiation is a concern at both upper elementary schools. The teachers and the school leaders spoke about this as an area for development. In the school with an established culture of literacy, the principal spoke about differentiation as a way to increase teacher creativity as well as meeting individual student needs. This leader said, *"Teachers need to learn more about how to differentiate instruction within the writers/readers workshop. Thinking about, these are things I can do with my students, instead of worrying about 'staying within the lines'."* This was evident in classrooms as well, where several teachers were delivering the same instruction in the same way. This principal wants his teachers to express creativity within the curriculum. The need for differentiation focuses on instructional methods at this 4th–5th grade school. As teachers accept the workshop model, the need for differentiation increases, as does the use of appropriate strategies. The leader at the school recognizes that teachers do not yet understand the role of strategies. The principal commented, *"Some of our literacy instruction is more based on activities rather than direct skill and strategy instruction. Some small group instruction that goes on but not the amount we would like it to be. Differentiation is not at the level we would like. Some teachers still see it as a different level of worksheets."* Teachers see differentiation as something aside from the curriculum, not as different ways of delivering it. This is a topic for future professional development. Teachers need a foundation of understanding about differentiation, as well as opportunities to see it in action.

Classroom instruction primarily focused on whole class lessons or individual student work. In some cases students worked with a partner, but small groups were not seen often during the classroom visits. Principals also raised this issue during the interview process. One leader said, *"Very little small group instruction is going on. Very few teachers are focusing on skills and strategies in the classroom."* The use of the workshop model for reading and writing does not eliminate the need for strategies, but rather facilitates it. Ideally, the model promotes differentiation, including work with small groups and strategy instruction. This was not seen frequently during the classroom observations. Teachers were either engaged in the model to the upmost degree or only did aspects of the workshop, but either way, strategies were not used to support instruction.

The curriculum maps exist for teachers at this school. The curriculum specialists created the maps and sample lesson plans to align to the Common Core State Standards. The teachers and administrators mentioned these maps and their usefulness during focus groups and interviews. One teacher noted, *"We worked on the curriculum, it was completely aligned. I feel very comfortable knowing that it is covered. Each one of the units tells you which standards it is aligned to."* With the maps in place, the teachers can spend time working on differentiation, small group instruction, and using strategies. The maps are a guide, but still allow for teacher creativity and meeting the needs of students.

The upper elementary schools in the district each display a unique personality, style, and culture. These differences can be celebrated, while still maintaining consistency of curriculum and instruction. The workshop model was consistently implemented in the primary (K-3) schools, but not in upper elementary (4-5) schools. Students at each school and in some instances each classroom, are experiencing literacy differently. If uncorrected, this will become an issue as students transition to middle school. The student achievement data also supports this notion. The data reveals an increase in the number of *partially proficient* students moving from fifth to sixth grade. This could be due to the inconsistency of literacy instruction in the upper elementary schools. The district has an opportunity to realign the instruction in the two 4th-5th grade schools. If the workshop model is desired, then all teachers, school administrators, and district administrators need to support it.

Grades 6-8

The workshop model disbands at the middle school level. There are vast inconsistencies in how and if the model is implemented. Interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations reveal this trend clearly. Teachers either spoke in favor of the model or disputed its effectiveness at the middle school level. Regardless of their opinions, teachers are not implementing the model with fidelity. One teacher noted, *"We use most of the Columbia model. We tweak the model because we find it successful with the writing. We find it less successful with the reading. We believe in whole class novels. We start with a whole class novel and teach skills from it."* Another teacher added, *"I like the workshop but we take bits and pieces that work. We make it our own. We take from different models to see what works."* The teachers questioned the applicability of the model in middle school. The school administrators expressed frustration with trying to support teachers in implementing the model. A principal said, *"The key things that came out in our last principals training with teachers college include the battles we have had around the workshop model. We need more support from central office to say this is not an option. Teachers have been given permission to do what they want. It (the workshop model) has to be mandatory."* Despite the curriculum currently in place, teachers choose topics to teach, such as whole class novels, outside of the workshop model. This presents issues with vertical alignment within the district.

Curriculum discussion revolved around the issue of whether or not to include whole class novels in middle school. This was a point of contention between educators and administrators. The school leaders spoke about meeting the needs of all learners through the workshop model versus whole class instruction. One principal commented, *"With the workshop model you have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. Whole class novel is comfortable, but as soon as you do the whole class novel then everyone goes to plot. We need to move well beyond that. You aren't teaching the book, you are teaching the skills."* The administrator at the second middle school made similar remarks. This leader said, *"What concerns me the most is teacher conversations are very 'I' centered verses on what children need. 'I want to do this novel because I love it.' If I look at our high students, they aren't given the permission to take risks. The middle of the road students get lost in the shuffle. Our low students are failing."* One leader mentioned trying to eliminate the whole class novel, but failed due to resistance from the teachers union. As a result, the teachers are not implementing one

consistent model throughout middle school. Some teachers are using whole class novels, others are using parts of the workshop model but not all, and few others are using the full model. Student experiences differ greatly based on their teacher assignment. This is a significant concern for the district to address.

Differences also exist when examining writing instruction. The teachers raised several issues with the workshop model. Interviews and focus groups with teachers, parents, and administrators indicated frustration with the lack of grammar instruction within the model. One teacher said, *"They don't know what nouns are or what verbs are. The previous instruction was inconsistent. The kids don't retain it. It is the drive-by grammar approach so they don't retain that from year to year if they are even getting it."* Many teachers reported attempting to use the workshop model, but struggled with completing the curriculum and its requirements within the given structure. Another teacher noted, *"Time is the key. I have a very difficult time fitting everything in. When things were consolidated, nothing was dropped and it is hard to cover everything."* The administration acknowledges the importance of writing and the commitment teachers demonstrate to the process, yet, also recognize the inconsistencies within the system. One middle school leader said, *"We also have a culture that values writing. I don't know if the students value it as much as the teachers. We write in all classrooms. Inconsistency and incongruity are the biggest issues for us. We don't teacher all of the skills they need to do the writing."* All participants agree that writing instruction, in its current form, is inconsistent and poses a concern for vertical alignment. When teachers approach the writing process differently, the expectations across content areas are unclear to students. One administrator recognized this challenge. This principal noted, *"There is a distinct line being drawn. You write one way for ELA and then all of the rules fly out the window for the other subjects."* These instructional divides will make emphasizing literacy skills in the content areas difficult for teachers and students. Clear expectations and agreed upon methods will facilitate successful writing instruction.

Aside from the structure of writing instruction, administrators also spoke about the craft of writing and the lack of creativity seen in the middle schools. School leaders mentioned "cookie cutter" writing instruction several times throughout the interview process. One leader even commented, *"It (writing instruction) is based on the overall structure of the five paragraph essay. It looks cookie cutter. In some places it is actually demanded. Composition risks are not celebrated."* The teachers agreed that writing should be about the process, not the product. One educator said, *"The process is much more important than the final product. That's the writing instruction."* When asked to clarify, the process referred to creating the five paragraph essay. There is a disconnect between what teachers expect students to know and be able to do and what administrators expect from writing instruction. These differences require clarification for consistency to evolve.

Time arose as an issue throughout the data collection process. Teachers indicated that English/language arts instruction lasted only 57 minutes and included both reading and writing. Both faculties indicated time as a constraining factor. One teacher mentioned, *"There's not enough time to get through the curriculum and the units expected and still reach every student. We try. We are told it is a priority, but it's not."* Many indicated having to make difficult decisions about what to

keep and what to drop from the curriculum. The administrators, while sympathetic, took a proactive stance on the issue of time. One leader said, *“The teachers would say the weakness is time. I would argue that if we don’t have enough time then we need to teach what is most important. Let’s make a curriculum that fits the timeframe we do have. I want to hear this is what we do have time for.”*

While scheduling is a challenge at every school, the district can examine current structures in place at the middle schools and at the high schools. Many high schools rely on block scheduling, which challenges students making the transition from shorter middle school classes. Providing a double block for English/language arts in middle school will assist students when making the transition to high school, and will provide teachers with additional instructional time. The district can examine its current structures to allow for this opportunity.

While the NJASK scores steadily improve from sixth to eighth grade, it will behoove the district to eliminate inconsistencies within the curriculum and classroom instruction. This will help to eliminate any possible gaps in student achievement and will allow the schools to make continual gains.

Grades 9–12

Several issues arose when examining curriculum and instructional practices in the two district high schools. Focus groups, classroom observations, interviews, document reviews, and the school information checklists provided information to support these concerns. At the high school level, teachers no longer use the writer’s or reader’s workshop model. Instead, English teachers rely on traditional, whole class instruction to teach novels, short stories, the five paragraph essay, and other related topics. Classes are leveled and contain homogeneous groupings. Students are either assigned to “college bound,” “honors” or “Advanced Placement” classes. Participants indicated that when the district eliminated “basic skills” classes that “college bound” courses are now considered the new basic level.

The data sources indicated a difference in beliefs about the success of English instruction at the high school level. In administrative interviews, the leaders spoke about high student achievement, particularly around writing. They credited this success to earlier preparation with the writer’s workshop. One principal remarked, *“They are good writers. We are starting to see products of the Columbia workshop. We are really seeing much stronger writers.”* Another leader shared this sentiment, saying, *“Our strength is our teaching of the writing process. Our kids come back every year when they go to the most selective schools in the country that they are extremely well prepared for writing at the college level. Not just the AP kids but across the curriculum.”* The principals spoke highly of the writing instruction occurring in English classes.

The teachers labeled writing instruction as rigid and time consuming due to vast deficiencies among students. One educator said, *“We spend a lot of time on analysis and we don’t allow kids to see the joy of writing.”* Another commented, *“Some kids understand the function of the essay and the parts, but others do not. I offer writing conferences to support these students, but it assumes the child has an interest and wants to improve. I put the onus on them, and I worry because I don’t think everyone is covered.”* Participants at both schools indicated the lack of creative writing and the intense focus

on the five paragraph essay. Upon further inquiry, the teachers require students to complete all writing in class. No outside writing assignments are accepted in English classes. Students have a limited amount of time to write, edit, and revise their piece. The policy allows them to complete an outline with quotes ahead of time, but no actual drafts are allowed. All writing must be completed in class.

Student participants in both focus groups outlined concerns with the “in-class only” writing policy. None of the comments indicated complaint about the amount or the types of writing, but instead focused on the writing process and the current in class policy. One student said, *“One of the main issues is that it is almost all in class writing. With this type of writing, the teacher doesn’t get to see your expanded writing after editing or revision. It’s what you can do in one hour. It doesn’t show the range of your ability or what you can do. That bothers me.”* The student discussed the growth writing takes after revision and editing. Another student remarked, *“It is difficult to do this type of speed writing...you don’t have the time to think about your work. You just hope you have enough time to write and hope that your thesis works. You don’t get to show your true writing skills.”* This student acknowledged that these skills could be useful when taking standardized tests, such as the AP exam, but not for other writing tasks. Students also commented on receiving little to no feedback on their writing, just a grade on each piece.

The English courses offered are a full year for freshman and sophomore students, but one semester in length for juniors and seniors. This model generated a lot of discussion and criticism from teachers and students alike. One teacher said, *“Semester classes are not giving kids what we used to be able to give them in a full year experience. We can’t do what we used to be able to do. The expectations and the performance have gone down.”* Educators also spoke about having to “rush through” materials versus go in depth for the sake of coverage in these shortened classes. Students expressed the same level of unpreparedness. One girl remarked, *“If you just take semester classes then you get out of practice and you are screwed when you get to college. Writing is more than an art than a science. I don’t feel like we were ever really taught how to write. It was always just the same five paragraph essay. I feel like every single essay is the same, but just different content.”* Another student spoke about the imbalance of reading and writing in the semester long classes. He said, *“The semester courses do a lot more reading, less writing. You get out of practice in those classes.”* The length of courses for junior and senior appear insufficient to meet the needs of these students.

The Common Core State Standards will shift the current curriculum with the inclusion of new texts and higher level skills. One administrator indicated the school was taking proactive steps to introduce new texts, ones sensitive to the diverse population. The principal noted, *“We are not a ‘dead white guys’ curriculum and it reflects the kids we have in class. It is very important for our population to see that white people aren’t the only ones who wrote something worth reading.”* While the resource section of this report illustrated difficulties with acquiring new texts, the schools appear aware of this issue and indicated they are working to rectify it. Some teachers indicated concern about eliminating all canonical texts, but most agreed that a balance of new texts and the classics was the most effective.

One of the major concerns for parents and teachers in the district was inconsistency among instructional practices and curriculum coverage. Teachers spoke honestly about having to make crucial curricular decisions to support the needs of students. Many indicated having to remediate certain skills when students entered their class. One teacher noted, *“We find they are lacking in preparation so we try to copy things down and break things up for them. We are teaching them how to read—noticing patterns, holding them accountable for reading, and taking notes. We almost do daily quizzes because they are not reading closely enough. They have to get used to it or they don’t do well.”* The teachers noted inconsistencies throughout the system, culminating in remediation skills needed in high school.

Parents focused on two concerns in particular; preparation for the NJASK assessment in lieu of other curriculum and inconsistencies between teachers and expectations. The high school parent focus group made several comments about the focus on NJASK preparations. One parent said, *“If I had to give an overarching message, let’s not have a curriculum based on passing the NJASK; let’s teach them how to be effective readers, writers, and communicators.”* This drew a brief round of applause. Other parents mentioned they hired outside tutors to *“fill in the gaps”* while others started neighborhood book clubs to facilitate discussions. The participants gave several examples of outside supports used to supplement school-based instruction. This led to comments about the inconsistency of classroom experiences throughout the district. Numerous parents contributed to the discussion, but one comment stood out as particularly poignant. This parent said, *“I am not the only parent in the district who feels as though the quality of her children’s language arts training was a matter of luck more than the program; one teacher would focus on skills, while another teacher in the same course would ignore skills, teach half the texts and spend class time showing endless films.”* While teaching styles will always differ, the core content of the courses should not. Curriculum maps, aligned to the Common Core State Standards, will guide the district in establishing consistency across schools, courses, and teachers.

Resources for Struggling Learners

Grades K-3

The West Windsor-Plainsboro School District addresses the needs of struggling learners through formalized special education services, as well as providing informal measures to ensure student success. The support for struggling students begins in kindergarten where students are monitored for reading difficulties or deficits. Once identified, student cases are presented to an internal committee for further review. Each school uses their own system to track student progress, which became an identified concern for the district to consider. There are no consistent measures or benchmarks across schools to demonstrate need or progress. Each school uses its own criteria for determining referrals to the internal committee and the resulting actions. One administrator remarked, *“We have interventions in place—what we refer to as INRS Intervention and Referral Services. The committee meets and tries to offer suggestions and interventions for each student presented.”* While this system is in place at each K-3 school, the procedures for use are inconsistent.

Reading Recovery is in place at each K–3 school in the district. Students identified in first grade received these services. Some schools also outlined a transitional system to ease students out of the program and into second grade to ensure support. First grade teachers feel supported by this program; however, kindergarten teachers do not feel similarly. One teacher remarked, *“We have 2.5 reading recovery teachers and other buildings have 3.0. We now have an at-risk population. Kindergarten does not get support. We have half-day kindergarten with no more supplemental aide. They are taking away our literacy resources.”* Administrators all indicated the importance of Reading Recovery, yet also recognized possible limitations. One principal spoke about the need for a heightened awareness among teachers to better address the needs of struggling students. This leader commented, *“I think also there is a shift happening where teachers used to feel where there was basal readers or reading recovery, then they didn’t have to be as concerned with struggling readers. This is an area that we continue to focus on.”* The goal of effective instruction is to provide appropriate support for all students.

Teachers and administrators in the district, specifically at the K–3 schools, mentioned the need to identify and support students outside of the special education system. Average, non-identified students also necessitate support to increase academic achievement. The schools serve a high functioning group of students, so identifying struggling students and providing the right support is crucial. One principal remarked how this impacts instruction and decision making in the district. She said, *“It is hard for us. Sometimes we lose sight of what an average kid looks like in this district. We have so many kids working at a high level.”* Many teachers also identified this as a concern and indicated that “average” students often go unrecognized, and as a result, are under-supported. One teacher noted, *“I have a lot of struggling readers and writers and with the pressure of having to get to everything; it isn’t always fair to the kids. There is too much of a push. The teachers need some flexibility to decide what is best for the students, deciding when to move on and how to pace the units.”* Providing the right level of support for all students will facilitate increased student achievement.

Many of the supports identified by teachers, administrators, and district personnel focused solely on reading, but neglected writing. This arose as an issue for the district to consider moving forward. As students progress through the grades, writing becomes more prevalent in both instruction and assessment. Providing support to develop writing skills, even in the younger grades, will facilitate higher-level thinking, content development, and increased student achievement. One administrator recognized the gap in services. This principal noted, *“There are supports for reading, but really none for writing. This has always been an issue.”* Teachers also highlighted the disparity between support for reading and support for writing. This teacher said, *“One thing we often talk about is writing. We have pull out for reading, but not for writing...especially for our ESL students. It is very difficult for them.”* This statement can be extended to include all students, not just English Language Learners. Balanced literacy includes adequate support for both reading and writing for all students, not just those with special designations.

Grades 4–5

The upper elementary schools have fewer structural supports in place for struggling learners. Instead, teachers and administrators work to provide support when possible within the classroom. Both schools identified this as an ongoing problem to address. During the focus group sessions, teachers expressed great concern about the rising number of struggling students, including those who speak English as a second language, yet no increase in the number of services provided. One teacher said, *“The struggling students have less of a voice because their parents are unaware. The struggling students are growing but the support hasn’t.”* Each school takes their own approach to placing and supporting struggling students, which complicates the transition process when students articulate to middle school.

Teachers feel generally unprepared to work with struggling learners. Administrators recognize their concerns, but are unsure of how to support the teachers. One principal noted, *“One issue has to do with our teachers’ professional development. They have not been given the tools that they need to work with struggling learners. We tend to blame the student. We classify them and send them off. We don’t know what to do with them.”* Many people spoke about struggling learners as classified, special education students. Not all struggling learners will qualify for special education, and in fact, many students only need short-term support. The following statement from a teacher illustrates this point well. She said:

The students who are really struggling are also not getting the home support they need. We have a large number of ESL students. At home, the original language is spoken and this makes it difficult for the student to gain ground. They end up getting lost because they don’t qualify for services. Even some of the students who don’t struggle are caught in the cross hairs because they lack background knowledge, syntax, and vocabulary. It is hard to duplicate that experience.

While some English as a Second Language (ESL) students will require formal services to acquire language proficiency, not all need to be referred for outside assistance. Instead, teachers can use differentiated instruction with supporting strategies to help these students gain the experiences they lack. Teachers also need additional support through professional development to meet the needs of these students. Administrators recognize the need, but are unsure of how to better support their teachers. One leader said, *“The thing that frustrates us the most is the quality of instruction that our neediest students are getting. Most of it boils down to a PD issue.”* Providing targeted, ongoing professional development will assist teachers in making positive instructional changes.

Both schools mentioned a committee to identify and support struggling students, but teachers are not invited to participate in the process. The committees include the principals or assistant principals, the guidance counselor, and a special educator or specialist. The teachers expressed frustration about the process used by the committee to discuss students. Many teachers are reluctant to refer students because they are not invited to participate. One teacher commented, *“There is a struggling students committee—it is a paid position, however, no teachers are involved in*

this. No records kept and there is no form to fill out. They bring names up but the teacher is not invited to present about this student.” These committees also exist in the primary schools, but with a more inclusive process. Establishing a districtwide protocol for this type of committee will allow all stakeholders to have a voice, increase familiarity with the process, and provide more inclusive support for students. One administrator summarized this well, saying, *“We all need to be more equipped to address the needs of our struggling learners.”*

Grades 6–8

As students progress through the grade levels, the supports for struggling learners become fewer and fewer. As mandated by law, identified students on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) receive services determined by need. Non-identified, struggling students do not receive the same benefit. The middle school information checklists, interviews, and focus groups revealed limited available services for struggling learners in the district at this level.

Teachers identified the lack of support services for struggling learners a major concern, particularly at the middle school level. One educator said, *“The upper administration took out basic skills because students in the district didn’t need it. They have it in elementary school, but then they get to middle school and they have nothing. Teachers feel unqualified to help these students because they are from secondary programs, which don’t teach pre-service teachers to assess reading skills or teach kids to actually read.”* This sentiment was shared and acknowledged by many in attendance. The administrators at the schools saw this as an opportunity to differentiate instruction using strategies and the workshop model.

Interviews with the leadership teams at each school revealed a very different philosophy about struggling learners. One principal noted the abilities of the teachers at the school, saying that the classroom teachers know the students the best. This leader said, *“I don’t believe any pull out can be as successful as the classroom teacher setting the right expectations.”* The principal also noted that teachers became accustomed to not having struggling students in class, which set a negative precedent. The principal commented, *“They used to have special skills classes so teachers did not have struggling students in their class. Now that they have these students, they think we are changing. The program used to be based on what teachers want, not based on what students need.”* Several teachers did indicate they believed the district population was changing to include a greater number of struggling students, including ESL learners.

The classroom teachers expressed frustration about the lack of support and resources for struggling learners. Teachers spoke about identifying and supporting these students on their own. One said, *“Nothing is currently in place to support struggling students, not identified by the IEP system. We meet with these students individually. We can also find books at lower levels, but this is also on us to do. You have to pick who needs you the most, because you don’t have as much time to do individual instruction.”* Another teacher remarked that even average students are considered struggling in a district with extremely high standards. These students, although average, are left behind. She said, *“These middle of the road kids do not get the support they need. Now these kids are getting much*

lower grades and you have to fill the gaps in. They aren't really prepared to keep up with the established pace. Parents get private tutors. It is rampant in this district." Administrators responded to this concern. One principal said, *"Some students are 'district impaired'. Meaning if they come from any place but here then they do not meet our standards. Teachers are not meeting the children where they are. It is focused on what we have always done instead of what kids need. Skills need to apply across the board."* Skill instruction is needed to support struggling students, average or not. Providing true differentiated instruction will also provide challenging content to students, regardless of their ability. While the administrators acknowledge the need for skills instruction, the teachers need resources and support to implement it.

Grades 9-12

Data sources indicated minimal support services for struggling students at the high school level. Special education students continue to receive mandated support, but "average" students who struggle are often "left behind" when they reach high school. Teachers, administrators, parents, and students indicated this as a concern for the district to address. Each school approaches the needs of struggling learners in their own way, but both agree there is not enough support for these students.

One school spoke openly about their challenges with providing services for struggling learners, especially students identified as English Language Learners. During a recent program review for the ESL program, the school was cited for providing too much exclusionary support. The principal said, *"When we went through our ESL program review, we provide an enormous amount of support for these students. Almost too much—we shelter them. We were told the model is not the ideal. Every mainstream teacher should address the needs of these ESL students. Something we thought we were doing so so well, it was to the detriment of the students."* The school has since made changes to include ESL students in mainstream classes sooner. Although this change occurred, teachers were not prepared to meet the language needs of these students. One teacher referenced using technology to support these students, as well as other struggling students. She said, *"I encourage kids to download the books on i-tunes and they listen to it as they read. You can also go to you tube and do this. This allows them to hear the difficult texts read aloud. This gives them access to it."* In general, teachers felt unprepared to meet the needs of these students.

This school also spoke about the academic challenges and the consequences for "average" students. The teachers identified the special education and AP programs as strengths, yet worried about the students outside of these areas. One noted, *"We have a phenomenal special education program and we have a phenomenal program for AP. My concern is for the kids in the middle. The kids who in any other high school would be perfectly fine, are struggling here because we are so high level and competitive. The culture in the school is very much competitive."* When asked how the school supports the students in the middle, teachers mentioned several programs no longer in existence. Several people mentioned "academic express," a resource room program that supported non-special education students during study halls. This program was cut due to budgetary and contractual constraints. No one could identify current supports for students not identified by special education.

The second high school in the district agreed that services for struggling learners fell short. Administrators at the school acknowledge the need for additional services, yet feel unsure of how to provide these. One leader said, *“One of the things financially, where we are hurting are interventions for the struggling, yet regular students. The student tutors are volunteers, no training is provided to them.”* While student tutoring can have a positive impact on academic achievement, it cannot be the only intervention available for struggling learners. The teachers expressed strong frustration about the lack of services. One said, *“Kids with the lowest grades are not classified students. The IEP students get support but the non-classified students are not. What about the typical kid? When a kid moves into the district, they go in front of the student needs committee because they need support to enter this school. They lack the prior skills and prior knowledge. Kids and teachers are left on their own to survive.”* Another teacher noted that some struggling learners opt to drop out rather than struggle. She said, *“I had two kids who dropped out of school because they weren’t getting support they need. They could have used a basic skills program to address their needs.”* Some teachers concurred with this statement and spoke about developing bitter feelings. One in particular mentioned, *“When you give all of this support you almost don’t want to be helpful because kids get pushed too hard. It took a lot of teacher effort to get the student to a successful place, but then they are pushed to an even higher level. This defeats the purpose.”* Teachers in this group felt defeated.

Both schools identified contractual constraints as limiting factors in providing the necessary support services for students. The administrators shared creative solutions to providing support, but named the teacher contract as the barrier preventing this progress. One said, *“I think we need an intervention for the regular education students struggling with some aspect of literacy. I think we can provide it but I think right now the roadblocks to it are contractual.”* In a time of budget limitations and increasing standards, schools need to find creative solutions to meet their needs. These administrators need teacher support to make this happen.

Assessment and Data Use

Grades K–3

The primary elementary schools in the district use the same assessment with all students. The schools administer the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) at least twice, sometimes three times each year. Teachers use the scores for group placement and progress monitoring over time. At the end of the year, assessment information is informally passed from one teacher to the next. When students get to the third grade, many teachers also use the Columbia Quick assessment, although this is not consistent at every school. Some teachers introduce students to the Columbia Quick, because it is used in fourth and fifth grade in place of the DRA.

Several administrators commented on the importance of the DRA data collected each year. One said, *“We use the DRA’s from K–3. We require the teachers to do this in the fall and the spring. It is looked at for placement purposes. We want teachers to help students move up based on their data.”* This administrator recognized the ongoing value of assessments—to help students improve. Yet, this arose as a major theme across interviews and focus groups. This principal noted, *“The use of use of*

data is something we need to continue to work on in terms of informing instruction. Looking at more formal data—how do we meet kids needs?” Several groups of teachers also identified this as an area for improvement. Teachers understand the need for using assessment to guide instruction, but feel overwhelmed by the time constraints of it. Using assessment to guide instruction is the ultimate goal, as to provide students with appropriate, targeted experiences. Yet, teachers often have limited time to even examine their standardized scores. One teacher mentioned, *“We need to look beyond just the NJASK scores. This is all concept at this point. There isn’t enough time to look at all of this.”* When fully supported, data use becomes part of the culture. Assessments are given, but resulting actions are limited. The district is not currently facilitating data use effectively or consistently.

Teachers also recognized the need for common assessments, but have not taken formal steps to create or implement these. One school mentioned the use of common assessments at one particular grade level, but this was not consistent even throughout the same school. The administrator of this school said, *“We have some common assessments, but this is not formalized yet.”* Common assessments can serve as an important element of the assessment framework. These measures can be used to inform instruction and increase consistency across classrooms.

Classroom observations identified a lot of test preparation occurring in third grade. While preparation is important, such as reviewing test taking skills, giving reminders, and outlining testing techniques, it can also take away valuable time from the curriculum. The state assessments are designed to measure skills acquired over time, so if teachers are addressing these skills regularly, then additional preparation will not be required. The summative assessments are only one measure of student achievement.

Grades 4-5

The upper elementary schools use a range of assessments including the Gates MacGinitie and the Columbia Quick assessment. The schools also administer the NJASK in both fourth and fifth grades. Some teachers use additional measures such as running records to track student progress, however, this is not consistent. Two common themes emerged from interviews and focus groups around assessment and data use. In general, teachers do not use data regularly or effectively to impact instructional practices. In addition, the assessments used are not diverse, therefore not providing teachers with the information necessary to make instructional decisions. These issues are interconnected, and without correction will limit student achievement.

Both schools expressed concerns about the collection and use of student data. Administrators mentioned concern about the involvement of the teachers union. One noted, *“One thing that I would like to see improved is a more formalized data collection. The biggest obstacle to that is the teachers union. It would have to be something that comes from Central Office.”* When teachers use data to inform instruction or to make student placement decisions, then these actions will benefit everyone, and should not pose a concern to the union. Some resistance was noted around the teachers’ willingness to collect data and use the recommended assessments to track progress.

Another leader said, *“Many teachers indicated that they didn’t do the assessments, but instead just wrote down levels. Or they just turned in September’s data because they didn’t want to do it. We asked them to do it three times this year. I crunch the numbers and tag kids who have not made progress or who look to be a concern. I try to do this in a coaching capacity.”* Formalizing data collection makes the practice an expectation, not an option. Creating a safe culture of data use will be important moving forward.

The types of data being collected also posed concerns for teachers and administrators. Currently, the available data include NJASK results, Gates MacGinitie scores, and Columbia Quick levels. These measures provide one look into a student’s ability. One principal keenly noted, *“I would like to be able to see growth over the course of the year. We have snapshots right now, not movies. We need more movies. Right now we only have NJ state data, but not schoolwide data.”* Teachers become engrossed by the NJASK scores and place great importance on this measure. One school leader commented, *“We rely on NJASK data for everything—programs, support services, grouping etc. Many teachers talk about students as walking NJASK members.”* This measure is just one picture of student achievement. Additional professional development is needed to familiarize teachers and administrators with the different types of assessments, their uses, and how to build a consistent assessment framework.

In addition to summative measures, teachers also need to collect ongoing data from formative assessments. Teachers appear unfamiliar with the use of ongoing formative assessments, as they mainly discussed summative measures as the way in which they use data. Both schools identified this as an issue to address. One principal said, *“I don’t think our teachers understand formative assessment in general. Our teachers think of assessment as paper and pencil. I have not seen so much of this type of assessment in elementary school. I was shocked to see a test and a quiz in the same classroom in 4th grade.”* Creating common assessments and examining student work were goals identified by both groups of teachers and both building principals. These goals will support the use of formative assessments, but cannot be stand alone efforts. The common assessments must extend beyond the walls of each school building and be implemented regularly districtwide.

Grades 6–8

Two common themes emerged from the middle school data sources; fear of judgment and grading versus assessment. The use of data is not a frequent practice in the middle schools, as indicated by the interviews with administrators and the focus groups with teachers. Teachers were hesitant to speak about the use of data and most often changed the subject to student grading practices. This became a pressing issue for educators, whereas the administrators acknowledged the importance of using data to inform decision making and instructional practices.

The school principals recognized the lack of a strong culture of data use at their schools. One leader said, *“There is a fear factor and fear of judgment. We don’t use a whole lot of data. We have data but teachers claim they don’t have time to use it. Most of it is informal use.”* This administrator understood the use of data well and spoke about the misunderstandings among teachers. He said,

"We don't use data as much as we should. Data doesn't give you answers. It allows you to ask more questions. They think data gives answers. Data means that you have to change. They are very fearful of change." There was a reluctance to discuss data among teachers in the focus groups. The administrators' comments explained the hesitation well. Many teachers present saw data as something used for comparison purposes, instead of to inform purposeful instruction. For data use to successfully emerge in the middle schools, the leaders need to shift the culture to establish a safe place for data use and discussion.

The issue of grading versus assessment arose during several focus groups. Many teachers commented about the focus on grades from students and parents. Instead of seeing assessment as an opportunity to learn and grow, students see it as a way to earn points or a specific grade. One educator noted, *"Everything is about the grade. It is point driven. It is not about what I will use for the future. It's scary. It takes away the real point of doing everything."* In some cases, the administrators interchangeably used assessment with grading. One said, *"The assessment piece is 100% inconsistent. At each grade level we are grading on what projects we have with no consistency. They were told the set percentages for each class, but this is new. Within these categories the tasks students do are not consistent."* Teachers and administrators need to understand the purpose of assessment, which is to provide authentic feedback to students to guide the instructional process. While grades are a part of school, these cannot be confused with assessment. Assessment is about feedback. Grades are one singular measure and do not give feedback.

One of the middle school leaders acknowledged the need for assessments and feedback, especially around writing. This was also a major concern for parents that was raised several times during the evening focus groups. One principal said, *"In terms of student writing, there isn't as much feedback given to kids about their work. Not true in 100% of classes but we hear it from parents. Teachers wait to give feedback until the end of the process or rubrics at the end, but not until then."* Students require feedback throughout the process in order to guide the instruction and to make noted improvements. The rubrics used in schools currently focus on assigning students a grade, not on giving feedback. One leader remarked, *"The rubrics we use are also not consistent. The teachers cannot look at student work and determine student expectations."* The parents also mentioned the inconsistencies with the rubrics but had other concerns about the assessment process. Several parents expressed concerns about the use of peer feedback in lieu of teacher feedback throughout the writing process. One parent noted, *"The thing that concerns me is that in the classroom, I am sure there is conversation about introductions and ways to produce them, but I am not seeing any feedback. The children are asked to provide feedback before they turn it in. They aren't trained to give the feedback."* While peer revision can be valuable, it cannot replace teacher feedback and the use of formative assessments to guide instruction.

Several misconceptions about assessment exist in the middle schools. While several summative assessments are used, few formative assessments exist to provide guidance, feedback, and targeted instruction. In addition, teachers are not accessing and using data to guide decision making. The school leaders acknowledge these challenges, but expressed uncertainty about how to make lasting change in a difficult culture.

Grades 9–12

Data use at the both high schools was very limited. Administrators spoke candidly about trying to implement common assessments, but recognized the limited scope of the work thus far. One said, *“We are getting there with this. Are they comfortable with data, no? It provides a level of accountability that they are not used to. Teachers have opted whether or not to give midterms and finals, up until this year. They were asked to stop this practice and go to common assessments instead.”* This leaders mentioned several departments who adopted this practice willingly, but mentioned reluctance among English teachers. The principal noted:

My biggest concern with the ELA department is that they have not responded well as a group to the common assessment. Many believe that the spirit of teaching in my class is my business. This is the sentiment of many teachers. Any time you have change, you have a group of people who adopt the change, a group of people that sit on the fence, and a group of people that become calcified. I need to target that middle group. This isn't going be a choice in the state. We are going to do it. I have to find a way to show them that this will increase their effectiveness. Right now, they see themselves as individuals, not as part of a team. This is a pretty big piece.

This principal faces several challenges, including getting the English department to collaborate, generating and using agreed upon common assessments, and implementing data use to inform instruction.

The second high school expressed similar concerns about data use and the creation of common assessments. This leader spoke about using the online system to store and track assessments. While the system is in place, not every teacher is comfortable or amenable to its use. This administrator noted, *“In terms of performance data, we are just beginning to use ‘Performance matters.’ They are putting in standardized scores. We are also moving toward common assessments. We are beginning to develop these this year. This will also get put into the system. This will inform placement decisions. We are on the dawn of that transition.”* The teachers took an opposing view and mentioned needing to address standards first and assessments second. One said, *“We were supposed to incorporate the core standards into the common assessment. Instead of being able to sit and discuss the standards and use them in our teaching, we had to create an assessment. We need to focus on the standards first. I don't think the upper administration truly understands what we do and how we do it.”* Teachers in the focus groups expressed resistance to creating common assessment in lieu of addressing the standards first. There is a clear disconnect between administrative philosophies and teacher philosophies about data use and assessment.

When asked to discuss data use and assessment, grades arose as a topic of discussion among students, teachers, and administrators. Grades and assessments were synonymous in the eyes of focus group participants. One student raised a crucial point, illustrating the difference between the two, but acknowledging the dominance of grades. She said, *“I have only had one teacher give actual feedback on the essay, the rest just give a grade.”* Another student followed this statement with a comment about rubric use at the school. He said, *“Every teacher has a rubric but they are not the*

same across the department, outside of AP. In AP we use the sample rubric to score our essays. This is good practice for us for the test. Some teachers also used the NJ holistic rubric to evaluate our work. I feel like that is an issue. I feel like when you learn one thing freshman year and then you go onto sophomore year and it is wrong.” While grades hold a certain level of importance to students in high school, assessments are needed to provide authentic feedback. This is where growth occurs. One teacher in the group acknowledged this nicely. She said, *“Our greatest challenge is to get the kids to see beyond individual achievement and to see true learning as the goal. Our kids are more focused on grades than they are with a true love of reading and writing.”* Providing feedback through authentic assessments will shift the culture at the high schools, but will begin to focus on learning, instead of earning a grade. As schools implement common assessments for data use purposes, it will be essential to include a mechanism for providing ongoing feedback to students. Rubrics can be used for this purpose, if the tool focuses on feedback instead of a numerical or letter grade. Using this data and student feedback will positively influence instruction.

Student Transitions

Grades K–3

Students in the district make several transitions as they progress through the grade levels. After completing third grade, students attend one of two upper elementary schools. Making this transition requires collaboration, communication, planning, and student data. This process becomes complicated when only one piece is missing. The district does not have a formal transition plan or procedure in place to facilitate this process. Currently, each sending school provides different information. Some schools send DRA scores, Columbia Quick scores, and writing portfolios, while others send only some of these pieces. There is no consistent information for each student arriving at their new school. One principal commented, *“From here to 4–5, I don’t think we do that well, to be honest with you. As principals, we do a good job articulating the curriculum between schools. Teacher to teacher articulation needs to happen more. In house we do it nicely. We do send over portfolios to fourth grade. They get a sample of writing from each grade level.”* This sentiment is shared by others. Another administrator noted, *“Our biggest inconsistency has been the assessment piece and passing along information. Other schools have not been very consistent. We bought the DRA kids and we trained teachers to use them. Other schools have not done the same.”* This was echoed several times in interviews and focus groups.

Teachers feel unprepared to support student transitions. One teacher specifically noted the difficulty with passing on information. She said, *“I am not sure how the transfer of data is done....between 3rd and 4th grade. That’s the problem. Performance Matters is not working well at this point. We are struggling to get this done.”* Many people noted the existence of placement cards, but the use of these and the information listed on the cards varied. One administrator expressed a concern that the 4–5 schools do not have the same student supports, which makes the transition process even more difficult, and essential. This principal noted, *“What you will find is, after third grade, they don’t have the same kinds of supports in 4–5 as we have here. We do meet with them*

and try to articulate. The placement cards have writing levels and reading levels.” While the placement cards are well intended, this practice needs definition and consistency to make transitions successful and smooth.

When students transition to a new school and a new grade level, concerns around curricular demands arise. With the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, students are expected to read increasingly complex texts, think critically, and complete intricate tasks. Teachers in the district need opportunities to examine the curriculum and observe the instruction at different grade levels to fully understand the demands on students. One principal recognized this issue and made note of these concerns. She said, *“We need to have teachers see the expectations in the upper grades, to have teachers ask good questions, and to have teachers understand how the CCSS raises expectations.”* When teachers are prepared to facilitate the transitions, then students will be better prepared to take on the challenges of a new grade in a new school.

Grades 4–5

The upper elementary schools facilitate two transitions: one to integrate the upcoming third grade students and one to send off the out-going fifth grade students. These schools are constantly in transition each year. Each principal talked about a placement and transition process but these differed at each building. The schools are still placing students by hand, despite electronic resources. One leader said, *“The teachers fill out a placement card including the DRA, the reading level, how the teacher perceives them in reading and writing. Our placement process is very detailed. From 3rd to 4th grade we place over 400 students by hand.”* Yet despite this placement process, this same principal noted the lack of communication between schools and teachers. The principal noted, *“There is not a lot of communication between 3rd and 4th—just a placement card. There is no time to meet. No articulation time. Even from 4th to 5th and it is in the same school.”* While time in schools is limited, facilitating time for student transitions was requested by many focus group participants.

Teachers recognize the importance of meeting to discuss student needs and placement. When asked about the success of placement cards, many teachers commented about the inconsistency of the practice. One noted, *“We get students from many K–3 schools so there is a lot of inconsistency. We expect them to have skills they aren’t exposed to. We get placement cards from the 3rd grade. There is a comment written in each area, depending on the teacher.”* While placement cards take less time to complete, the information is not always inclusive of the students’ abilities. Teachers recognize the increased size of the district, but still desire in-person contact to discuss student needs. One participant said, *“Articulation with 3rd grade teachers would make this easier. In our growth we have lost the ability to communicate with these teachers. With that being said, we don’t even have a chance to articulate across grade levels in our own building. In our building it is decent. However outside is not there.”*

One school implemented a practice to send writing samples to the sixth grade teachers, yet was unsure how the information was received and if it was used. While this practice gives teachers another indicator of student performance, it needs to be conducted consistently with common

expectations and parameters for the assignment. One administrator recognized the need for a clear structure. The leader noted, *“It does serve a specific purpose, but it does not give teachers into a window into how they write, but not in the same instance they are going to learn. They looked and felt very different than the type of writing we are used to looking at.”* The upper elementary schools and middle schools require additional writing; therefore, including a writing sample during the transition process will give teachers crucial information when planning for future instruction.

Making transition practices and expectations clear and setting these as expectations, not options, will begin to facilitate the process more effectively. Students will be placed appropriately based on a variety of informational sources, not just one card. At the same time, teachers will feel more prepared to meet the needs of their incoming students.

Grades 6–8

The middle schools also face challenging transitions each year. Two classes transition in and out of each school every year. The teachers prepare for incoming students, but must also communicate the needs of those moving on as well. The middle schools have the added complication of grades and class placement issues to consider also. These factors make preparing for transitions difficult.

When the new sixth graders transition into middle school, a cultural shift occurs between earning grades for effort and earning grades for credit. This can be challenging for students and teachers alike. One teacher noted, *“Depending on where they came from will depend on how much feedback they received. They have a hard time with constructive feedback. Some students have gotten a warped perception of their skills and abilities. Because you worked on it independently does not mean you automatically get an ‘A.’ An ‘I’ does not equal an ‘A.’ They think that if they read or write a lot then it will be an ‘A.’ They are concerned with volume not quality. At the beginning they have a hard time adjusting to this.”* The teachers also expressed concern about the varied experiences of students in previous grades. This added to the issue of assigning grades. Educators indicated a lot of time is spent “catching students up” to the expected sixth grade level. One said, *“Something not taken into consideration, these are 6th graders coming in with a variety of needs. They are coming from so many places. There are many inconsistencies. You are trying to get all of them on a level playing field. I am still trying to give them a foundation for the basics.”*

The sixth grade teachers at both schools expressed frustration about the lack of information they receive about their incoming students. One educator said, *“We ask for test scores, but we didn’t even get our scores from last year. We should know the level of where kids are reading, but we don’t. There is nothing being passed from grade level to grade level.”* The school administrators confirmed these frustrations. One leader noted, *“We haven’t been doing transitions well. There are two 4–5 buildings. We get 60% from next door and 40% from across town. Teachers might not be aware of the resources available for student scores etc. For instance the fifth graders have to do a reading level, which would give the 6th grade teachers introductory information. Infinite Campus could be a central resource for students but this is not being used in this way.”* The district has resources in

place to assist in facilitating the transition of information. Teachers and administrators can use these tools more effectively to ensure a smoother transition process.

The eighth grade to ninth grade transition is also difficult for teachers and for students. The eighth grade teachers hold strong beliefs about preparing students for the transition to high school. There are philosophical differences between administrators and teachers when it comes to preparing students for high school. One language arts teacher said, *“With 8th grade to 9th transition, they read ‘Great Expectations’ as their first novel in high school. There is a huge philosophical difference between middle school and high school. This year we were told no whole class novels but we fought that last year. We want to give them the best experience possible.”* A second teacher commented, *“We work our butts off to get them ready for high school. We have articulated with the HS. There is still second guessing on what we do. The high school teachers still expect the same kind of students, but that isn’t the population we get.”* Despite the push for the workshop model for middle school reading instruction, the teachers continue to push for whole class novels in order to prepare students for high school. The administrators defend their position about using the workshop model versus a “mini version” of a high school classroom, often seen with whole class novel instruction.

High school class placement also becomes a major concern to students, parents, teachers, and administrators. When students leave the 8th grade, teachers are making decisions that potentially impact the next four years of a student’s life. This is particularly true when assigning students to honors versus regular classes. One administrator remarked, *“There is a change on how they place kids in honors moving into high school. Teachers see themselves as gate keepers. They are sending kids on a path in high school when they are 13.”* Teachers expressed frustration with the placement system also, which created concern among administrators. One leader explained, *“Teachers were saying that a ‘B’ isn’t really a ‘B.’ My fear moving forward is that teachers are going to slam kids because they don’t feel like they belong in honors. We need to be more encouraging versus discouraging.”* Currently in the district, earning a particular grade allows students to opt into an honors level class in ninth grade. This process places an emphasis on grades versus learning.

Middle schools face two challenging transitions each year. Establishing protocols and expectations will facilitate the transitions with greater ease and consistency. It will behoove the district to create a structure to enhance the transition process.

Grades 9–12

The transition from middle to high school presents a number of challenges for students and for teachers. Initial placement into high school courses occurs at the end of eighth grade, but the data sources collected did not indicate vertical alignment and articulation of the curriculum from one level to the next. One administrator remarked, *“I think we are good at horizontal communication and alignment but not as good at vertical. In terms of student gaps from middle school to high school, there seems to be a gap in individual responsibility. In middle school they are give more opportunities to redo and retry assignments. At the high school level we want them to do it right the first time; personal responsibility and accountability. The students also have to adjust from*

heterogeneously grouped classes to homogeneously grouped ones.” Students arrive with middle school expectations, while teachers anticipate students prepared to embrace high school standards. The limited communication between teachers at one level to the next and the lack of a formal process for transitioning students creates a number of academic concerns.

At the end of each year, students can transition into a higher course level if they meet certain requirements. These requirements are based on final course grades. With a “B” grade students can elect to take an honors class the following year. With an “A” grade students may opt for an AP class. Teacher recommendations are no longer used to move students from one level to the next. One student commented:

It was probably the hardest time in my life. I had to learn everything at home because I was so behind everyone else. Between 8th and 9th grade everything was different. I didn’t feel prepared for it at all. I was asked to be on a transition panel as well. I went from 8th grade to honors. All of a sudden you have an hour to write and that’s all there is...no time to edit or revise at all. With someone coming into that with no experience at all, it’s a really big change. To the point where this summer my brother is taking a special class to prepare him for this kind of writing.

This student expressed anxiety about the transition process, the new course requirements, and the lack of preparation. Another student commented about the attitude in honors classes. He expressed the belief that asking for help at this level was frowned upon. He said, *“I asked for a mini lesson about how to do this and the teacher questioned whether or not we should be in an honors class.”* When making transitions from one level to the next, students need support and time to adjust.

The teachers expressed great frustration about the process for entering honors level and AP classes. Both focus groups were adamantly opposed to using course grades as the entrance into these classes. Several teachers made statements about this. One educator commented:

There is no minimal level to take an honors or an AP course. Over the last 8–10 years, progressively at each grade level, they are less and less capable. I now teach basic grammar and punctuation so they can construct a sentence that is intelligible. I teach them to identify the parts of a sentence etc. I have found this is very effective; however, I am wasting so much time at that level. I never had to do basic skills with these students. They come unprepared. They have no working vocabulary. It goes back to the fact that any student can over ride into any level they want.

The group spoke about the pressure from parents to place students into consistently higher course levels. They indicated this was the reasoning behind changing the course recommendation process. One participant said, *“Parents override the class selection. When we get information, we get ‘they have always gotten an A.’ This shouldn’t be a prerequisite to honors. We can’t get through the curriculum because we have to account for the huge variety. My current seniors couldn’t hold a candle to my sophomores seven years ago.”* Currently, the lack of a protocol creates several issues, including pressure from parents, resentment from teachers, and increased student anxiety. Using

multiple data sources over time as part of a placement protocol for transitioning students from one level to the next will decrease student anxiety, ensure students are ready for the increased challenge, and provide teachers with additional information about students.

Collaboration and Communication

Grades K-3

Collaboration and communication within schools occurs in a number of places. In the West Windsor-Plainsboro School District, collaboration happens frequently at the team level and at the school level, but less frequently at the district level. Teachers struggle with cross-school collaboration. One principal stated, *“Typically collaboration has been more horizontal. Teachers work so hard in our district and time is constraining us.”* This sentiment was echoed by teachers. One said, *“We also need collaboration with our colleagues within and outside of the building. Yet, this also takes away from our instruction with students.”* Time to collaborate is desired by many but experienced by few.

Principals make collaboration a priority, and when possible, they provide designated times for teachers to discuss issues, plan lessons, and share resources. The size of each school appeared to influence the amount of collaboration that occurred regularly. One principal noted, *“Being the smallest school we have the advantage because we can all communicate clearly and often.”* Some of the larger primary schools expressed concerns about being able to afford teachers a planning period or other opportunities to work together. Two administrators provide a common lunch period for teachers, but could not also facilitate a shared planning period. One said, *“More time is needed for teachers to collaborate with one another and plan effectively. Honestly, I would love a different schedule to facilitate common planning.”* Increased opportunities for collaboration will open up possibilities for lesson study, the creation of common assessments, and other student focused initiatives. Going beyond the walls of the individual schools and collaborating with colleagues districtwide would also facilitate a smoother transition for students when moving from building to building.

Numerous opportunities exist for home to school partnerships. Parents and teachers, together, can collaborate to form a strong educational bond to meet the needs of children. Parents can play a pivotal role both at home and in school. One administrator recognized the power of parental education and involvement. This principal said, *“Parents don’t know what a ‘just right’ book is. More parent education is needed. No doubt about it. If we want them to continue the work at home, then we need to help them with what we are doing.”* Parent focus groups revealed limited communication about student progress, beyond the standard report card. This group indicated that the initial conference helped to determine the needs of their student, but unless a problem arose throughout the year, then communication between home and school was limited. The parents also expressed the need for information about school initiatives, literacy events, and other academic opportunities. The focus group participants noted their willingness to get involved if the school solicited help. The district has an opportunity to increase collaboration by reaching out to parents and educating them about literacy initiatives.

Grades 4–5

The two upper elementary schools recognize the need to communicate and collaborate with one another and with parents. Currently, the schools are working together to increase parent communication. The leaders outlined two distinct times that teachers communicate with parents. One principal said, *“The communication part, in general, happens at two junctures. At the end of a marking period or when there is a perceived problem. That being said, they are also invited in for the writing celebrations happen. Not frequently and certainly not in every room. Those are the extent to which families are involved.”* The schools mentioned the need for increased communication with families, and made this a priority moving forward.

Both schools mentioned the newly implemented parent workshops. The workshops are intended to educate parents about the writing instruction provided at the schools. These two schools are currently the only ones actively involved in educating parents about the workshop model. One administrator proudly discussed the parent workshop nights. The leader said, *“Last year, we started a series of workshops for parents to better understand how we teach writing. Our teachers feel very uncomfortable trying to explain the workshop approach. Our parents started to believe that we don’t teach grammar anymore. They think kids can write whatever they want and hand it in. We are trying to bridge that through the series designed for the PTA. We have invited the parents from Mill Stone River. Our evening workshops have had 40 plus parents.”* While this represents only a small number of parents, with ongoing support and the right incentives, participation will increase, as will communication.

Regular communication between schools and even across grade levels within the same school remains a challenge. Within schools, teachers rarely have opportunities to collaborate regularly, making consistency difficult. The teachers expressed frustrations about not having time to plan and discuss content materials with support staff and special educators. One participant noted, *“There is no time for teachers who work with struggling students to collaborate with classroom teachers.”* This lack of communication limits the support teachers can provide to struggling students. The school capacity profiles did not indicate common planning time for teachers at either school. Establishing formal times to facilitate teacher collaboration, within the school day, will allow teachers to participate in lesson studies, coaching sessions, and conduct meeting to discuss student needs.

Grades 6–8

The middle schools use the team approach at each grade level. Each team is comprised of members from each content area and usually a special educator. These groups share a common cohort of students throughout the day. Some content area groups also meet to support one another, but this is not mandated by administrators and is left up to the discretion of teachers.

Teachers spoke highly about the teaming approach. One teacher mentioned the willingness of other content area colleagues to include literacy skills when they felt supported. She said, *“When you work on a team the other content areas will come to you for advice. In science there are books written by National Geographic and there are many questions about matching students to*

appropriate levels. Students were reading books in social studies and they asked for support around groups. The content teachers are pulling reading into their curriculum too." This statement generated a lot of positive feedback from the focus group participants. Another teacher noted, *"Without the support among teachers, we would be struggling even more but we work well together. It helps to have a cohort group to work with. We get reassurance from one another. We brainstorm a lot together, but even that it's hard to find time to meet and we each have this on a different day. It comes down to one period a week."* Despite their willingness and enthusiasm to participate on a team, teachers still spoke about needing time to collaborate with members of their own content area as well.

Vertical alignment of curriculum and ensuring consistency with instruction does require time for teachers to meet, plan, discuss lessons, and participate in coaching activities. There are no structures currently in place for teachers to do this within their departments during the school day. A veteran teacher said, *"It's hard during the year to get together with the teachers from different grade levels to cover what was covered in the other levels. Teachers need to know the start and end points. We need check-ins more throughout the year. There isn't enough time to do this within our day. It falls by the wayside."* Many people agreed with this statement and a few mentioned some ways teachers work to communicate and collaborate. One teacher mentioned, *"We have met every week to have lunch together. We use our own time to share. We love being able to do that."* This practice is by choice and is not done by every group in every school.

Communication practices did arise as a concern for administrators and teachers. As with the younger grades, participants noted the importance of parental communication and the need to educate parents about the workshop model. This is further complicated at the middle school, where the workshop model is not implemented with fidelity. As mentioned previously, some teachers use the workshop model fully, others use parts of it, and a few do not use it at all. Communication with parents becomes even more difficult when there is not instructional alignment. One administrator noted this, saying, *"We have to have a parent program. We have to use the website. We need to walk them through the process, watch a video or get an explanation. This will help your challengers to go away. We need to be consistent with the workshop model."* Many comments made by parents resulted in miscommunication or a lack of understanding about the workshop model. Statements from parents such as, *"The Columbia thing is being used as an excuse. My student gets no feedback. The length is more important than the content"* and *"Middle schools are a black hole. There is very little or no instruction. The writing is graded on completion. There are no corrections or suggestions"* imply that parents are not well informed about the type of instruction occurring at the schools. The administrators acknowledge the lack of adequate communication. One said, *"We need to do a better job of educating our parents about what is going on in the classroom. We have groups of parents who are adamant that there should be specific grammar and vocabulary lessons. They don't understand the workshop model."* While resources such as the website are in place, parents are not accessing them regularly. Additional steps are required to educate and communicate with parents about instructional practices and curriculum, particularly at the middle schools. The schools have an opportunity to gain additional parental support through educating this group about the workshop

model or other curricular decisions. Student achievement increases when there are strong partnerships between home and school.

Grades 9–12

Few structures exist at the high school level to facilitate collaboration and communication between teachers and between parents and teachers. One school facilitates a common lunch period for all students and teachers. The principal at this school mentioned that several teachers spend this time working with struggling students, grading papers or gathering resources. Contractually, no formal collaboration or services can occur during this block of time. The second high school did not indicate any shared time for all teachers or for teachers within a certain department.

Both administrators and teachers spoke about the difficulties of professional growth within the constraints of limited collaboration. One teacher said, *“We aren’t allowed to grow and chat together. The aspect of allowing for time to collaborate is missing. We used to have half days for collaboration. The board eliminated this.”* Several teachers made similar comments about the missing time for collaboration. The administrators confirmed the lack of time for peer coaching or other common time, outside of being a new teacher. A principal noted, *“Common planning time and peer coaching is not in place. If you are a new teacher then you get a mentor and there can be peer coaching as part of it. In terms of PLCs all of the teachers of a particular subject, such as “Art of the essay” are grouped together. This is the only type of structure that we have here.”* While Professional Learning Communities (PLC) are in place, the teachers felt this time limited their collaborative opportunities because they only interacted with colleagues teaching the same course. The PLC groups are a place for collaboration to begin, but other opportunities are needed to further the professional growth of teachers.

Parental involvement in high school often wanes, as does communication between home and school. Both schools indicated using an online report card system to communicate grades to parents, but no official communication protocol exists to discuss progress or issues that may arise. The communication exists on an as needed basis, and varies by teacher. One administrator commented, *“There is no formal structure for reporting literacy specific skills to parents. We have infinite campus for reporting grades. Parents can see a certain mark on a certain assignment. Does this translate to literacy skills being communicated to parents, the answer is no.”* While students are gaining independence throughout high school, parental communication is still crucial to student success.

Forming positive partnerships with parents over time, through consistent communication, will reduce the number of resistors when new initiatives arise. Several parents indicated little or no communication from teachers about student progress. The parent focus groups also revealed several misunderstandings or misinformation about the type of instruction occurring at the school or the types of assignments given. Clear communication with parents, consistently over time, will lessen negative reactions or push back when schools implement changes.

Materials and Technology

Grades K–3

Classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups strongly indicated the district’s dedication to providing teachers with adequate resources to support literacy. Several classrooms had extensive classroom libraries, organized by book level using an alphabetic system. Despite the prevalence of books in many places, this varied by school. For instance, certain principals prided themselves on providing their teachers with book budgets, while others required their teachers to purchase books using their own funds. One administrator commented, *“It’s the classroom libraries. I pride myself in making budgets for books. I feel really good at this point. Our classroom libraries are outstanding.”* A second principal noted, *“The physical aspect of the classrooms—they all have leveled libraries. Some classrooms have carts and closets with multiple copies and levels. By grade level, teachers devoted a lot of money for books to support units in science, social studies etc.”* There are no common protocols for allocating funds for books. This is up to the discretion of the building principals.

Technology can enhance classroom instruction, increase student motivation, and prepare students to be productive members of society. The presence and use of technology also varied greatly by school, especially in the younger grades. Some classrooms were well equipped with student computers, a projector, Smart Board, and document camera, yet others had nothing more than a CD player. Most rooms had televisions with VCR s or DVD players, and all teachers had access to a laptop. Each school made individual decisions regarding technology, so learning experiences will vary according to school placement. A district expectation for the presence and use of technology will equalize student experiences across buildings, ensuring that all students will arrive to their next school prepared and able to use technological resources.

During classroom observations in kindergarten through third grade, no technology was used for instructional purposes. While technology does not have to dominate instruction, it can be used to highlight topics, introduce students to its uses, and provide them with interactive learning opportunities. Teacher interviews revealed uncertainty about technology use and capabilities. In some cases, teachers had access to technology resources, but had little familiarity with how to use these tools effectively. Educators expressed a desire to learn more about how to enhance instructions using technology. Professional development will facilitate these experiences.

Grades 4–5

The administrators at the upper elementary schools outlined a need for a different type of resource; funds for building-directed professional development. The principals mentioned several district sponsored professional development sessions, including work with Teachers College and the workshop model. Yet, the leaders also outlined the need to address concerns in their own building with additional development. This leader said, *“My wish would be that the district had a clear vision that all administrators were empowered to move their buildings toward that vision. A big part of the vision would have to do with providing more PD time. Not because it looks good or looks sexy, but because it is what our teachers need and want. We need to have difficult conversations with*

teachers, safely." The leaders clearly outlined the need for a district led vision, but also the flexibility to differentiate the professional development to meet the needs of their specific teachers.

The physical resources within each school varied, including the presence of classroom libraries. One school allocated funds for specific classroom libraries, while the other opted to build a "book room" for use by all grade level teachers. Some teachers expressed concern about the equality of funds. She said, *"We have more students than (school) but less support. We have less money for books. We haven't bought new books. It depends on which side of the road you live on."* Classroom observations revealed books in many classrooms, but some had larger collections than others. When asked, teachers said, *"Our money has gone to the book room, not classroom libraries. Many people have used their own money for their own books."* While classroom resources will vary by teacher, establishing a network for sharing resources will help to equalize the gaps.

Classroom observations revealed a strong technology presence at both schools. Smart Boards, document cameras, projectors, televisions, and computers were present in several classrooms. Each teacher had access to a laptop computer and many rooms had computers for student use. During the visits, teachers used the projector to display prompts or poems, but rarely asked students to interact with or use the technology. Teachers passively used the technology to move the lesson forward. This type of technology use is not preparing students for the skills needed to be college and career ready. Students need active experiences with technology to learn and experience the content, as well as the technological capabilities. The district has invested in technology resources to enhance learning. Teachers need professional development to learn how to use and integrate technology effectively. This will also increase technology use among students in the classroom.

Grades 6-8

The middle schools also displayed an impressive array of technology. Students had access to i-pads and e-readers, in addition to Smart Boards, computers, and other similar resources. Several classrooms were equipped with computers, but not all rooms had document cameras or projectors. Each teacher had use of a laptop in the classroom. The technology appears to be integrated into each classroom gradually, over time. Some teachers indicated the need for additional technology in their personal classrooms, but on average, most people appeared pleased with their current access.

As with the elementary schools, the technology used in the classroom for instruction was limited during the classroom visits. While some used the projectors to display prompts or show movies, there was no instructional interaction with the technology. This is certainly a concern to address at the middle school level. When asked about their use of technology, teachers generally saw it as a fun activity, but not as an educational opportunity. One educator commented, *"The technology now, while it is a lot of fun, but it zaps one's ability to present one's self and communicate."* The Common Core State Standards promote the use of technology when making interactive presentations and displaying new learning. In order to be college and career ready, students need frequent interactions with technology to enhance their skills. Teachers need additional professional development on the technology and its uses.

Another disparity at the middle schools was the presence of classroom libraries. Some rooms had extensive independent reading libraries, while others only had the required textbooks. At one school, teachers buy their own classroom libraries, while at the other school, there are funds allocated to support this need. One teacher said, *“The curriculum changes have moved faster than the resources in our room. There’s always something new. You can’t really sink your teeth into one thing and collect resources.”* Another participant added, *“I would love to have more independent reading books in the classroom. We have been getting more and more but we need additional ones to actually use in the classroom. Since we will be doing more nonfiction, it was hard to come up with enough for them. It was an issue.”* In response, one administrator did comment about the presence of a variety of texts. This leader said, *“The PTA bought multiple copies of books to support class novels. Some teachers took advantage of resources with a variety of levels. These books are there but not all teachers are using them. We also have a lot of high interest reading to use with the kids.”* The changing curriculum, with the inclusion of more informational texts, will require the district to invest in new resources. Providing time for teachers to share resources or to explore donated ones, such as the books from the PTA, will help to ensure these materials are fully used.

Grades 9–12

The use and presence of technology was severely limited in the English classrooms at both high schools. At one school, classrooms were held in the open, with televisions or overhead projectors being wheeled from space to space. Very few Smart Boards, student use computers, projectors, document cameras and other related technology were present in the classroom spaces. Teachers commented on the lack of access to technology throughout the focus group session. Many spoke about the arduous process of booking the computer lab and accessing the resources they need regularly. The administrators also identified this as a concern, especially in relation to data use. The principal spoke about wanting the teachers to use data on a regular basis. Several resisters emerged and the lack of technology to ease the process was one reason given for the resistance. One leader said, *“We need to use technology more to support this. Teachers are doing it the old-fashioned way. We need to let technology help us to manage that data a little bit better.”* Providing greater access to technology will enhance instructional practices, data use, and assessment at both high schools.

The teachers at both schools also remarked that several students bring their own technology to school to use in their classes. In class observations revealed several students with i-pads, i-phones, i-pods, laptops, and other comparable devices. One teacher noted, *“Some kids will actually take pictures of the notes instead of taking notes. Other kids use i-pads or laptops when taking notes.”* The Common Core State Standards support the use of technology in the classroom. Students need to use technology when making presentations, conducting research, and portraying ideas through writing. While some students can afford to provide their own technology for these purposes, not all learners have this opportunity. These students need equal access to technology at school.

The high schools viewed their textual resources very differently. One school spoke about creating a collection of texts that represented the current student population, instead of the one from years past. One teacher in this focus group said, *“We need to look into buying more books and different*

copies. We are not growing and advancing as a department to meet the needs of our clients. When we look at our curriculum, it is the canon of 1975. Why aren't we addressing the cultures that we are teaching here? Why aren't we addressing the needs of our students and the CCSS? I have to find all of my own materials, which is very time consuming. We need a place for common resources that teachers can share." This statement aligns with the school's philosophy about providing support for ESL students. The school recognizes the identities and the needs of this group, as it grows. These teachers also spoke openly about the changing demands of the CCSS. They expressed an urgent need to use the recommended texts.

There was not a clear consensus about text use at the second high school in the district. The focus group revealed that some teachers felt the school needed to adopt a greater number of resources from the canon, while other teachers wanted to adopt more modern texts. One teacher noted, *"I have had former students recently tell me that they felt at a disadvantage in college English courses because they knew fewer canonical texts than many of other students. Most of our students graduate high school without having read any Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth, Austin, Thackeray, and the list goes on."* Some teachers felt strongly about including classical texts in each course, while others recognized the value in striking a balance with more modern selections. Regardless of their preference, teachers felt that there was a shortage of available text resources at the school.

Aligning the curriculum to Common Core State Standards will require the adoption of additional text resources, both in electronic and print form. The district can prepare for this transition by providing resources steadily over time to help schools increase their collections.

Recommendations

After a review of student proficiency in literacy, school capacity in each of ten schools spanning grades K–12, and teacher and administrator perspectives on the district's literacy services, PCG Education makes the following recommendations to improve literacy practices in the West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District. These recommendations are divided into six categories: 1) Curriculum and Instruction, 2) Meeting the Needs of Struggling Learners, 3) Communication and Collaboration, 4) Resources and Technology, 5) Data Use and Assessment, and 6) Student Transitions. If implemented, these recommendations will positively impact the literacy programs in the district.

Curriculum and Instruction

The district promotes the workshop model, based on the work of Lucy Calkins, for reading and writing instruction, although implementation varied greatly after third grade. The K–3 schools demonstrated the highest levels of consistency with the Workshop Model and elements were clearly visible during classroom observations. Students used the language of the model fluently. The upper elementary schools employed the model frequently, but not with as much vigor as the early schools. Teacher use varied by classroom, although many elements were still evident. Despite

adoption of the program in the elementary schools, use of the model waned in the middle and high schools within the district. Teacher preference dictated use in the middle schools, and the model was virtually non-existent in the high schools, where traditional instruction dominated practice. Student experiences differed to a great extent by teacher. While creative differences provide enrichment to the curriculum, it cannot replace it. Students are not receiving the level of consistency needed as they enter middle and high school.

The district recently worked to align the elementary English/language arts curriculum with the Common Core State Standards. The curriculum maps demonstrated alignment to the standards, and included units complete with sample lesson plans. This work has not yet extended to the secondary schools. The middle and high school English curriculum also needs to align with CCSS. The new demands, texts, and performance tasks will challenge students in innovative ways. Aligning the curriculum to the new standards will not only provide a greater level of consistency, but will also prepare students for college and careers.

The workshop model provides education and support in many areas, but discrepancies existed among grammar and vocabulary instruction. Some teachers employed Word Study to enhance vocabulary instruction, but this was not consistent across classrooms or schools. As students progress into secondary schools, content area vocabulary becomes increasingly more important. Providing instruction to support vocabulary acquisition will greatly enhance the literacy programs in West Windsor-Plainsboro. The model does not directly address grammar instruction, which poses a challenge for students and teachers as writing demands increase. A few teachers supplement the curriculum with direct instruction, but this was also inconsistent. The Common Core State Standards address grammar instruction in the Language standards. Aligning the district curriculum to these standards will further strengthen the academic achievement of students.

The time spent on language arts/English instruction fluctuates by grade span. In the primary schools, teachers provide a block of instruction, inclusive of both reading and writing, yet when students reach middle school, instruction is cut to a mere 52 minutes. Teachers attempt to cover reading and writing during this time, but struggle to do so under tight time constraints. While several scheduling issues emerge in middle schools, allotting at least 80 minutes for language arts/English instruction will ease the transition students make from primary to secondary instruction, as well as provide teachers with the opportunity to cover their material in greater depth. Student proficiency scores on the NJASK assessment decrease when students transition from fifth to sixth grade. While no one factor can fully account for the decline in scores, the decrease in instructional time is a significant concern.

PCG Education makes the following recommendations to positively impact curriculum and instruction in the district. When implemented, these recommendations will increase consistency, fully align the entire curriculum (K-12) to the Common Core State Standards, and will lead to new levels of student achievement.

1. **Establish consistency with the Workshop Model.** The district invested time and resources to implement the workshop model for reading and writing instruction. Providing district support to school principals will help to facilitate authentic implementation of the workshop model. At the building level, principals can work with teachers directly to increase consistency of the model within the classroom. Using classroom walkthroughs and conducting lesson studies will also help to provide direct feedback and support to teachers.
2. **Realign the high school curriculum with CCSS to create common texts, performance tasks, and writing opportunities (including time to revise/edit).** The elementary language arts curriculum is aligned to CCSS. Implementing performance tasks into this curriculum will enhance assessment practices and guide instructional opportunities. In addition, continuing the curriculum alignment work to include the middle and high schools is essential for continued success. Specifically, the writing curriculum requires attention. Research indicates students need time to revise and edit their writing, demonstrating their ability to improve their writing over time. Writing shorter pieces on demand is an important skill, but cannot be the only type of writing within the curriculum. Varying the type of writing assignments will further adhere to the demands of CCSS, while allowing students to demonstrate their best writing.
3. **Write a curriculum specific to language use and vocabulary acquisition aligned to CCSS (Language).** The CCSS demand increased rigor in several areas, particularly language use and vocabulary instruction. These elements of language arts/English become more and more important as the academic demands of reading and writing increase over time. Implementing a consistent, districtwide language development curriculum, including vocabulary acquisition will further enhance the writing abilities of students throughout the district.
4. **Increase literacy skills across all content areas, particularly at the secondary level.** Time spent on language arts instruction in the primary skills appears sufficient, but as students enter middle school the time decreases significantly. Approximately 100 minutes of language arts instruction occurs in the primary grades, but in middle school, students only receive 52 minutes of similar instruction. The high schools also use extended blocks. Increasing the amount of time spent on language arts in the middle schools will maintain consistency, as well as prepare students for the demands of high school. All content areas share the responsibility for developing literacy skills. Creating opportunities for team-teaching, extended blocks or other similar structures will help to restore balance to the middle school language arts curriculum.

Resources for Struggling Learners

The early elementary schools in the district provide several literacy support services for struggling learners. The identification process begins in kindergarten and the support continues, gradually decreasing as students make progress. These supports cease when students move to the upper

elementary schools. From fourth grade forward, there are virtually no formal supports for students not identified by special education. Students in the upper elementary and secondary schools require the same level of attention as younger students. As the academic demands increase, the gap between struggling students and their peers widens. An overwhelming number of parents indicated providing outside tutoring services to meet their needs of their students not being addressed in school. Without school services to provide the needed support, the struggling learners will continue to fall behind, preventing them from achieving success in college and careers.

Several schools specified the use of a referral committee to discuss struggling students and outline possible actions. The members of the committee varied, as did the practices. To ensure consistency across schools, establishing expectations for participation will equalize the process and allow for greater representation. Many teams did not include teachers, which limits the amount of information gathered about the students. Teachers can provide important insights into student struggles. The district will also benefit greatly from using a set protocol for committee meetings and actions. For instance, the protocol will dictate how to refer a student, the types of information to collect, and the action planning process to address the identified needs.

The absence of a Response to Intervention (RtI) system also prevents students from receiving requisite services. Several stakeholders, particularly at the secondary level, indicated their lack of knowledge about RtI. Interviewees shared many misconceptions and indicated this as an area for growth. Implementing data use, as recommended below, will facilitate the creation of an RtI system, with accompanying supports for struggling learners. In addition to misconceptions about RtI, teacher focus groups revealed the common sentiment of not being reading teachers, therefore feeling unprepared to work with struggling students. Content area teachers need coaching and support to implement literacy strategies in the classroom, and to differentiate instruction based on identified student needs. Literacy coaches and specialists within the district will play an integral role in this process.

In response to the data collected, the following recommendations will assist the West Windsor-Plainsboro Secondary Schools to develop and maintain a system of supports for all students, while providing additional resources for struggling learners.

- 1. Design a consistent district protocol for use with the referral committee at each school.**

Several schools mentioned the use of an internal referral committee to discuss and plan for the needs of struggling learners not served by the special education system. Each committee differed in terms of participants, referral procedures, student plans, and follow up. Some schools included classroom teachers throughout the process, while others did not. Standardizing the referral process and procedures will increase consistency and equitability throughout the district. Including classroom teachers throughout the process will provide a complete picture of student abilities and will help to ensure follow through with the committee recommendations.

2. **Implement a Response to Instruction and Intervention program in all schools, particularly at the secondary level.** The early primary schools provided the greatest level of support for struggling learners. As students progressed through the district, the level of support waned for students not identified by the special education program. Implementing a response to instruction and intervention program in all schools will help to provide adequate supports to all learners. Differentiated instruction can be part of this system, but cannot stand alone. If structured properly, the workshop model can provide a structure to facilitate small groups, individual attention, and teacher led interventions. Providing outside structures to support struggling learners will also be important.
3. **Establish structures to provide support for struggling learners during the school day, particularly in grades 4–12 (literacy lab, supported study halls, etc).** Students in grades 4–12 require additional support throughout the school day. Currently, there are no formal structures, outside of basic skills classes, remaining in the upper elementary and secondary schools to support struggling students. Those not identified by special education are particularly in danger of “being left behind.” While peer tutoring can be a powerful mechanism for improvement, struggling students require the attention of trained educators. The recommended support structures, such as literacy labs, supported study halls, and tutoring blocks, will greatly enhance the Response to Instruction and Intervention framework.
4. **Provide professional development on effective strategy use for all content area teachers.** Teachers expressed concern about addressing the needs of struggling learners within the contained classroom. Several mentioned not being well equipped to provide strategies to meet the needs of all students. Providing professional development on effective literacy strategies will provide teachers with the necessary resources to meet the needs of students. These strategies can be used by all content area teachers, not just those in English/language arts.

Data Use and Assessment

Throughout the district, there was an intense focus on the NJASK summative assessment. During classroom observations, students were practicing reading passages and answering questions, as well as writing to sample prompts. Even the younger students articulated strategies for taking the examination. The students in the district consistently outperform their peers statewide on the NJASK, the HSPA, and the Advanced Placement examinations. The consistently high district scores demonstrate a dedication to test preparation and student achievement.

Teachers also use other measures such as the DRA, the Columbia Quick, and the Gates MacGinitie to establish reading abilities of their students. While these tools can be used for student placement, they are not useful in guiding ongoing instruction. Several stakeholders reported little or no data use to inform instruction. The lack of a thorough assessment framework limits the data use possibilities.

When an assessment framework is in place, schools can use the information to place students, assign interventions, and inform ongoing instruction.

Data use can be intimidating, as high stakes are often attached to the results. Eliminating the high stakes environment, and creating a positive culture for data use will allow teachers to feel comfortable sharing student data, using it to plan lessons, and asking for support from their peers. With an assessment framework in place, the schools can use protocols to examine and use data effectively. Each grade level, team, or content area can form a data team to examine student work and results. Formative assessments provide teachers with information to guide ongoing instruction. The summative measures mentioned above give snapshots of achievement but do not tell the whole story.

In response to the themes outlined in this report, PCG Education makes the following recommendations to the West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District. Implementing these recommendations will enhance student achievement and create a greater sense of accountability.

1. **Create an assessment framework for each grade span (K-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-12).** The assessment framework will be designed to include summative and formative data sources. Summative measures can include NJASK results, the upcoming CCSS required assessments, the HSPA examination, and other sources identified by the district. Sample formative measures could include common assessments, such as performance tasks. The common assessments will monitor student progress and can be scored by teachers using a common rubric or other scoring tool. The assessment system will also include other ongoing formative assessments, conducted by classroom teachers. These pieces will inform daily instruction, while the other assessments can assist with placement and additional supports. The assessment framework creates an overall, ongoing picture of student achievement.
2. **Design performance tasks aligned to the CCSS, common to each grade level.** The district identified common assessments as a goal for the future. Creating common assessments also increases consistency across classrooms and schools. The CCSS highlights the use of performance tasks to increase the students' readiness for college and careers. Creating common performance tasks, aligned to the standards, will provide students an opportunity to practice and demonstrate a number of literacy skills, as well as their understanding of the content. This type of task will require students to demonstrate concrete skills using a range of texts. Critical thinking, skill acquisition, and content knowledge are essential to achieving success on performance tasks.
3. **Implement data use structures to support increased data use at each level (use of formative data to guide instruction).** Using data efficiently and effectively will help schools to identify areas of need, improvement priorities, and will positively impact instruction. Data provides teachers a window into student achievement. When used to inform instruction, data can be used to differentiate groupings, materials, or entire lessons. The schools in West Windsor-Plainsboro do not use data consistently. This recommendation encourages the

district to establish policies and protocols for data use at each school. The literacy leadership teams or PLC groups can serve as the venue for examining the data, if other teams and structures are not available. The teams can set expectations for data collection and use, as well as assist teachers in using the information to drive instruction.

4. **Create a positive culture for data use at each school and at the district level.** Teachers view using data as risky. There are often stigmas attached to low scores, which teachers associate with their personal success. Yet, when a positive culture exists teachers can feel safe and supported to use data in new ways. Data use among teachers is best facilitated through peer groups. Providing time, clear expectations, and a process for examining data work to create a positive culture for data use. As teachers gain comfort using data, instructional practices will be positively impacted, resulted in increased student engagement and achievement.

Student Transitions

Students make several transitions during their school career. The first transition occurs when students leave their early elementary schools and enter fourth grade in a new building. The next move occurs when students leave fifth grade and enter middle school. Finally, students transition from middle school to high school. Several moves are made from one building to the next, without much communication between teachers. With four early elementary schools, two upper elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools, it can be difficult to facilitate transitions without an effective plan in place. Currently, the district does not have a student transition plan in place.

Stakeholders mentioned the use of placement cards when moving students from one building to the next, however, these cards were not consistent. Some teachers filled them out in great detail, while others made short remarks. There were no consistent expectations for use. In some cases, teachers reported that the cards were no use in preparing for the needs of students. In addition to the placement cards, several administrators mentioned the guidance counselors meeting to discuss students, but rarely were teachers invited or consulted about students. While the guidance counselors play a crucial role in scheduling, they cannot be the only source of information about a student. Creating a short portfolio or formal reporting process will better represent the needs of students when placement decisions are made.

Teachers spend the greatest amount of time with students over the course of a school year. Educators fully understand the strengths and areas of opportunity for each student in their classroom. Relying on their expertise and providing time for articulation will enhance the transition process greatly, and will ultimately lead to increased support for students. Ideally, articulation will occur when students transition every year, but at a minimum should occur during the years when students change location. Providing time for teachers at different buildings to meet will facilitate the articulation process. Teachers will be better able to plan and provide support for students when they understand their needs.

Based on the data collected, PCG makes the following recommendations to the district to enhance the student transition process. Actively addressing these recommendations will provide a greater level of support for teachers, students, and administrators.

1. **Design and implement a district transition plan.** Placement cards do not provide sufficient information for transitioning students to a new building. The district uses placement cards, with varying levels of participation and success. Designing a transition plan will help the district to gather information about each student, make informed decisions about placement, and provide opportunities for teachers to meet. An effective transition plan, implemented with fidelity, will provide a greater level of support for students and teachers.
2. **Develop a student portfolio or reporting process to facilitate transitions.** A few schools used writing portfolios to provide an additional source of information about students. This was not a consistent practice throughout the district. Developing requirements for a short student portfolio, including a work sample or two, teacher comments, and assessment scores will enhance the transition from grade to grade and building to building. Teachers will receive consistent information about students each year.
3. **Implement articulation time for teachers at the beginning and end of the school year.** Time for articulation is important for all teachers, as students move from grade to grade, but is crucial for teachers who receive students from a new building. Currently, there are no formal structures in place for teachers to discuss student needs and placement, curriculum covered or not addressed, and other relevant issues. Implementing time and structures at the beginning and end of each school year for teachers to meet will better facilitate the student transition process.
4. **Create a transition committee at each school to discuss student needs.** The team currently consists of the guidance counselors at each school, and occasionally a building administrator. While these are important stakeholders, the teachers can also lend valuable information about students. Including classroom teachers on the transition team will provide a new perspective and voice. While all teachers cannot participate in the process, asking representatives to serve on the committee for a designated amount of time is fair. Allowing teachers to rotate will allow for greater participation.

Collaboration and Communication

A predominant theme across all data sources is the need for a consistent, collaborative approach to district literacy programs, services, and professional development. Several participants indicated the lack of consistency and communication across the district, especially between schools serving the same grade levels. Respondents to the School Capacity Profile agree that there is currently no common literacy planning time in the district or in the schools. Teachers indicated limited, if any, time to collaborate with their colleagues, both within and across schools. When asked about collaborating during professional development, this was also limited based on the assigned groups.

School administrators recognize these inconsistencies, but have limited authority to implement school policies that effectively address these districtwide inequities.

An internal committee convened to evaluate the district literacy program. This group represents teachers, administrators, coaches, and district personnel. Creating a district literacy leadership team from this group will facilitate ongoing communication and collaboration between schools. The structure of a district literacy leadership team allows for school representation during the decision making process. The team sets literacy goals and priorities for the year and disseminates the information to schools. A smaller literacy leadership team is also recommended at each school. These site-specific teams discuss how the district goals can be implemented at the school level, as well as outline any other school related literacy initiatives. This structure enhances communication within a school, between schools, and across the district.

Another significant concern mentioned by several schools in the district is the lack of consistent protocols for parent communication. Practices vary greatly from school to school and from teacher to teacher. In particular, parents of struggling students, whose native language is not English, need additional support and attention. Research consistently demonstrates the positive impact of parental and school collaboration on student achievement. With regular communication and outreach, parents can support school initiatives and provide another source of information about student needs. This will also help to ensure students are supported at home, as well as in school. Among parents, several misconceptions exist about the workshop model and the type of instruction provided to students. Educating parents about the model will reduce resistance and eliminate several concerns. The West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District will benefit greatly from increased, consistent parental communication practices.

PCG Education makes the following recommendations to improve collaboration and communication in the school district. When implemented with fidelity, these recommendations will provide a supportive network for teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

1. **Form literacy leadership teams at each school and one at the district level to facilitate ongoing communication.** The literacy leadership teams in the elementary schools should include representatives from each grade level, a literacy specialist or special educator, as well as an administrator. In the middle and high schools, the literacy leadership teams should include representation from each core content area, as well as an administrator. Participants do not have to be experts in literacy, but should be passionate about the work. At the district level, the team is comprised of one school representative from each building, a district administrator, the curriculum coordinator, and literacy coaches if possible. The team structure facilitates ongoing communication and collaboration between schools, as well as between schools and the district.
2. **Implement parental communication protocols to keep parents adequately informed about literacy initiatives, events, and student progress.** Current communication practices vary by school and by teacher. Implementing consistent communicative measures will increase

- parent support, while reducing resistance to initiatives due to miscommunication or none at all. Using electronic resources such as email, news blasts, or the district website to communicate with parents will allow for one consistent message sent to numerous people at once. In addition to increased general messaging, establishing a protocol for when, why, and how to contact parents about literacy achievement will also keep all stakeholders informed of student progress. Parents will be able to better support school initiatives, while working with their student(s) at home.
3. **Establish regular times for communication and collaboration among language arts/English teachers within the contracted school day (once a week at a minimum).** School scheduling can be difficult at any level, but especially in secondary schools. The early and upper elementary teachers reported some time to collaborate with their grade-level colleagues, but did so rarely across grade levels. At the secondary schools, collaboration as a department was nearly nonexistent. Finding ways to creatively structure class assignments or extra duties will allow schools to offer a collaborative planning block, at least once a week. During this time, teachers will be able to share materials, plan lessons, and create common assessments. Establishing time for teachers to collaborate will further school and district goals.
 4. **Facilitate ongoing learning opportunities for parents around the workshop model and other district initiatives.** Two of the upper elementary schools implemented workshops to better educate parents about the model used for reading and writing instruction. These events invited parents to the school to learn about library resources, as well as the instruction offered. Extending these opportunities to all parents in the district will allow parents to interact with teachers, ask questions about the model, and learn how it can benefit their student(s). Currently, several misconceptions about the model exist among parents, particularly at the secondary level. Regularly scheduled workshops can occur quarterly or monthly and are well publicized. Also, ensuring the workshops do not conflict with major sporting events, school plays, or other “parent night” activities will increase participation. Proactively educating parents will garnish additional support, build a sense of community, and decrease ongoing resistance.

Resources and Technology

Textual resources and technology varied by school and by classroom. In several places, technological resources were present; including Smart Boards, laptops, document cameras, televisions, and student use computers, yet this was not the case in all buildings or in all classrooms. During a few classroom observations, teachers used the technology resources to post prompts, play music, or show a video clip. The passive use of technology was concerning. The resources were underutilized to enhance instruction. Teachers appeared unaware of the full capabilities of the resources present. During the visits, none of the students present ever interacted with the technology in the room. There were several missed opportunities to make the learning process interactive and innovative.

Several classrooms and schools contained impressive libraries. Many had books arranged into labeled bins, according to the reading level of the text. Students had bags of books at their seats or in bins. Younger students in the district communicated with others about their reading level and needs. Students excitedly spoke about reading and finding books in their classrooms. This was generally true in the early elementary schools and in some of the upper elementary classrooms. The middle schools and high schools did not display classroom libraries, and oftentimes only one text was used to drive instruction. Students at this level did not share the same level of enthusiasm about reading, and many reported not reading at all, outside of the required selections. Placing a continued focus on providing engaging texts to all students, particularly those at the secondary level will enhance the culture of literacy across the district.

The Common Core State Standards outline new, increasingly difficult textual demands for students. The focus on informational texts provides new challenges for teachers and schools. Finding adequate informational resources for students of all abilities will be the issue facing educators in the coming year. In addition to the new texts, the CCSS also requires an increased use of technology to research, produce, and present materials. While some classrooms are well equipped for the new demands, many are not and require immediate attention. With an increased focus on new resources and an equal distribution of technology, the district will be poised to take on the challenges of the CCSS with great success.

Based on the findings of this report, PCG makes the following recommendations to improve the use of textual resources and technology across the district. When fully implemented, these recommendations will enhance the instructional opportunities for students.

1. **Conduct a technology audit to determine accurate technology needs at each school, in each classroom within the district.** Several schools and classrooms in the district were well equipped with technology to enhance instruction, yet others were not. Even within the same school, technological resources differed from classroom to classroom. Conducting a technology audit will allow the schools to identify classroom needs and report these to the district. Then, allocating technology equitably will be crucial to ensure that all students have access to the same instructional opportunities.
2. **Provide professional development to teachers on using technology in the classroom to enhance and support instruction.** While some teachers expressed comfort with technology use, others did not. The technology present in classrooms was not fully utilized to enhance instruction or to develop student skills. Providing all teachers with professional development based on hands-on learning opportunities will allow them to acquire the skills necessary to introduce technology into the classroom. Once general sessions are provided, interest based workshops can supplement the initial instruction. These can be teacher driven by interest or need. The CCSS require students to use technology for a variety of purposes, and teachers need to be fully prepared to support this type of learning.

3. **Revise curriculum documents to include additional technology instruction and opportunities to use technology within the subject areas, including English/Language Arts.**
As mentioned previously, the CCSS will require students to research, write, and present materials using technology in a variety of forms. Students need several opportunities to learn and practice these skills in all content areas, but especially in English/Language Arts. Building instructional opportunities into the existing curriculum for elementary students and into the revised curriculum for secondary students will further enhance the instruction and prepare students for college and careers in the 21st century.
4. **Allocate necessary funds to update the text collection to include informational sources, CCSS recommended texts, and leveled texts for middle and high school struggling learners.**
Schools allocate their funds for text-based resources differently across the district. Some schools dedicated a percentage of funds to increasing classroom libraries, book carts, and book rooms. Several classrooms and schools had impressive collections of books, organized into bins by level. Other schools require the teachers to provide their own books for their classroom libraries. This creates an unequal distribution of resources across schools. Some students have extensive access to texts, while others do not. In addition, the CCSS promotes an increased use of informational texts, which leaves many schools unprepared. Identifying recommended texts, identifying gaps in the school collections, and providing funds for equitable classroom libraries will support students in all grades and at all reading levels.

Conclusion

The West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District actively participated in the literacy program review. Several stakeholders spoke candidly about the strengths and areas of opportunity at the school and district levels. Teachers, administrators, specialists, students, and parents participated in the review process. The qualitative and quantitative data sources illustrated six thematic areas for the district to consider. Twenty-four recommendations stemmed from the six identified themes.

One of the overarching themes, spanning across all six identified areas, was the lack of consistency throughout the district. For instance, the early elementary schools implemented the workshop model with enthusiasm and vigor, yet teacher participation waned in the upper elementary and middle schools. Students receive vastly different curricular experiences from one classroom to the next. This raised several concerns for teachers, students, and parents alike. In addition, the workshop model, while strong in many areas, does not directly address grammar and vocabulary acquisition. These skills are highlighted in the Common Core State Standards and will better prepare students for college and careers.

Services for struggling learners also emerged as a concern. Students identified by special education receive mandated services throughout the district, yet struggling learners outside of the system find little assistance and support. The early elementary schools offer the greatest number of literacy support services, but these sharply decline after second grade. The student achievement scores

indicate a high level of academic achievement in the district, which can increase academic demands for struggling readers even more. Establishing an assessment framework, in conjunction with a Response to Instruction and Intervention framework will allow the district to monitor academic achievement and provide appropriate services for struggling learners.

Collaboration and communication also arose as a theme for the district to consider. Little time is available for teachers to meet about students, plan lessons, and generate common assessments. No formal time exists for teachers across schools to meet and discuss student transitions. While school schedules are challenging, identifying times for teachers to regularly collaborate will increase collegiality and can result in consistent, effective instructional practices.

The district is poised to make positive, impactful changes. The themes and recommendations outlined in this literacy evaluation will guide the district in planning and implementing focused literacy initiatives. The process requires commitment, but when executed with fidelity, these improvements will support the academic development of students, fully preparing them for college and careers.