

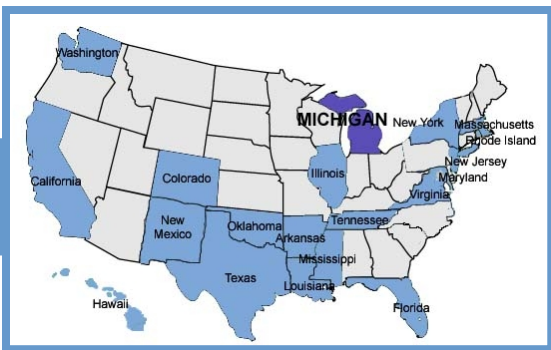
**National Center for  
Educational  
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# Just for the Kids, Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2006

Iris M. Becker Elementary School, Dearborn Public Schools  
Samuel Gompers Elementary School, Detroit Public Schools  
Lewiston School, Johannesburg-Lewiston Area Schools  
Adlai E. Stevenson Elementary School, Southfield Public School District  
Weidman Elementary School, Chippewa Hills School District

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## Just for the Kids, Michigan

### Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2006

#### The Institute

The 2006 Michigan Best Practice Institute continued a process begun in 2005 as part of a larger national research study to investigate the practices of schools that consistently outperformed their peers. Research teams studied schools in 20 states to identify key practices of consistently higher performing schools in a variety of policy contexts.

As in 2005, researchers studied five consistently higher performing elementary schools in Michigan to learn how they had attained and sustained their level of higher performance. Schools were identified through an in-depth analysis of academic achievement developed by the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA) using data publicly available from the state.

The 2006 Michigan Best Practice Institute was sponsored by Just for the Kids-Michigan affiliate (JFTK-MI) and received additional funding from the Daimler-Chrysler Foundation. JFTK-MI is a partnership of the Michigan Business Leaders for Educational Excellence and the National Center for Educational Accountability.

#### The Summary

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

#### The School Identification Process

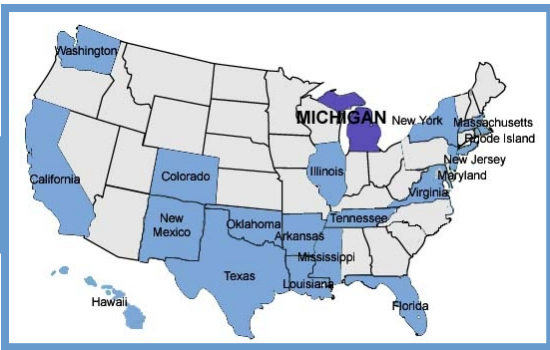
NCEA used publicly available student achievement data from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) to identify schools that consistently outperformed other schools with similar demographics in at least four of six subject areas in the 2002-03 through 2005-06<sup>1</sup> school years: mathematics, reading, English Language Arts, writing, science, and social studies. The analysis included data from the third- through sixth-grade Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests.

To identify the schools, NCEA conducted a separate analysis for each subject (mathematics, reading, English Language Arts, writing, science, and social studies) and year (2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006) to learn which schools outperformed their demographic peers on an average of the percentage of students meeting the "Met" and "Exceeded" standards on the state exam in each subject except social studies (which used only the "Met" standard).<sup>2</sup> NCEA used a Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analysis to compare each school's percent of students meeting the standard with the percent that was "predicted" or "typical" for a school in the state with the same demographics. The demographic and other variables used in this analysis were each school's percentage of low-income, African American, Hispanic, and Asian American students; the size of the school; and the schools "magnet" status. Normally, NCEA also prefers to take students' prior year test scores and length of enrollment in the same school into account, but that longitudinal information was not available in Michigan.

NCEA ranked each school against the elementary schools in the rest of the state based on the extent to

<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 2005-06, the MEAP was administered in the fall. The 2005-06 data are actually from the Fall 2005 MEAP assessments.

<sup>2</sup> This formula translates to a school receiving one point for any student who "Met" the standard and two points for any student who "Exceeded" the standard.



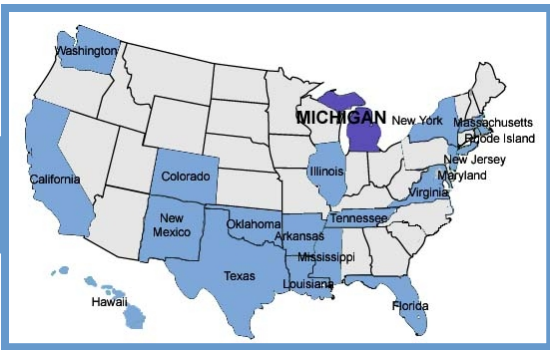
## Just for the Kids, Michigan

### Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2006

which it outperformed its “predicted” percent of students meeting the standard. For example, a school that outperformed 99% of the schools in “performance relative to predicted” in fourth-grade writing in fall 2005 (representing the 2005-06 school year) received a percentile rank of 99 for that subject and year. The average performance for each subject area across the four years was ranked separately to create an overall percentile rank by subject. To be selected as higher performing for the purposes of this study, schools had to have overall average percentile ranks above 75 in four of the six tested subjects: mathematics, reading, English Language Arts, writing, science, and social studies. In addition, schools were selected to participate in this Best Practice Institute with attention to their urban/rural status, size, and geographic location.

### The Higher Performing Schools Studied

School	District	2005 School Enrollment		2005 School-Wide Demographics						
		Grade Span	No. of Students	African American	Hispanic	White	Asian American	Native American	Other	Low Income
Iris M. Becker Elementary School	Dearborn Public Schools	K-5	273	0.4%	0.4%	97.8%	0.7%	0.7%	0.0%	80.0%
Samuel Gompers Elementary School	Detroit Public Schools	K-5	286	95.5%	0.7%	3.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	88.0%
Lewiston School	Johannesburg-Lewiston Area Schools	K-8	326	0.6%	0.3%	97.5%	0.0%	1.5%	0.1%	50.0%
Adlai E. Stevenson Elementary School	Southfield Public School District	K-5	472	89.6%	0.4%	5.1%	1.7%	0.0%	3.2%	37.0%
Weidman Elementary School	Chippewa Hills School District	K-5	300	1.3%	0.0%	87.3%	0.3%	11.0%	0.1%	69.0%



# Iris M. Becker Elementary School Dearborn Public Schools

## Just for the Kids, Michigan School Summary

### The School

Iris M. Becker Elementary School, which serves 273 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 20 elementary schools in the Dearborn Public Schools (17,470 students). Becker's student population is 97.8% White, 0.7% Asian American, 0.7% Native American, 0.4% African American, and 0.4% Hispanic. Within this student population, 80.0% receive free or reduced-price lunch services.

Subject	Overall Average Percentile Ranks 2003-2006
Mathematics	96
Science	94
Social Studies	97
Writing	98

### Consistent Higher Performance

Iris M. Becker Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in four of six subject areas: mathematics, science, social studies, and writing. The analysis included all third- through fifth-grade achievement data from spring 2003 to fall 2005 (2006).

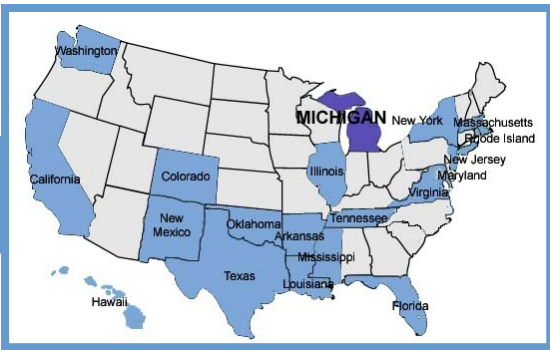
### MEAP Performance Trends

The Performance Rates listed below, except for social studies, are an average of the number of students meeting and exceeding the standard. In essence, this calculation gives a school one point for each student that meets the standard and two points for each student that exceeds the standard. NCEA is a strong proponent of higher standards and recognizes school efforts to move more students to the state's higher standard of achievement by accounting for those students in the analysis of consistent higher performance. The social studies MEAP had a strong floor effect (i.e., very few schools were able to get students to the Exceeds standard in significant numbers); therefore, the rates listed are the percentage of students simply meeting the standard in social studies.

Subject	2003 Performance		2004 Performance		2005 Performance		2006 (Fall 2005)* Performance		
	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	4	5
Mathematics	39.0	N/A	86.0	N/A	73.8	N/A	80.5	83.3	63.2
Science	N/A	57.9	N/A	70.4	N/A	77.7	N/A	N/A	52.7
Social Studies	N/A	18.4	N/A	69.4	N/A	50.0	N/A	N/A	N/A**
Writing	37.1	N/A	46.0	N/A	27.5	N/A	73.2	47.7	48.6

\*The MEAP administered in fall 2005 is listed as the 2006 test even though it assessed learning from the 2004-05 school year.

\*\*The MEAP in social studies is administered in sixth grade beginning with the Fall 2005 test.



# Samuel Gompers Elementary School Detroit Public Schools

## Just for the Kids, Michigan School Summary

### The School

Samuel Gompers Elementary School, which serves 286 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 256 elementary schools in the Detroit Public Schools (153,034 students). Gompers's student population is 95.5% African American, 3.8% White, and 0.7% Hispanic. Within this student population, 88.0% receive free or reduced-price lunch services.

Subject	Overall Average Percentile Ranks 2003-2006
Reading	98
English Language Arts	99
Science	90
Social Studies	98
Writing	97

### Consistent Higher Performance

Samuel Gompers Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in five of six subject areas: reading, English Language Arts, science, social studies, and writing. The analysis included all third- through fifth-grade achievement data from spring 2003 to fall 2005 (2006).

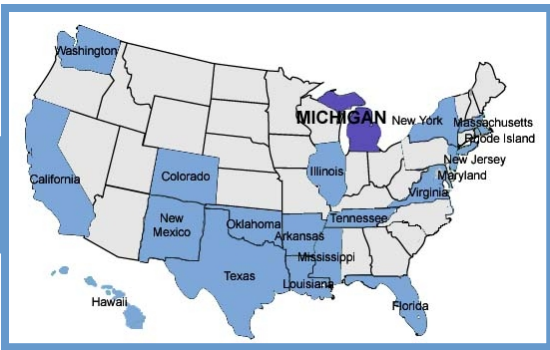
### MEAP Performance Trends

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Subject	2003 Performance		2004 Performance		2005 Performance		2006 (Fall 2005)* Performance		
	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	4	5
Reading	76.0	N/A	80.6	N/A	70.5	N/A	61.9	59.5	37.5
English Language Arts	52.0	N/A	50.1	N/A	51.2	N/A	51.2	53.6	30.6
Science	N/A	50.0	N/A	44.5	N/A	53.4	N/A	N/A	36.1
Social Studies	N/A	53.3	N/A	45.7	N/A	75.0	N/A	N/A	N/A**
Writing	34.3	N/A	30.6	N/A	35.2	N/A	34.9	40.5	32.0

\*The MEAP administered in fall 2005 is listed as the 2006 test even though it assessed learning from the 2004-05 school year.

\*\*The MEAP in social studies is administered in sixth grade beginning with the Fall 2005 test.



# Lewiston School Johannesburg-Lewiston Area Schools

## Just for the Kids, Michigan School Summary

### The School

Lewiston School, which serves 326 kindergarten through eighth-grade students, is one of two K-8 schools in Johannesburg-Lewiston Area Schools (868 students). Lewiston's student population is 97.5% White, 0.6% African American, 0.3% Hispanic, 1.5% Native American, and 0.1% other. Within this student population, 50.0% receive free or reduced-price lunch services.

Subject	Overall Average Percentile Ranks 2003-2006
Reading	85
English Language Arts	91
Social Studies	79
Writing	90

### Consistent Higher Performance

Lewiston School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in four of six subject areas: reading, English Language Arts, social studies, and writing. The analysis included all third- through fifth-grade achievement data from spring 2003 to fall 2005 (2006).

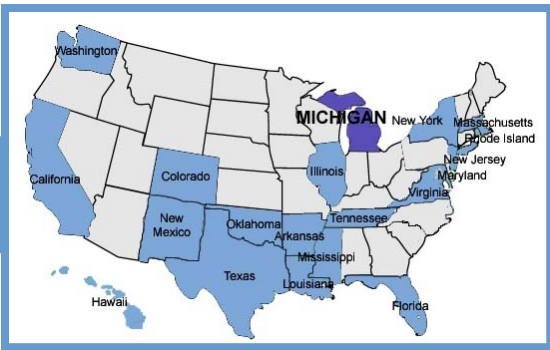
### MEAP Performance Trends

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Subject	2003 Performance		2004 Performance		2005 Performance		2006 (Fall 2005)* Performance		
	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	4	5
Reading	53.7	N/A	52.5	N/A	58.9	N/A	60.0	61.3	63.9
English Language Arts	35.2	N/A	46.4	N/A	50.0	N/A	48.8	42.5	51.4
Social Studies	N/A	22.6	N/A	65.3	N/A	23.2	N/A	N/A	N/A**
Writing	29.7	N/A	43.9	N/A	28.0	N/A	28.8	28.8	44.5

\*The MEAP administered in fall 2005 is listed as the 2006 test even though it assessed learning from the 2004-05 school year.

\*\*The MEAP in social studies is administered in sixth grade beginning with the Fall 2005 test.



# Adlai E. Stevenson Elementary School Southfield Public School District

## Just for the Kids, Michigan School Summary

### The School

Adlai E. Stevenson Elementary School, which serves 472 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is 1 of 10 elementary schools in the Southfield Public School District (10,248 students). Stevenson's student population is 89.6% African American, 5.1% White, 1.7% Asian American, 0.4% Hispanic, and 3.2% other. Within this student population, 37.0% receive free or reduced-price lunch services.

Subject	Overall Average Percentile Ranks 2003-2006
Reading	99
English Language Arts	99
Mathematics	99
Science	99
Social Studies	99
Writing	99

### Consistent Higher Performance

Adlai E. Stevenson Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in all six subject areas: reading, English Language Arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and writing. The analysis included all third- through fifth-grade achievement data from spring 2003 to fall 2005 (2006).

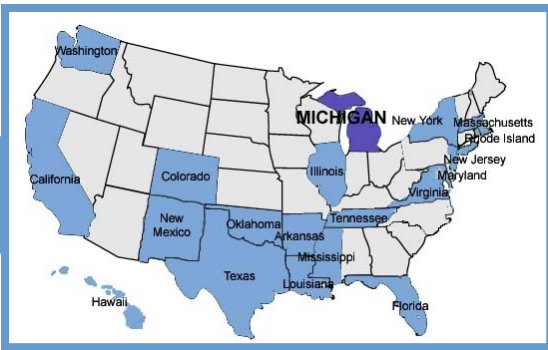
### MEAP Performance Trends

The Performance Rates listed below, except for social studies, are an average of the number of students meeting and exceeding the standard. In essence, this calculation gives a school one point for each student that meets the standard and two points for each student that exceeds the standard. NCEA is a strong proponent of higher standards and recognizes school efforts to move more students to the state's higher standard of achievement by accounting for those students in the analysis of consistent higher performance. The social studies MEAP had a strong floor effect (i.e., very few schools were able to get students to the Exceeds standard in significant numbers); therefore, the rates listed are the percentage of students simply meeting the standard in social studies.

Subject	2003 Performance		2004 Performance		2005 Performance		2006 (Fall 2005)* Performance		
	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	4	5
Reading	71.6	N/A	75.1	N/A	67.9	N/A	90.3	72.7	77.5
English Language Arts	54.4	N/A	55.4	N/A	47.4	N/A	88.1	61.0	64.3
Mathematics	93.0	N/A	93.9	N/A	75.1	N/A	95.6	78.1	73.3
Science	N/A	83.1	N/A	89.5	N/A	86.9	N/A	N/A	70.2
Social Studies	N/A	78.1	N/A	82.4	N/A	76.3	N/A	N/A	N/A**
Writing	37.1	N/A	46.0	N/A	27.5	N/A	73.2	61.8	52.4

\*The MEAP administered in fall 2005 is listed as the 2006 test even though it assessed learning from the 2004-05 school year.

\*\*The MEAP in social studies is administered in sixth grade beginning with the Fall 2005 test.



# Weidman Elementary School Chippewa Hills School District

## Just for the Kids, Michigan School Summary

### The School

Weidman Elementary School, which serves 300 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is one of four elementary schools in Chippewa Hills School District (2,604 students). Weidman's student population is 87.3% White, 11.0% Native American, 1.3% African American, 0.3% Asian American, and 0.1% other. Within this student population, 69.0% receive free or reduced-price lunch services.

Subject	Overall Average Percentile Ranks 2003-2006
Reading	99
English Language Arts	99
Mathematics	98
Science	98

### Consistent Higher Performance

Weidman Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in four of six subject areas: reading, English Language Arts, mathematics, and science. The analysis included all third- through fifth-grade achievement data from spring 2003 to fall 2005 (2006).

### MEAP Performance Trends

The Performance Rates listed below are an average of the number of students meeting and exceeding the standard. In essence, this calculation gives a school one point for each student that meets the standard and two points for each student that exceeds the standard. NCEA is a strong proponent of higher standards and recognizes school efforts to move more students to the state's higher standard of achievement by accounting for those students in the analysis of consistent higher performance.

Subject	2003 Performance		2004 Performance		2005 Performance		2006 (Fall 2005)* Performance		
	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	4	5
Grade									
Reading	64.4	N/A	59.6	N/A	61.3	N/A	81.0	67.5	67.1
English Language Arts	46.2	N/A	44.1	N/A	48.8	N/A	60.7	57.5	55.0
Mathematics	63.5	N/A	86.0	N/A	73.8	N/A	81.8	73.9	59.6
Science	N/A	72.7	N/A	76.5	N/A	70.8	N/A	N/A	75.0

\*The MEAP administered in fall 2005 is listed as the 2006 test even though it assessed learning from the 2004-05 school year.



# Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute Findings

*Based on the Themes of the JFTK Framework*

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

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

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

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



## Theme One: Curriculum and Academic Goals

*“What Is Taught and Learned”*

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

### Specific Michigan Findings: Curriculum and Academic Goals

- **District curriculum materials, such as curriculum maps, pacing guides, lists of aligned instructional resources, and common assessments, provide additional detail to Michigan’s Grade-Level Content Expectations (GLCEs).**
  - School staff reported that their districts began with the state standards and worked backwards to build detailed curriculum maps using Grade-Level Content Expectations. One educator summarized the process described by many school systems: “We always start with the state

benchmarks and grade level expectations; and then, as a district, we design curriculum based on that.” One principal noted, “Everything we do is driven by the GLCEs and the [state] benchmarks, and that became reality when the MEAP was hitting us all hard and heavy. That’s the backbone, and that’s where we begin everything.”

- Pacing guides are common instructional resources. Educators noted the consistency that these guides offer to their students. One educator noted, “In Detroit, we’re supposed to be following our pacing guide and staying within two to three weeks of our pacing guide. ... One thing is, in some areas of Detroit, we have a high transient population, so if a child is moving from school to school, they are not missing their curriculum, and that’s important in our district.” Even smaller districts described the benefit of coordinating instruction district wide. A leader from Chippewa Hills School District said, “If we have a child move from Weidman [Elementary] to, say, the Mecosta building, they really should be at a similar place and have accomplished a similar thing.”
- Educators discussed the instructional support that curriculum maps provide for new teachers. As one said, “The teachers help put together the pacing charts, so ...when you open up a pacing chart as a new teacher—say, teaching grade six for the first time—it’s all laid out there for you.” Another educator explained that, in his or her district, acculturating new teachers to the district curriculum is accelerated: “We started putting copies of the curriculum guides in [human resources] because they’ll see people with still weeks to go before they come to school to start teaching Labor Day. So when they have their final interview and sign on the dotted line, Tom loads them up. The poor elementary teacher walks out with a stack of curriculum guides. Of course, it’s on the website, but I want them to be able to write in the thing and stick notes and all of that, and it’s given to them when they sign on.”
- Small and large districts alike provide lists of aligned instructional materials that support the GLCEs and district curriculum maps. One district representative explained the process of clarifying and enhancing the GLCEs: “We actually look at [each GLCE and say] ‘Where do we cover that?’ For example, let’s say it’s a math GLCE. We do that; it is in our textbook on pages 10 through 20. So our teachers would expect that every student in our grade level would have been exposed to pages 10 to 20. It would be mastered. ... We have additional resources so that if we are adding supplemental materials—we are adding extra things—we also have a column for that [in the curriculum map].”
- One school led their district in developing common assessments to go with the pacing guide. The principal noted, “For the last two years, we’ve been developing common assessments to go along with [the district curriculum]. I would like to see that happen at the district level, and some progress has. They have been moving towards common assessments; but it’s a lot of work, a lot of collaboration, and a lot of teacher release time. That is where they are falling kind of behind. There is not enough money to do that this year. So we do a lot at the building level.”
- **Instruction is tightly focused on the GLCEs and district pacing guides. As a by-product of this standards-based instruction, teachers develop a deeper understanding of the student learning expectations.**
  - Higher performing schools encourage teachers to explicitly connect their instruction to content standards and outcome expectations. One school uses the *Blackboard Configuration* (BBC) technique of having teachers post lesson objectives and bell work associated with building-wide focus standards. The principal explained, “We decided that everybody would be a math teacher. So every day for bell work, we do math. From the curriculum mapping, we had a list of our skills that we were doing poorly in related to the grade level expectations. I can do a three-minute walkthrough and look at every chalkboard in my school and see the bell work for the morning. So when I arrive at my school at about 7 a.m., I can quickly see that every teacher is working on that objective, by just looking at the chalkboards.”

- One principal stated, “We use our [curriculum] maps, ... and then the teachers jot down the date that they’ve completed a particular GLCE. It’s marked right on the map.”
- One teacher from Becker Elementary said, “We have a new report card that is tailored to the benchmarks. In every marking period, there are certain [content expectations] in every subject that were covered by the teacher. So when we teach our lesson, immediately we have to mark those skills on the report card that we taught that concept. So the report card is designed to fit in within the curriculum.”
- According to the Lewiston School principal, “We have had a consultant come in and work with us on unit development. Starting with the GLCEs and, in his words, ‘backwards design’ to get to the assessment. If the kid is going to master this grade-level content expectation or benchmark, what will the kid know or be able to do in order to master that? What’s it going to look like at the end?” A teacher explained, “When we first started taking a closer look at our performance—and we were struggling so much—we got some help from outside. ... That person helped us take the benchmarks and expectations and break them down. ... That really started Lewiston School moving in the right direction when it came to taking a closer look at curriculum and those specific lesson plans.”
- One teacher from Gompers Elementary in Detroit explained, “We are also required as teachers, in our lesson plans, to write the standards, know the standards, and to teach the standards. They are included in our objectives, and we do have to point them out. So we have the numbers, and [we] write the whole thing out. So we do internalize what the state expects us to teach in our subject matter.”
- Not all schools required teachers to detail standards in their lesson plans, but most have found other ways to foster a deep understanding of the content expectations. A teacher from Lewiston School described their efforts to translate the state’s GLCEs into easily understood language: “We’ll put [the benchmarks and outcomes] in a friendly form for parents to understand, and we’ll send those home to parents, too, so they know what their children are expected to know. [They are] teacher friendly, too, so you can just pick it up and use it real easily. [They are] also substitute friendly. When you have a guest teacher in your classroom, they can look at it and use it. We’ve worked real hard to make sure in our lesson plans that we include those outcomes and expectations. ... I think it’s a good practice because it does help you know what you’re teaching and internalize it—very much so.”
- **Teacher teams contribute to the curriculum development process by studying the state standards (Grade-Level Content Expectations) and developing pacing guides and other support materials. Curricular materials are often tailored at the school level.**
  - The principal of one school, who also serves as the curriculum director for the small district, noted, “We don’t have that many teachers per grade level. I have four schools with about two sections [per grade] in each building. ... So I am able to pull all of my teachers together from all of my buildings, and that’s where we really do our curriculum work. So in my case, all of my teachers are involved in [curriculum development]. It’s not just a committee.” She adds that this level of teacher input improves implementation and buy-in “because they’ve worked on them, they made them. It wasn’t top down; it was bottom up for the [curriculum] maps. Because [our district is] small, they all have a part in the development.”
  - Larger districts employ teams of teachers (and sometimes principals) to study the GLCEs and write a district curriculum that is aligned with the state expectations and benchmarks. One principal explained, “We look at the GLCE, and we look at what that means to us. We put it in a little different term, although the GLCEs are so much easier to understand than the past benchmarks.”

- Although nearly all of the schools have curriculum maps or pacing guides in effect district wide, several schools further supplement and tailor those maps according to the needs of their students. The principal of Gompers Elementary noted, “I don’t think Detroit often gets credit for our outstanding curriculum because of all of the other problems that go around, but we have excellent curriculum in Detroit. And then at the school level, you address any gaps and fill those gaps with our [school] curriculum team through staff development.”
- Schools in smaller districts, like Lewiston School, also enhance the district-level work with school-developed materials like vertically aligned vocabulary lists: “We focused on vocabulary that we would use school wide K-8 so that kids were hearing the same thing that was familiar, and we didn’t confuse them with a lot of different terms. We wanted to remain as consistent as we can yet teach them some new things each grade level.”
- The curriculum development process was viewed by most schools as an ongoing activity rather than a terminal one. The principal of Lewiston School detailed the process in his school uses to develop and regularly refine the curriculum: “One of the things we did last year in curriculum development in math was called a COW, ‘Curriculum on the Wall.’ We just looked at math GLCEs by grade level, and each grade level team, which is just two people each team, would get together, take the GLCEs, and literally cut them all out—cut and paste—put them on sticky notes, and put them on a chart board by quarter. The poster board is divided into four sections representing the first through fourth quarters, and they put the GLCEs where they belong, where they are going to be mastered by each quarter. That’s first through eighth grade. Then we posted that up on the wall, so it’s a great visual of what is going to happen throughout the year, first through eighth grades. We keep those posters in a common room during the course of the year in a conference room. Then, during the year, the teachers will go and move things around because we planned to do this first quarter, and we didn’t get anywhere near that, so some things are moving to second [quarter] or other things get done more quickly. So by the end of the year, it’s a living document—a living thing—and it goes on throughout the year.”
- The principal of Lewiston School also noted, “The [curriculum development] process “has involved a lot of release time for teachers. We’ll bring in the consultant during the day, call in four rotating substitutes instead of the teachers doing half-day shifts, and we’ll do that ... about every two weeks. It was really, really busy and really frantic, and we’ve been doing it for a number of years now. And as we go through it, and I reflect on it, we’ll never be done. The curriculum will never be something we can say we’re done ... because kids change from day to day, especially at the middle school end of the building.”
- **Educators regularly review and refine curricula and their instruction based on student performance. These curricular revisions occur on different scales at different intervals throughout the year.**
  - Classroom teachers noted that they regularly review and adjust their instruction based on student performance data. As one teacher explained, “We’re always adjusting based on data, whether it’s formal or informal data that we get. Because if you’re teaching the subject and the students are not doing well, you’re going to adjust to that. It’s a constant thing. ... It’s just a natural thing that you do. We adjust all the time based on data.”
  - One school developed an intervention worksheet, which is reviewed seven times throughout the year along with student profiles. Reviewing individual student progress may not be particularly innovative in today’s educational environment, but the school brings an additional perspective to that task that makes it unique. The principal explained the patterns that educators look for after highlighting struggling students’ names on the worksheet: “We also look vertically at content areas. If there is a subject area that has a disproportionate number of scores marked compared to the others, then we’ll reflect on what are we doing. Let’s say it’s math, and half the kids are marked yellow, and nothing else looks anything like that. [We’ll ask], ‘What’s going on in math?’ Obviously, it’s not all Johnny and Susie; it’s something else. Is it the curriculum; is it the approach; is there too much TV going on; were there ten snow

days; that kind of thing? So that happens at the halfway point of every marking period and at the end of every marking period as well. That's been huge in our move forward. We've been doing it for a number of years now."

- Similarly, other districts and schools review annual assessment data with an eye to curricular needs as much as to individual student needs. In one small district, an administrator explained, "The process for making adjustments to the curriculum in our building is based on the data that we see. We look at the data. We look at the long-term data and say, 'Where are our strengths and where are our weaknesses?' If it is a K-8, we look at the data, and say, 'Why are we not doing well on [this standard]? Why are children not doing well on these high-order thinking skills?' We will come back and say, 'What do we need to do as a staff member, as a strategy?' If [the challenged area] was in the high school, we can take a look by department and say, 'Is it content? Do we need to change the content? Do we need to change when we teach or what we teach? Are we missing something? Is it instructional? Is it our assessment piece?'"
- One teacher summarized the sentiment of many teacher participants about how the annual review of assessment data informs curricular adjustments: "We do a lot of item analysis when we look at the MEAP. We found out that there were some gaps in the second-grade year. Vocabulary was a big thing that we needed to work on."
- Another teacher added that the potential exists to react quickly to assessment data: "Always looking back at the test data you get back is going to determine what you are going to do next year. ... We always look at what changes can we make right now as soon as we are done testing. What can we do to do a better job next year? We start right away by asking the kids questions—how they felt about the testing situation, what concerns they had about it. And when they share those, teachers get together, and we look at that. When we get back our [assessment] results, we break down our test data and look at our strengths and our weaknesses. Whatever subject material it was, we see if we need to spend more time on that, focus on that or maybe shift that expectation to a lower grade level or a higher grade level. ... If they are struggling with something, we take a look at it on a daily basis as well as on a quarterly or yearly basis."
- Educators in Lewiston School attributed a significant and important shift in their student achievement to a change in the way teachers thought about, constructed, and revised their lessons. One teacher explained the impact of the consultant who taught them the backwards mapping technique: "We started with the assessment piece first, and we worked backwards and built the lesson from that point. ... That was the biggest change I think we ever made based on student data. It just changed the way we taught." When asked about revisions to the curriculum based on student data, the principal of Lewiston School also referred to this reflective unit development process: "It's not so much the focus on materials we're going to purchase, but more on the GLCEs and why the students aren't performing the way we'd expect them to perform."
- With an iterative model of curriculum development and adjustment based on student data, the Lewiston principal added, "It sometimes feels that at first you're juggling two balls, and then three and four and five, and you never get to put one down because [with] the process you're never done. You can never say, 'Well, we've got social studies figured out; let's put all of our focus on science this year.' You just can't. You can focus and make this is the year we're going to work on writing or math or whatever it happens to be, but those other things—you've got to keep juggling those too and keep them alive."



## Theme Two: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

### *"Selecting and Developing Leaders and Teachers"*

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

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

- **Internal leadership development programs help produce principal candidates who can provide continuity to the instructional program of school.**
  - Detroit Public Schools offers a School Leadership Academy, a year-long training process for aspiring principals. One district administrator noted the benefits of developing potential principals internally: "I think we're kind of lucky because we tend to grow our own administrators most of the time. So it is our own teachers who have evidence that they are doing great things with kids that end up as assistant principals [APs]. It usually is an AP who becomes a principal. So from that standpoint most of our people have lived in our system, and they know the instructional program because they taught it."
  - The development of internal candidates in another district once included simulated "in-box" exercises. An administrator noted, "We got some great information on some novice people. It really helped us identify teachers who were ready to step into some administrative positions."
  - In one smaller district, administrators try to foster strong teachers' interests in administration: "[In a large district], many times you're going to get a principal from a smaller school applying. They have principal experience. I am going to get a teacher. I would also like to 'bring up baby' whenever I can. So if I have somebody on the staff that I think is going to be good—and I have an idea that somebody is going to leave in a little while—I will try to nurture that person."
- **Principal selection is an inclusive process involving numerous stakeholders in order to identify candidates who are well-matched to the needs of the school.**
  - Matching candidates' expertise to school needs is a priority for these school systems. One district administrator noted, "People come with lots of good information today. They talk about the data. One candidate came with an action plan for the school, saying, 'If given the opportunity to serve—looking at your data—these are some things I would propose.' I'm seeing a higher quality of individual coming today for the jobs, and they are very specific about the schools they are coming to interview for."
  - Schools reported having principal interview panels that consisted of district leaders, peer principals, human resource representatives, teachers, and—in some cases—parents, students, or business partners. One district administrator only forwarded candidates to the interview panel who had "a proven track record."
  - One district administrator described the panel interview process: "We use the stakeholder process [to interview principal candidates]. We have our parents; we have a transportation supervisor, a maintenance supervisor, and some of the building folks in another group; students in a group; administrators in a group; and I went with the board. So we took five candidates, and we did it in one fell swoop, moving them around every 20 minutes. They moved from table to table, so we went through five interviews, ... and each got in our own groups and rated them."

- In one district that includes parent and teacher representatives in the interviewing process, district administrators and peer principals interviewed candidates first. As the district administrator explained, “We had a committee of three teachers per building that needed replacement, and we had three community/parent/whomever from each building in another room. Then the candidate [who] made it through that first interview process had an interview with the teachers back to back with the interview with the community, and we just kept flip-flopping people. We made sure we didn’t put a candidate in front of the teachers or the community that we couldn’t live with, so we did the initial selection.”
- **School structures, such as grade-level teams and common planning times, enable teachers to collaborate regularly. Teachers use the given time to study assessment data, plan and critique lessons, and mark student work.**
  - Most of these schools are incorporating the study of student work into their collaborative time. One school principal detailed a formal process: “*Looking at Student Work* or *Studying Student Work*, from Michigan Middle Start, is similar to what you’re describing. There is a whole protocol that goes with it; it’s a pretty prescribed process. ... For example, you’re bringing a sample writing piece from a student who is really struggling in writing, and the teacher will then present the assignment, and say, ‘This was the assignment, and this is what I expected the children to do. Here is what Johnny did.’ There’s a series of questions the facilitator will ask, and then the observers have a chance to ask questions of the teacher. Then we come up with suggestions to help the student. So, here we are—a group of professionals—sitting around studying one student’s work, the product that we’re asking kids to do, and looking for ways to help that child improve. And in the process, [we’re] helping the teacher improve in a non-threatening way. I wish when I went to the doctor that my doctor sat around with five other doctors and brainstormed about things they could do to help treat me better.”
  - One district administrator explained that four of the district schools—which are not limited by transportation issues—adopted a modified schedule to accommodate teacher collaboration and professional development: “We do have four schools that follow a different start and ending time because they asked if they could have an early release on Wednesdays. Of course, they had to make up the 1,098 hours of instruction, so the kids come to school 15 minutes early every day; but on Wednesday, they get out an hour and 15 minutes early.” The teachers use that time as a common planning period that is usually used for staff development planned by the principal and a group of teachers.
  - Lewiston School has held staff retreats for the past six years, usually funded through grant money. Although grants provided money in the early years for teacher stipends, the retreat is now a voluntary, unpaid activity that still draws about 90% faculty participation. The principal explained, “One year we were able to offer teachers stipends for it, but for the most part, they don’t get paid. They are not forced, but it’s become such a huge part of who we are and such a productive event that we’re to the point now where we don’t understand how we ever started school without doing it. ... It’s part of our culture now.”
  - Regular grade-level meetings provide opportunities at Lewiston School to share professionally. The principal said, “We’ve reset our schedule so that every grade level team has common planning time every day. They’ll have 45-60 minutes together where it didn’t used to be possible, but it is now, including the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. I asked them to have at least one structured team meeting a week during that common time, and then submit to me team minutes. Tell me what it is that you were talking about, and what it is you’ve been working on. ... I’ll usually write notes back about whatever it is if they had questions for me or just comment on what they are doing. It has been a great way for dialogue and communication.”
  - One principal explained an added benefit to the collaboration: “[Grade-level common planning time] is one of the big things that we’ve done to try to make sure that there is not this huge gap between this second grade and that second grade, to make sure the teachers are all working together. They work in teams that do work well together. During the retreat, we build in some

team planning time where they just get together in their teams and talk about common procedures, common expectations, and that kind of thing.”

- In addition to regular informal meetings, one teacher explained that—at least once per semester—grade-level teams are released by substitutes for a half day to collaborate: “We’ll come together and say, ‘Okay, how far have we gone so far; are we on the same page?’ Sometimes we’ll pull resources and [find that] one of us has a resource that’s working really well that we can share with another. Then [we] kind of map out the rest of that semester, and we’ll do the same thing maybe midway through the second semester.”
- For at least one school, collaborative planning time is also used for report card marking. A teacher explained, “We make sure that we are marking the report cards with the same scales and the same way for each child.” Common report card marking also allows for professional reflection. As the teacher noted, “I find it also that when there are certain concepts that I feel like the kids are not getting, then I ask other teachers how they teach it, what they do to get it to the kids so they can understand this concept and skills.”
- An alternative teaming concept used in one school is “platooning.” As a teacher explained, “We are expected to specialize in our [content] area, and we’re endorsed in that area.” At this school, teachers teach the same subject to third, fourth, and fifth graders who move around from teacher to teacher. The teacher explained, “One thing I like about our platooning is it takes some of the pressure off. ... Because, if you’re self-contained, the whole ball of wax is on you.”
- In one school, even the staff lounge fosters informal collaboration. A teacher reported, “In our staff lounge, we came up with the idea for bulletin boards for each subject area. Up there is where we post any questions we have about how to do something. We ask questions there, we share examples of rubrics we build to score something maybe, different pieces of work we’ve done with kids and tried with kids, successes and failures. It’s mostly a space where—it’s right there during lunch time—you can take a look at it, and you can say, ‘Does anyone have a rubric for how to grade student presentations?’ or something like that. So you can ask questions; you get answers. ‘Can I come in and see somebody do a guided reading lesson?’ It’s kind of a communication thing where you can share examples of student work, you can ask questions, and you can get responses back. ... It can be focused on one student, or it can be a class assignment that we look at. I pose the question as ‘What do I need to do to get my students to do this better?’”

▪ **Collaboration fosters collective responsibility for student learning in the school.**

- Teaming was seen by many as a way to foster greater accountability for the learning of all students. That was the goal for two schools that had restructured into teams from a departmental structure. As one principal explained, “Before, if a student was having a problem and I went to a teacher, the response seemed to be, ‘I teach math; I don’t teach Johnny.’ Now it’s not that way anymore. You have a team of kids; you teach this kid. You may teach him math; you may teach him language arts; you may teach him science; but you teach students first, so it’s all about owning those kids and really, really feeling accountable for those kids personally. A teacher from another school agreed: “Before [the current principal] came to the building, the upper elementary teachers were departmentalized. She changed that because she wanted the teachers to feel responsible for that group of students and make sure that they were meeting those kids’ needs. ‘Those are your children, and you make sure you do the best for them.’”
- Gompers Elementary in Detroit adopted the Comer philosophy school-wide which focuses on all developmental aspects of the students (e.g., physical, cognitive, social, emotional). A collaborative adult culture accompanies that philosophy. The principal explained, “We’re a no fault school; if something doesn’t work, we’re not pointing fingers. ... We all take ownership of every child in our school. They are all ours. I think that you had mentioned the atmosphere in the school. That is so important. We believe that, too. We are a family.”

- **Cross grade-level team meetings allow teachers to develop deeper understanding of the Grade-Level Content Expectations and to share information about the learning needs of incoming students.**
  - One school that provides a half day of grade-level collaboration time each semester sometimes includes cross-grade teams in the planning. A teacher explained, “Sometimes we also do that in cross-grade level meetings, too, where maybe the fourth-grade team will meet with the third-grade team and the fifth grade team to make sure of both the grade level behind us and ahead of us, [that we know] what is expected at the other grade levels.”
  - At Becker Elementary, cross-grade–level meetings are used to ease student transitions from one grade to the next. One teacher explained, “Towards the end of the year, we met with fourth- and fifth-grade teachers, and we found out what had been covered and what had not been covered.”
  - Vertical teams help to reinforce curricular alignment. One teacher noted, “I feel responsible to go to the fourth-grade teachers and ask them if they covered certain benchmarks, or ‘How did the kids do in the previous year?’ or ‘What were the difficulties achieving those skills and concepts?’ so that when they come to fifth grade, I will try to focus on those concepts and skills that haven’t been totally mastered in fourth grade. So we always have informal discussions going among staff.” Another teacher agreed: “We have cross-grade meetings where we can go to the third-grade teachers and say, ‘Hey, this seems to be missing from the students we’re receiving. Maybe you can emphasize this a little bit.’ And that works really well because they become a little bit more prepared the next year when we get the children.”
  - Cross-grade collaboration also provides an opportunity to broaden teachers’ skills in various techniques. For one school, an after-school tutorial program served the added benefit of institutionalizing instructional practice: “Now what happens is the third-grade teachers helped the fourth-grade teachers. So they are in the room, and they are watching us teach, and they are helping us and teaming with us. So they learn a little bit about fourth-grade curriculum. Now we would help separate teachers, and the second-grade teachers would help the third-grade teachers. But the interesting thing that happened was you are observing other teachers, and you are learning different techniques. [For instance,] someone would see you maybe teaching a way of solving certain story problems, and they would say, ‘That was great. You need to present this to the staff.’ And then all of a sudden you are presenting it to the staff, and it becomes a system that everyone in the building begins to use. So by the time I get the children now, they are familiar with that system.”
  
- **Professional development opportunities for teachers are based on identified needs and often tap the expertise of the school’s own teacher leaders.**
  - One teacher explained, “It’s been more than just an IDP [individual development plan] and a file. It’s involved some after-school activities and things like that that have been voluntary, but I think they are high enough quality that people want to come. The presentations are by [their peers] in the room. ... The professional development has been at the backbone of [the success of the program], and the reason I think it’s been successful is because it’s based on our data, our student performance, and what we want and have asked for as a staff. We need help to become better teachers. We need help helping our students learn better. ... So it’s because it’s based on our needs—and it’s been what we’ve asked for—it’s not been a problem getting people to buy in.”
  - One principal commented on another school’s practice of tapping internal expertise for professional development opportunities: “I think it’s great that you use your teachers to run the show, and I think that’s so important that teachers are learning. We’re not always bringing people from outside telling us what to do. So teachers are taking on the leadership and curriculum development and implementation.”

- One principal noted a shift in how professional development activities are selected for teachers: “It’s really driven by the needs that you’ve identified. It’s not like when I was a teacher, [when] every one of us got Madeline Hunter-ized. So it’s more driven by what the data is telling you and what you know about the student needs in your building.”
- Many school systems employ the “train-the-trainers” model of sharing professional development with the entire faculty. Through three year-long Comprehensive School Reform grants, Lewiston School brought in consultants to train the entire K-8 staff, but they are returning to the train-the-trainers model since those grants have concluded. One teacher described the benefits of both models of professional development: “We spent the last four or five years now bringing people into our building, so everybody has been trained the same way by the same people. That’s been wonderful; that’s been invaluable. We’re just finishing up this last year on that grant, so we’re done. Now we’re taking professional development to a new level, where we already have a group of two teachers down state in Lansing taking a workshop, and they are going to come back and present that to us. So we’re going to keep our professional development going within our own building among our own people. So we’re going to try to take on the role of that leadership.”
- Several district and school leaders mentioned the challenge of maintaining a common base of understanding—particularly of core instructional programs—once the initial period of publisher-provided professional development lapses. As one administrator explained, “The poor teacher that moves in later—they don’t get anything like the intense, publisher-focused training. We try to bring them in for their early professional development on those programs and to give them a better understanding of our philosophy for English Language Arts. But that is our biggest challenge. Again, the cycle—when you get new hires in an off-cycle and try to give them that initial information that they need.”
- An administrator said, “One of the easiest ways to deep-six a school system is when your new people do not have the same [sense of a program], and you don’t have the money anymore because the grant ran out. So now you have to build [capacity] internally, but it’s not exactly the same as the initial training. [It is as if] I whisper to you, and you whisper to you, and it’s not the same message.”



### Theme Three: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

#### *“The Right Stuff—Time and Tools”*

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

### Specific Michigan Findings: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

- **Blocks of uninterrupted instructional time in core content areas are prioritized and sometimes mandated.**
  - Schools often use block scheduling to provide large chunks of uninterrupted instructional time. One principal described this arrangement as “sacred time for teachers to be instructing students.” Representatives from Detroit Public Schools were the only ones at the Institute to discuss having a formal document or policy—a time allocation chart—detailing the time to be devoted to core instructional areas. Other districts share guidelines less formally through memos or other means to help principals and teachers allocate the instructional day.

- Uninterrupted 50- to 90-minute literacy blocks are built into the school schedule. Structured programs (such as *Open Court*) are commonly used as core programs during this instruction. Some schools also mandate weekly instructional minutes for mathematics and science. The principal at Gompers Elementary created a schedule that provides 75-minute blocks of uninterrupted time for science instruction, three times per week.
- Several schools coordinate instruction in core content areas so that everyone in the building is teaching mathematics or literacy first thing in the morning. At Stevenson Elementary, teachers follow generally the same schedule throughout the day. As one teacher explained, “The schedule has some flexibility in it, but it also has the structure to make sure that everything is getting the coverage that it should be getting. ... But, generally speaking, the entire building should be working on reading at about the same time, should be working on math at about the same time.”
- **Programs and practices to expand students’ environments are important to educators in both geographically and culturally isolated settings.**
  - Several principals described their efforts to integrate language instruction (Arabic, Spanish, French, and African American English) and to provide field trips as important ways to expand students’ opportunities and their outlook. Breaking down the isolation of some communities is also important. The principals want to honor the cultures that students bring to school, but also want to expand their perspectives and expose them to cultures, languages, and experiences outside students’ typical environment.
  - Serving a growing community with a large Arab American population, Becker Elementary offers Arabic instruction. All teachers, K-5, at Becker teach Arabic two or three times a week for about 45 minutes. A teacher explained, “We use the same procedure we follow for the English reading groups and have small Arabic reading groups for different levels. We test the kids and place them in levels, and they work with the teacher or with para-professionals.” The principal reported, “By the time [students] exit fifth grade, we have the data that they are reading in both languages.”
  - Even English speakers can benefit from second-language instruction, according to the principal at Gompers Elementary: “What can we do to let them know, ‘This is not really the true world that you live in, the Brightmore community in Detroit’? And if you’re going to be a part of the work world, how can you prepare for that? We also emphasize language. We teach Spanish and French at our school, so that our kids can learn that they have to speak another language. As I mentioned earlier, we have a lot of what you might call African American English that we contend with. Introducing them to a foreign language is a great way for them to see they can switch between different languages.”
  - One principal said, “Fieldtrips are so important. I always use a lot of money from the Title I budget to take them everywhere. They have to be out there, and try to include their parents as much as possible, so parents are encouraged to go on fieldtrips. We want the parents to be exposed as well.”
  - Expanding students’ perspectives and opportunities includes planting seeds for college attendance. The principal of Gompers Elementary said, “We try to get our kids on college campuses. We have a College Bound program at our school so that we can get college into their world really soon. This is a goal we want [students] to have.”



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

### *"Knowing the Learners and the Numbers"*

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

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

- **Student assessment data are critical to establishing and monitoring school goals. Districts have systems in place to manage various student data in order to provide timely feedback about student learning needs to educators.**
  - Data management systems such as *Schoolmaster* and *Zangle* are used to maintain and monitor student data. One district administrator explained, "The way we are keeping data in *Zangle*, we can flag kids so that we could query it, and ask for some longitudinal data on our *Reading Recovery* kids. [For instance,] they've had *Reading Recovery* in '01, and now we want to see what those kids are doing in '06."
  - The schools and school districts represented at the Institute use a variety of assessment data to establish and monitor school goals. Schools are becoming more open to sharing data and progress toward goals with parents and community members through their websites and community events. In one system, the district holds a stakeholders' meeting, at which the district's school improvement committee reports to the community-at-large. One administrator indicated, "We'll invite all the local business leaders, and some key parents and school staff. We usually have about 50 people show up at this dinner, and then the data [are] presented annually. 'These were the goals we set last year. This is how the school performed.' Each principal talks a little bit about things that are going on at their schools."
- **Curriculum-aligned common assessments and standards-based report cards provide ways for principals and teachers to ensure that students are meeting the standard benchmarks.**
  - Common formative assessments—both curriculum-based and norm-referenced—are used to monitor student learning throughout the year. Participants mentioned the following assessments: *TerraNova*, *Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)*, *Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI)*, *DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills)*, the *English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA)*, *Rigby PM Benchmarks*, *Iowa Test of Basic Skills*, *Stanford Achievement Test*, and the *Michigan Literacy Progress Profile (MLPP)*.
  - Participants also described the use of curriculum-aligned benchmarks. In some cases, those assessments are district- or teacher-created common assessments, in others, they are related to particular instructional programs such as *Open Court* or *Houghton Mifflin* reading programs. Detroit Public Schools, for instance, includes *Measuring Instructional Progress*, which is a pre-/post-test that accompanies the district's curriculum.
  - With the development of common assessments, several districts are also working on developing common grading expectations. One district administrator noted, "[Sometimes] the assessment is all over the board. ... So with this whole notion of common assessment: What does it look like? What is an A? What is a B? What is a C? So that's another key point that we're looking at—helping our teachers to do a better job of assessing student work."
  - Several schools are implementing a standards-based report card that has the standard benchmarks and the state's GLCEs as the basis for awarding students grades. To mark students' progress toward the standards, teachers use MEAP terminology like "exceeds

expectation, meets expectation, progressing,” and “not yet mastered.” In one district, the report cards were developed by a committee of teachers and administrators over the course of two years. One principal noted, “It’s really a whole new way to look at assessment. It’s assessing *for learning*.” Southfield schools are also moving away from using letter grades to using terms that are more descriptive of what students actually know or can do.

- **Teacher performance is monitored through the review of student performance data and the use of both formal and informal classroom observations. Regular data-based discussions among colleagues and informal observations by peers and grade-level or department leaders contribute to the atmosphere of collaborative, continual improvement.**
  - Formal teacher observations are only one way that administrators monitor instruction in their buildings. Insite participants described numerous other ways that instruction is monitored and supported, many of which were more important to the participants than the formal evaluation process.
  - Reviewing lesson plans as a way to monitor instruction is often a common exercise for principals, but several principals are beginning to review student assessments as a way to gauge student learning and instruction. One principal explained, “I take a couple of weeks a month just to look at the assessments. ... This week I’m looking at writing samples. I don’t want it to be state-of-the-art; just give me a stack of your papers to look at. We also look at them in teams during staff meetings to see how the children are doing just on the day-to-day assessments. ... I think that gives me a greater scope than just always looking at a lesson plan because I’m actually seeing what the children are doing.” Another principal agreed with the value of reviewing student work as a way to monitor instruction: “It’s all about student achievement. It’s not about telling the teacher, ‘You’re not doing this or that. But what can we do additionally to help you move toward getting your students to meet that benchmark?’”
  - Informal observations by administrators, lead teachers, or peers is common in these schools. With regular observations and meaningful feedback, teachers and students are more comfortable with having visitors in their classrooms. As one district administrator noted, “You get used to them if they’re there a bunch. ‘It’s okay; you can walk through any time you want.’ That’s what I hear. They’re not even paying attention to you.”
  - Administrators are eager to see lessons with strong objectives. One school uses the Lorraine Monroe’s *Blackboard Configuration* school-wide, so the principal could easily walk through the building and review the instruction planned for the day. Another principal described a strategy for evaluating lesson objectives during informal walkthroughs: “I want to know what is being taught. What is the objective? Often, when I go in for a formal observation, looking at plans is a part of that formal observation. I don’t even want to touch the plans for 15 to 20 minutes. At the end of that time, I have figured out in my mind, hopefully, exactly what the objective is, and then I’ll look at the plan. Most of the time I’m right; and if I’m not right, then we have something to work with, and I’ll talk to the teacher afterwards.”
  - In addition to strong objectives, administrators also watch for high-quality teaching strategies. One principal explained, “When I go into classrooms, I am listening for questions. What kind of quality questions is the teacher asking the students? What kind of questions are students asking the teacher? What kind of dialogue am I hearing between the teacher and the students?” Other administrators described watching for engaged students: “When I go in, I am engaged with the kids. I’m talking to them, and I ask them, ‘What did you learn today? Show me what you’re learning.’ So the focus is not on the teacher but on the students in the class. That gives me a good idea of if they understand. If a kid is left behind not knowing what to do, and no one is assisting that child, I question the teacher: ‘Is there going to be a time when someone is going to sit with that kid and support that kid?’”

- Peer observations are increasingly important to these schools. One principal offered, “There was a big push last year with teachers doing peer observations and observing each other. ... It’s proved to be a very beneficial thing for all parties—for the teacher who is being observed by a peer, as well as the teacher that is doing it. We have them doing it in teams, and it’s less threatening for everybody that way. ... Then afterwards we’ll process it at a staff meeting a little bit. It’s been really beneficial for the teachers to monitor themselves and keep that challenge/support thing.”
- To facilitate data-based discussions, one principal asks teachers to maintain a “Monitoring Book,” a binder that details the power standards or benchmarks, a couple of years’ worth of student assessment data, and student work samples. The principal meets with teachers four times a year to discuss student data and learning needs in what are called “instructional dialogues”: “The first time, they meet with me one on one, so I am meeting with them and discussing student data and student needs. The second [and third] time, I am meeting with them by grade level, so we’re talking about the instruction. ... At the end, I meet with each teacher to go back and see what type of progress has taken place so far.”



## Theme Five: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

### *“Ensuring All Children Learn”*

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

### Specific Michigan Findings: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

- **Early identification of student learning needs is seen as critical to effective interventions.**
  - One district administrator reported, “As far as student support, we do not wait for the quarterly data to identify students in need. At every staff meeting, there is a time to say, ‘Do you have any children you have concerns about?’”
  - One district uses established programs such as *Reading Recovery* to intervene early and often with students having identified literacy needs. An administrator explained, “*Reading Recovery* is an effort to be proactive and catch the kids early on. Beyond that, our *Reading Recovery* teachers spend the other part of the day doing ‘booster groups,’ to support last year’s *Reading Recovery* kids with an added dose of reading in second grade or second semester, [while] continuing with their first round of *Reading Recovery* kids.”
  - Teachers are aware of the importance of early intervention with students. At one school, teachers maintain student profiles with intervention worksheets that are reviewed seven times per year. Teachers highlight low student grade point averages, and any student with two or more highlighted marks is considered to be at high risk. Teachers then develop an intervention plan for each student. Meticulous documentation of the applied interventions—and their effects—is maintained because, as one principal stated, “you never give up on those kids. Never, ever, ever. And you don’t let kids fall through the cracks either. Maybe we can’t get Johnny off the highlighted list this year or this quarter, but we’re not going to quit. That’s the attitude and approach.”
  - Standards-based report cards are helpful for identifying the areas a student may be struggling in, so that parents, students, and teachers can match an intervention strategy to the particular need.

- **Numerous interventions are available for students whose needs require attention beyond the scope of the regular school schedule. Saturday school and before- and after-school tutoring are important ways to provide additional instructional time.**
  - All schools attending the Institute have developed programs to provide additional learning time for identified struggling students. Schools in Detroit Public Schools use grant funds to offer “Super Saturdays” at which students and parents are able to work together.
  - Tutorials and homework-help times, both before and after school, provide support for students who have been identified even before report cards come out. A key component of tutorial time for one school was alignment with regular classroom instruction. A teacher explained, “The primary teacher sets the goal—the skill you’re trying to teach. ... Depending on the teacher, there may be a whole-group lesson initially, and then you break out into groups.” Schools also found the after-school homework help time was particularly important for students who may have difficulty getting assistance at home, either because their parents are working or because of parents’ language limitations.
  - Summer programs, both district- and school-sponsored, provide additional instructional support. One district instituted an eight-day MEAP Academy prior to the start of school as a review for the fall administration of MEAP. Another district offers a five-week summer program that can be supplemented by shorter, building-sponsored summer programs targeted to specific children.
  - Support staff bring additional resources to struggling students. Schools at the Institute had various combinations of reading specialists, Title I teachers, learning support teachers, resource teachers, paraprofessionals, and community support staff, such as a school social worker, psychologist, speech therapist, or nurse. In several schools, the efforts of various support staff are coordinated through a Student Support Team or students’ assistance team with an assigned case manager.
  
- **Struggling teachers receive additional instructional assistance through targeted professional development and peer support.**
  - Often, the systematic review of student assessment data identifies content with which some teachers struggle instructionally. One principal reported, “Usually [the assessment data are] a good indicator. If the students in that teacher’s classroom are failing math year after year, it gives me the idea that the teacher needs more professional development in that area. It doesn’t mean that the teacher is not a good teacher. It means that maybe she is producing good results in ELA, but not in math, so we can target the PD for that teacher. ... I can kind of guide the way for what she needs to focus on as far as professional development for that year or the coaching that needs to take place in that classroom.”
  - Ranging from grade-level planning to peer observations to formal mentoring, peer support for new or struggling teachers was common among the schools at the Institute. Several districts also offer teachers support through “visitation days.” One administrator explained that teachers could initiate a visit to a colleague for a particular reason: “It’s not pushing someone in to model something, but allowing them to spend a fairly good amount of time observing someone we consider to be strong in an area they might need to improve in.” Although the program has been eliminated by budget cutbacks, that district used to have a “consulting teacher program ... that allowed the assignment of a fabulous teacher that we select to spend a lot of intensive time with new teachers, when they come in the door in their first three years of employment.”
  - A struggling teacher is usually supported through an Individual Development Plan (IDP), which is developed collaboratively by the principal and the teacher. As one district administrator explained, “The principal’s main responsibility is to provide support. So we have lots of content area supervisors who can come out, work with a teacher on lesson planning or classroom management, do demonstration lessons, create documents with whatever they think they need based off the observations.”



# Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute Conclusion

*Based on the Themes of the JFTK Framework*

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

## The Findings

### Curriculum and Academic Goals

*The five higher performing schools at the Michigan Best Practice Institute were committed to instruction and improvement grounded in the state's Grade-Level Content Expectations and benchmarks. School systems' efforts to articulate the state's standards further into well-aligned curriculum maps and pacing guides were key steps to teachers developing a deep understanding of the standards and teaching to them. Teacher teams were integral to the curriculum development process.*

### Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

*Principal selection processes were inclusive of numerous stakeholders and highly structured. Internal leadership development programs produced instructional leaders particularly well-suited to individual schools. Professional development for both principals and teachers was job-embedded, based on student performance data, and usually enhanced by formal mentoring processes. Collaboration among teachers was cited as an essential factor in building individual teachers' capacity and fostering a sense of collective responsibility for student learning.*

### Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

*Instructional time in core content areas was prioritized and protected. School schedules usually reflected large blocks of time for instruction in literacy, mathematics, and science. To address the geographic and cultural isolation experienced by many students, most of the schools at the Best Practice Institute made conscious and concerted efforts to expand students' environments through foreign language instruction and field trips.*

### Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

*Student assessment data were fundamental to the activities of consistently higher performing schools. Regular formative assessments—particularly in literacy—were cited as essential to teachers' efforts to monitor student progress. Standards-based report cards were becoming a powerful tool for monitoring student growth toward particular standard benchmarks. Traditional teacher evaluations were supplemented by informal, collaborative strategies to monitor instruction school-wide.*

### Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

*Early identification of struggling students was critical to addressing learning needs. Interventions, supported at the district, school, and classroom levels, often required additional time outside the school day (i.e., Saturday school, before-and after-school tutoring). Struggling teachers were supported through targeted professional development and the assistance of peers.*

*One of the dangers of studying consistently higher performing schools is drawing conclusions based on a single school example. To avoid this danger, the conclusions for the JFTK–Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2006, focus on a description of the practices that are most consistent across the higher performing schools in this study. Without a comparison group of average-performing schools, we cannot highlight only those practices that were found to be systemically different in the higher performing schools as a group. Therefore, the conclusions from the JFTK–Michigan Elementary Best Practice Institute have also been informed by the findings from a much larger body of schools studied (500+ across six years and twenty states)—which included average-performing comparison schools—to help provide meaning in the context of Michigan.*