

Milwaukee Public Schools Instructional Review

***Findings and recommendations to improve academic systems
and increase learning for all Milwaukee Public Schools students.***

June 2025

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Executive Summary

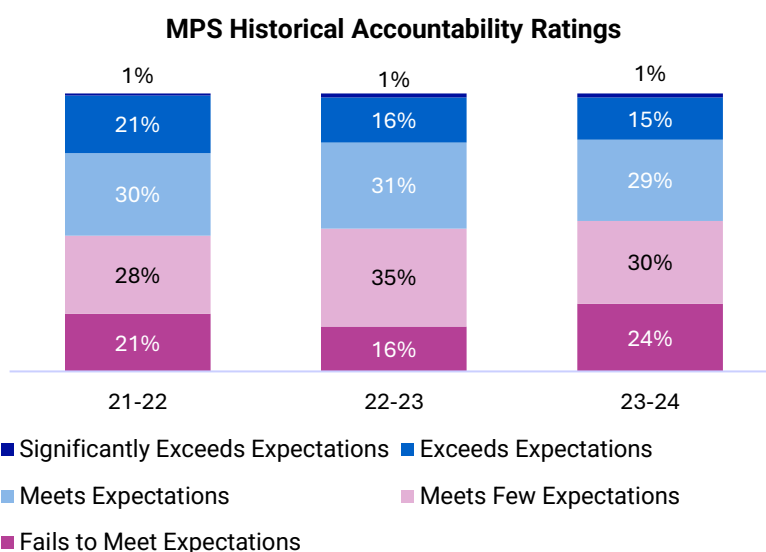
Overview

From February to May of 2025, MGT collected a wide variety of academic data from a representative sample of 78 schools in Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), with the goal of identifying strengths and key areas of growth. The report that follows summarizes key findings from that data as well as evidence-based recommendations for improvement. Data collected includes:

- Classroom observations
- One-on-one interviews with teachers, school administrators, and senior MPS staff
- Focus Groups with students, families, and district-level support staff
- Surveys from students, staff, and families
- Artifacts, including lesson plans, behavior management plans, literacy plans, professional development schedules, district-adopted materials, and Professional Learning Community (PLC) plans
- Data, including state report card metrics, attendance, discipline, and early literacy STAR assessment

Context

Milwaukee Public Schools has consistently struggled to ensure that all students meet ambitious academic expectations. Over the past three school years, achievement has continued to decline, with only 45% of schools districtwide meeting expectations on the 2023-24 Report Card. There are many factors, internal and external, that contribute to the district's low performance. While this report will enumerate many of the internal factors, relevant external factors include:



- Geographic and demographic shifts have resulted in stalled population growth, which along with competitive school choice dynamics have led to significant enrollment declines (11.3%) over the last six years.
- National teacher and staff shortages have strained the district's capacity to provide consistent, high-quality instruction and support services to students.
- MPS students disproportionately experience economic challenges, with over 80% of students classified as economically disadvantaged.
- Aging and outdated facilities present challenges for maintaining healthy, safe, and adequately equipped learning environments for students. Most recently, the district has experienced significant turmoil as the presence of lead has required testing and temporarily closing many schools districtwide, displacing students and staff.

Opportunity

During the 2024-25 School Year, Governor Tony Evers and the Department of Administration (DOA) commissioned an independent Operational Review of MPS, followed immediately by an Instructional Review of the district, both completed by MGT. In March of 2025, Dr. Brenda Cassellius was named as the next Superintendent of Milwaukee Public Schools. These factors combine to present an enormous opportunity for the district to chart a new path forward. Throughout the course of this Review, the MGT team conducted interviews and focus groups with a broad range of stakeholders and staff; a shared desire for authentic change was palpable in nearly every conversation.

We found that MPS employs many passionate, hard-working, and talented educators at every level, and there are pockets of real success within the district. However, MPS lacks a clear vision and the systems necessary to activate talent and create the conditions for learning in all schools, districtwide. The incoming administration has a real opportunity to establish that vision and develop systems that will ensure a high-quality learning experience for all students. Dr. Cassellius has already begun the important work of restructuring the district's central office to align with a narrow focus on teaching and learning; our hope is that the insights in this report will help to inform next steps.

Summary of Findings

This review was conducted with a focus on a representative sample of 78 schools, approximately 50% of the district. For the remainder of this report, all of the data shared will represent only the 78 schools that participated in the review. However, because of the large sample size and the intentional selection of schools, we believe that these findings are representative of trends throughout the entire district.

In the 2023-24 school year, only 42% of the schools that participated in this review met expectations on the state report card. Academic performance is inconsistent across the district, with significant variation across regions and grade bands. Proficiency data from the Wisconsin Forward Exam reveals similar trends, with some regions averaging as low as 13% proficient in Math and 21% proficient in ELA, while others average 10 – 18% higher.

The goal of this review is primarily to shed light on the school and district systems and practices that have created an environment of inconsistent student achievement. Throughout our review, the MGT team collected data aligned to the High-Quality Schools Framework, which consists of 4 Levers for school improvement. In this report, we propose that MPS adopt 3 objectives aligned to each Lever. The table below summarizes key findings and objectives.

	Key Findings	Proposed Objectives
Lever 1: Visionary & Student-Centered Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The district lacks a clear focus for instructional improvement or a vision for teaching and learning. Under the current (SY2024-25) structure, professional development and coaching support is dispersed and unfocused, resulting in staff who are spread too thin to provide meaningful implementation support to schools. The wide variety of initiatives, school types, and grade configurations create friction in districtwide improvement and accountability efforts. 	1.1: Create, clearly communicate, and align continuous improvement systems around a focused vision for teaching and learning.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal effectiveness is a key factor in student success and adult job satisfaction. The current (SY2024-25) regional supervision structure does not prioritize the development of instructional leadership, and many principals noted that they struggle to prioritize instruction over operations and student behavior. 60% of teachers report that their classroom is observed once per month or less, and many teachers noted that they rarely receive meaningful feedback. The professional development provided to principals is not typically focused on developing instructional leadership and sometimes lacks relevance and impact. 	1.2: Position principals as instructional leaders through explicit training, development, and accountability.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many schools in MPS struggle with staffing shortages. The district lacks effective systems to ensure that schools with historically low academic performance are staffed with qualified teachers and leaders, or that specialized schools are strategically staffed at every level. Staffing shortages lead to increased burnout and staff turnover. 	1.3: Reenvision staffing systems to align with the district vision and goals.

	Key Findings	Proposed Objectives
Lever 2: Ambitious Instruction & Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is inconsistent use of evidence-based instructional practices. Teachers need more time for professional development, including time for collaboration. District-led professional development is frequently perceived as disconnected from classroom realities. There is a need to clarify and strengthen the structure and expectations for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). 	2.1: Drive instructional improvement by providing regular, high-quality opportunities for job-embedded professional development and structured teacher collaboration that are aligned to the district's vision for teaching and learning.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In recent years, the district has invested in adopting core instructional materials. Implementation of core materials is inconsistent. The district has many supplement programs, which creates confusion on which materials are most important and must be used. The lack of training on new materials has contributed to inconsistent use. 	2.2: Create an ambitious but realistic plan to support the implementation of district-adopted high-quality instructional materials that includes appropriate training, coaching, and accountability measures.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foundational literacy instruction is inconsistent, contributing to low rates of reading proficiency. Many leaders demonstrate limited understanding of structured literacy. Teachers report dissatisfaction with their current training and experience a disconnect between theory and practice. 	2.3: Ensure that all students have access to effective reading instruction by building understanding of, and buy-in for, the Science of Reading, and by providing targeted professional development and coaching for teachers as well as district and school leaders.
Lever 3: Culture of Support & High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are unclear expectations and accountability across regions and academic departments. Poor communication is leading to confusion and disempowerment. There is insufficient collaboration, leading to individuals at every level operating in silos. There are missed opportunities to celebrate, acknowledge, and learn from wins. 	3.1: Intentionally build a districtwide culture of collective efficacy by enforcing high expectations, enhancing communication, and systematically celebrating success.

	Key Findings	Proposed Objectives
Lever 3: Culture of Support & High Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools widely differ in the number of extracurricular programs offered, impacting the student experience. Not all students have the same level of access to specialized schools and programs. Fewer specialized schools serve a high economically disadvantaged student population. 	3.2: Provide intentional access to specialized and advanced academic models, college and career exploration, and extracurricular opportunities for all students districtwide.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A common framework for student behavior is not consistently implemented. There is a need for more training to ensure that foundational classroom management practices are implemented in every classroom. Students in grades 7 – 9 are suspended at a noticeably high rate, indicating a need for improved school and classroom culture. Suspensions are disproportionately issued to Black students. 	3.3: Establish a districtwide vision of positive school culture and align policies and resources to ensure staff are equipped to implement evidence-based behavior management strategies and discipline systems.
Lever 4: Authentic Partnerships with Family & Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Family engagement practices vary widely from school to school, and there is a lack of clarity around roles and expectations for staff, including Parent Coordinators. There is a lack of clarity in the district’s vision for family engagement, and the work is not connected to research-based best practices. Some schools have built strong family relationships while others struggle to communicate with families at all. 	4.1: Establish a vision for family engagement and align systems to support implementation.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The district communicates with families but does not regularly solicit their opinions or provide opportunities for meaningful input. Families noted that even when they are able to share feedback with their school or the district, they don’t see their feedback being applied. Many teachers rely on one-way communication tools over real engagement and partnership with families. 	4.2: Empower families and community members to engage as partners in student learning and in the school improvement process.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools’ efficacy in engaging families and their community varies widely across the district, including some pockets of real success. There are not currently systems in place for the district to identify best practices in family engagement. Parent Coordinators can be used more strategically to identify, develop, and share best practices. 	4.3: Identify the most successful family engagement practices within the district and implement systems to replicate those successes in all schools.

Methodology

School Selection

At the direction of the Department of Administration, MGT identified a sample of 78 schools to participate in the Instructional Review, approximately 50% of the schools in the district. Schools were selected to ensure that our sample accurately mirrors the district based on:

- Geography
- Grades Served
- Special Programs
- Academic Performance

MGT divided every school in the district into distinct subgroups based on the above criteria. A proportional number of schools were randomly selected within each stratum to maintain district-wide representation. Finally, the selected schools were reviewed to confirm alignment with the district's demographic and academic diversity.

Framework

District and school-level data were evaluated against MGT's **High-Quality Schools Framework**, which includes 4 primary Levers for school improvement and 3 specific Domains within each Lever. These Levers provide the foundation for assessing district and school quality.

High-Quality Schools Framework			
<i>Levers</i>	<i>Domains</i>		
Lever 1: Visionary & Student-Centered Leadership	Clear Vision & Goals	Instructional Excellence	High-Functioning Teams
Lever 2: Ambitious Instruction & Learning	Instructional Preparation & Support	Delivery & Assessment of Learning	Evidence of Learning
Lever 3: Culture of Support & High Expectations	Culture of High Expectations & Accountability	Whole Child Development	Safe and Positive Environment
Lever 4: Authentic Partnerships with Family & Communities	Student-Centered Decision-Making	Clear Communication	Community Collaboration and Family Advocacy

Each data point collected was aligned to one or more of the rubric's Domains, and data was compiled to assign a rating for each Domain and Lever. These ratings—Beginning, Developing, Proficient, and Sustaining—represent a continuum from minimal to full implementation within each Domain.

Data Collection

District Level Data Collection

1. Leadership Interviews: **28** one-on-one interviews were conducted with district leaders, including:
 - a. Interim Superintendent
 - b. Interim Chief of School Administration
 - c. Chief Academic Officer
 - d. Academic Directors
 - e. Special Program Directors
 - f. Regional Superintendents
 - g. Instructional Leadership Directors
2. Focus Groups with District Staff: **5** focus groups comprised of district staff members in school support roles
3. Analysis of Academic Artifacts, Including:
 - a. Ambitious Instruction Plan
 - b. District-Adopted Curriculum List
 - i. Grades K4, K5 ELA – *Frog Street*
 - ii. Grades K-5 ELA – *Into Reading*
 - iii. Grades 6-8 ELA – *Into Literature*
 - iv. Grades 9-10 ELA – *My Perspectives*
 - v. Grades K-8 Writing – *Six Trait Crates*
 - vi. Grades K-12 Writing – *Write Source*
 - vii. Grades 3-12 Writing – *Launching the Writer's Workshop*
 - viii. Grades K3 – 2 Mathematics – *i-Ready Classroom Mathematics*
 - ix. Grades K3 – 2 Mathematics – *Counting Collections*
 - x. Grades 6-8 Mathematics, Algebra 1, Algebra 2, Geometry – *Illustrative Mathematics*
 - xi. Grades 6-8 Social Studies – *United States History Civil War to Present and Ancient Civilizations*
 - xii. Grades 9-12 Social Students – *TCI/McGraw Hill: Government/Econ/Citizenship/US History/World History*
 - xiii. Grades K-8 Science – *Into Science*
 - xiv. Biology & Chemistry – *STEMscopes*
 - xv. Montessori standards and materials
 - xvi. Music, Art, Physical Education, and other specialized subjects

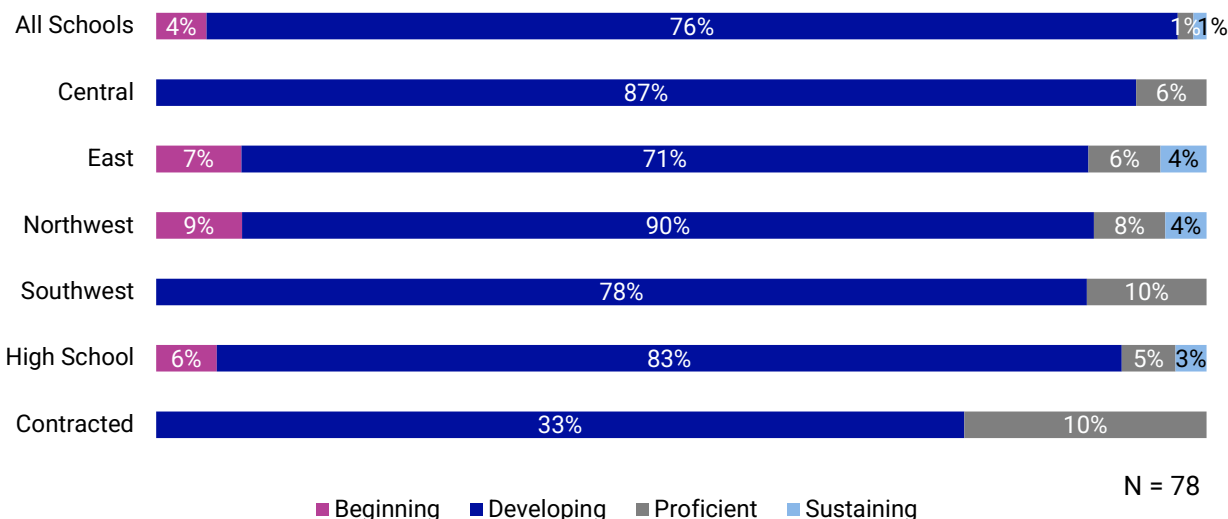
- xvii. Advanced Placement and Alternative Education Programs
 - c. Supplemental Professional Development Offerings, including topics and attendance
- 4. Analysis of Student Achievement Data, Including:
 - a. STAR Early Literacy
 - b. Wisconsin Forward Exam
 - c. ACT
 - d. FAFSA
 - e. Student Discipline
 - f. Attendance
- 5. Family Surveys: **1,237** family survey responses were submitted
- 6. Family Focus Groups: **7** in-person and **4** virtual focus groups were offered for family members of MPS students

School Level Data Collection

- 1. Teacher Interviews: **521** one-on-one teachers interviews were conducted via Teams
- 2. Principal & Assistant Principal Interviews: **150** interviews with school administrators were conducted in-person
- 3. Classroom Observations: **680** classroom observations, each 15-minutes in length, focused on collecting the following data:
 - a. Instructional materials
 - b. Learning objectives
 - c. Student engagement
 - d. Student groupings
 - e. Teacher practices such as instructional clarity, checks for understanding, feedback, and effective behavior management
 - f. Classroom environment
 - g. Student behavior
 - h. Rigor of tasks, using Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK) framework
 - i. K-2 literacy instructional practices
- 4. Student Focus Groups: **144** focus groups with a sample of students at each school from grades 3-12, with group sizes ranging from 5 – 15 participants
- 5. Staff Surveys: **2,345** staff survey responses were submitted
- 6. Student Surveys: **11,036** student survey responses were submitted
- 7. School Artifacts, including:
 - a. **78** Comprehensive School Improvement Plans
 - b. **134** Lesson Plans
 - c. **58** Schoolwide Behavior Plans or PBIS Plans
 - d. **58** Artifacts of Guidance for Reading Instruction

Lever 1: Visionary & Student-Centered Leadership

% of Schools at Each Rating Level
Lever 1: Visionary & Student-Centered Leadership

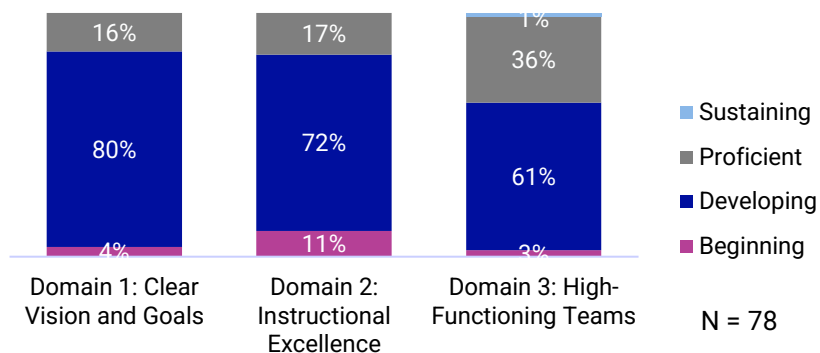


The first Lever for high-quality schools emphasizes the importance of leadership that prioritizes student growth and learning. Leaders hold a clear, student-centered, and shared vision that drives all aspects of school and district improvement. Leaders engage stakeholders in the vision and collaboratively create strategic plans and coherent structures that enact systemwide change and improvement. This Lever also considers effective resource allocation to achieve that vision, including necessary investments in the development of instructional leadership. Additionally, it underscores the value of high-functioning teams at both the district and school levels, fostering collaboration, communication, and alignment to ensure that all efforts are aligned with a clear focus on student outcomes.

Celebrations

During the course of interviews, focus groups, and observations, MGT coaches spoke with many passionate, hard-working leaders who are knowledgeable about instruction and school improvement. The district has

% of Schools at Each Rating Level
All Schools: Lever 1 Domains

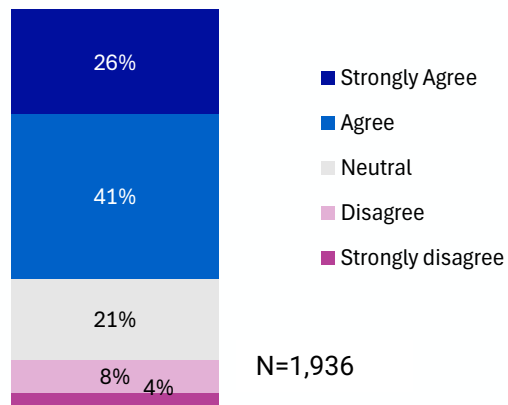


invested in creating Learning Teams at the school level that include representation from teachers at each grade level and/or content area, which creates authentic opportunities for teacher leadership. In surveys, 67% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that there are leadership opportunities staff members.

This is also represented in schools' Domain-level ratings, which show High-Functioning Teams as the highest-rated Domain in Lever 1.

The district's specialized school models – most notably Montessori and Bilingual Dual Language – serve as exemplars for clear, focused vision and expectations that drive the day-to-day work of instruction and school improvement. In these schools, staff have shared goals that motivate their work together.

Staff Survey Question: There are leadership opportunities for a variety of staff members at the school



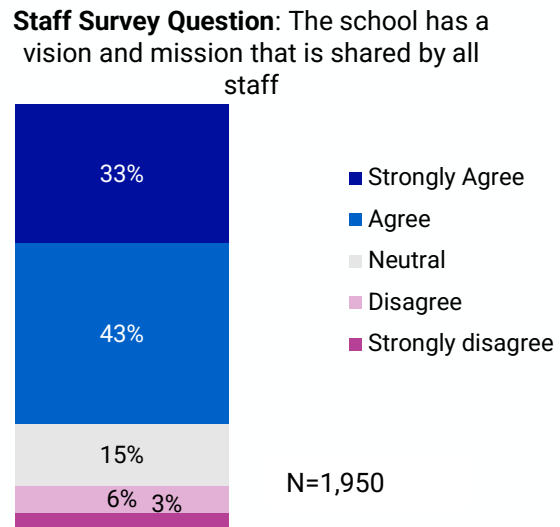
Objective 1.1: Create, clearly communicate, and align continuous improvement systems around a focused vision for teaching and learning.

Findings

Unclear Vision & Focus

In interviews and focus groups, district leaders, school leaders, and teachers could not articulate a shared focus for instructional improvement. While many leaders were able to share their own vision for effective instruction, there was almost no coherence across departments or at the school level. Within individual schools, clarity of vision and alignment around goals for improvement varied widely. Most schools had an established vision and mission, and teachers were typically able to articulate general goals for improvement during interviews. On surveys, 76% of staff members agreed or strongly agreed that their school has a shared mission and vision, and only 9% disagreed or strongly disagreed. However, interviewers found that those goals were often vague, and beyond a shared desire to improve test scores, and there was little consistency from school to school.

On paper, MPS has established an Ambitious Instruction Plan, which is aligned to the 2023 – 2028 Strategic Plan. However, its core pillars (Formative Practices, Explicit Instruction, and Engagement) are so broad that nearly any academic strategy or initiative could be introduced and logically tied back to one of the three, which creates space for confusion and lack of focus. Although a broad range of leaders and teachers were asked in one-on-one interviews about the district’s vision for instruction, the Ambitious Instruction Plan was rarely referenced.



Because there is no clear vision, district systems and structures lack focus and ultimately make school improvement efforts more difficult.

Central Office Structure and Allocation of Support to Schools

The Office of Academics contains 11 Directors, each representing a different initiative or focus area. Many of those Directors have a team of coaches, mentors, or individuals in similar support roles who spend time creating guidance, providing professional development, and working directly with teachers and leaders. While the initiative that each department represents is worthwhile and the individuals within are knowledgeable and passionate about their work, there is not enough staff in any one department to provide the level of support needed to implement the guidance they provide at over 150 schools in the district. As an example, there are only two math curriculum specialists in the Curriculum and Instruction department, who together are charged with supporting the entire district. Additionally, because there is no shared vision or focus, the guidance and support these departments collectively provide is not always coherent when it reaches the school level.

Professional Development

Without a clear vision or focus for instruction, it is impossible to provide professional development that is coherent, relevant, and useful for teachers. This topic will be explored in more depth in the next section of this report.

Collaboration and Continuous Improvement

Although senior leaders have added regular meetings and opportunities for cross-department collaboration in the past year, they haven't been sufficient to overcome deeply entrenched silos. MGT coaches found little evidence of staff from different departments working together toward shared goals. Instead, departments seem to function parallel to one another, with meetings serving only to create shared awareness of different initiatives. Without a clear, shared vision, goals, and action plan to drive the work, collaboration is superficial. MPS has effective data systems to capture academic progress, implementation, and adult learning, but they are underutilized because there are few clear, impactful goals to monitor.

School Types and Structures

The diversity of school types, specialized programs, and grade level configurations create friction in districtwide collaboration and continuous improvement efforts. While specialized school models are in many ways a strength for the district, there is a need to further clarify how they fit into the overall vision and goals of the district. Staff members affiliated with Montessori and Bilingual programs expressed that while they feel significant pride in their schools, they don't feel that their work is fully understood or supported by the district, and that they frequently have to push back against district systems and procedures to meet programmatic goals.

In addition, there are seven different grade configurations in MPS:

- K3/4 – Grade 5
- K3/4 – Grade 8
- K4 – Grade 6
- K3/4 – Grade 12
- Grades 6 – 8
- Grades 6 – 12
- Grades 9 – 12

In many cases, grade configurations seemed to be a remnant of various past initiatives rather than a strategic choice. This lack of alignment makes supervision, training, collaboration, and goal setting across schools difficult, and it can be a barrier to implementation of key initiatives. For example, schools that serve students in grades K3-12 are part of the High School Region, so those principals are supervised by the High School Regional team. This makes it much more difficult for teachers in grades K – 2 to get the focused support they need to implement new strategies and resources tied to Structured

Literacy. Teachers also reported that improvement efforts sometimes fall flat because, despite good intentions, leaders' time is disproportionately focused on one specific grade band (e.g., middle school student behavior challenges in a K – 8 building).

Recommendations

1. Establish a focused vision for teaching and learning in MPS.
2. Create clear expectations, measurable goals, and an action plan aligned to the district's vision; discontinue any initiatives that do not align.
3. Restructure central office roles to explicitly support the newly established vision and create robust structures for collaboration aligned to goals and action items.
4. Clarify how specialized school structures fit into the district vision and align systems and supports to maximize their impact.
5. Consolidate the number of grade configurations to allow for increased focus and collaboration across schools.

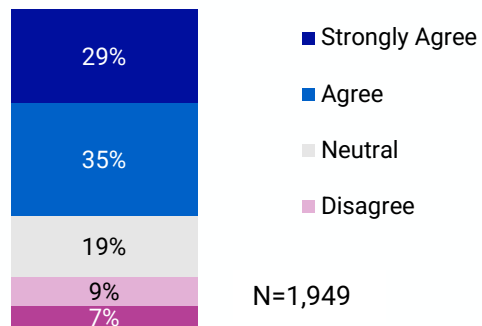
Objective 1.2: Position principals as instructional leaders through explicit training, development, and accountability.

Findings

Inconsistent Instructional Leadership

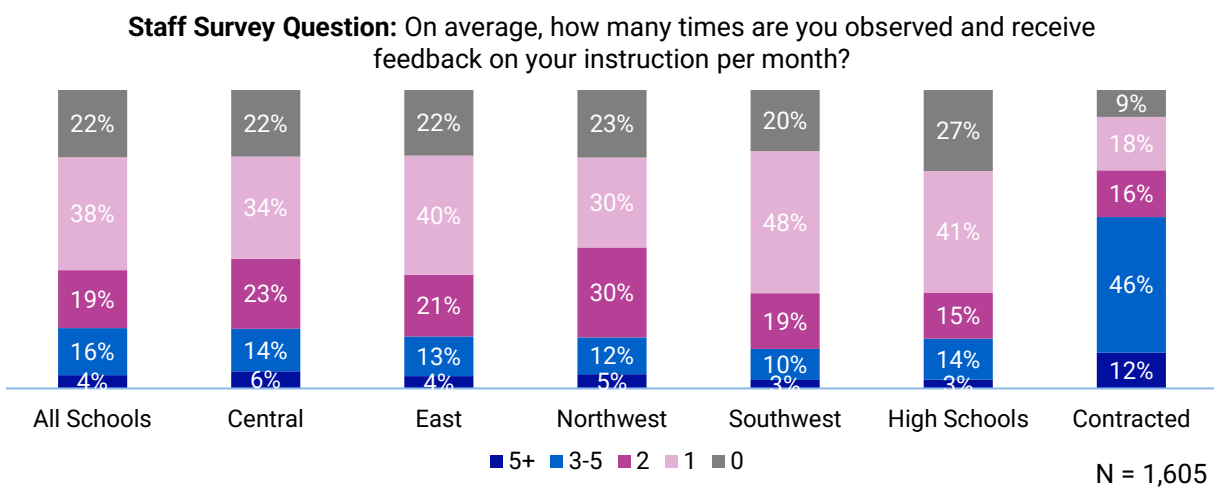
Principal leadership is key to an effective school system. Many staff members expressed in interviews and focus groups that the school principal was the most significant factor in whether a school was a positive or dysfunctional environment for teaching and learning. In MPS, principals receive the majority of their training and mentorship from regional teams, which typically includes a Regional Superintendent and an Instructional Leadership Director (ILD). Regional Superintendents have autonomy in how they structure their support to schools, and most choose to split principal supervision between themselves and their ILDs. As a result, Regional

Staff Survey Question: Leadership demonstrates a high level of accountability and finds ways to make things happen for students and teachers



Superintendents and ILDs both struggle to focus on instruction over various operational concerns that require immediate action (e.g., student discipline, parent concerns, facilities issues, staffing, etc.). In addition, this structure is not differentiated based on school type or grade level configuration, so a single Regional Superintendent may oversee schools that support every grade level, as well as Montessori, Language Immersion, and IB programs all within the same portfolio. This ultimately creates the conditions for a focus on basic operations and low accountability for instructional improvement. As a result, we found pockets of success, driven by individual highly-effective leaders, but very little consistency in leadership practices across schools. Survey results showed that school-level staff hold a wide range of opinions about their leaders, with 16% indicating that their principals do not demonstrate a high level of accountability, and another 19% neutral.

At the school level, we found that principals vary significantly in their aptitude and ability to focus on instruction. While some have the capacity and skillsets to lead professional development, observe classrooms, and provide frequent feedback to teachers, others struggle to find time after tackling operational and student behavior challenges, and others lack the instructional expertise to drive improvement efforts. Observation and feedback is a critical component of the Continuous School Improvement process; when principals are not equipped to observe instruction, they are unable to authentically monitor progress toward goals, provide feedback, and allocate targeted supports to teachers. When asked how often their classrooms are observed per month, 22% of teachers districtwide indicated that they are typically never observed, and another 38% noted that they are observed only once in a normal month.



In surveys and interviews, a lack of meaningful feedback on instruction was a common theme. While principals are required to do some classroom walkthroughs using a common

districtwide observation tool, that data is not consistently shared back with teachers. Many staff members at every level described the district walkthrough requirement as a “check the box” exercise.

Without regular, meaningful, actionable, and consistent feedback from school leaders, teachers are unlikely to change their instructional practice or implement new strategies or resources with fidelity.

The district provides professional development for school leaders through monthly, full-day Principal Learning Institutes (PLIs). While most leaders share that these meetings serve as a helpful way to get information from central office, many noted that they lack a clear focus and often aren’t immediately relevant or impactful for their work. The professional development that leaders do receive is often more focused on meeting requirements than building instructional leadership, problem-solving, or alignment.

Recommendations

1. Set clear expectations for instructional leadership at every level and hold leaders accountable consistently across the district.
2. Restructure the principal supervision system to ensure that support is focused on improving teaching and learning and cultivating an exceptional student experience
3. Re-envision professional development for principals to prioritize instructional leadership and alignment with the district district’s vision.

Objective 1.3: Reenvision staffing systems to align with the district vision and goals.

Findings

Inconsistent Staffing Across the District

Many schools in MPS are grappling with chronic staffing challenges, exacerbated by the nationwide teacher shortage. In some cases, principals reported having less than 5 licensed teachers in the building, with the rest being long-term substitutes or permit teachers. This lack of qualified personnel not only affects instructional quality but also places a heavy burden on existing staff, who often have to cover multiple roles or step in to manage classrooms themselves.

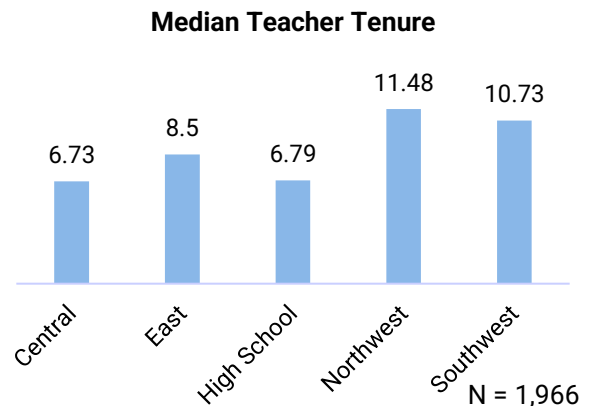
These overall shortages are compounded by a staffing systems that lack intentionality. Teachers, principals, and central office staff all expressed frustration with district funding

formulas that don't adequately account for student needs. Multiple staff members described a "haves" and have-nots" system and indicated that the district does not do enough to balance resources.

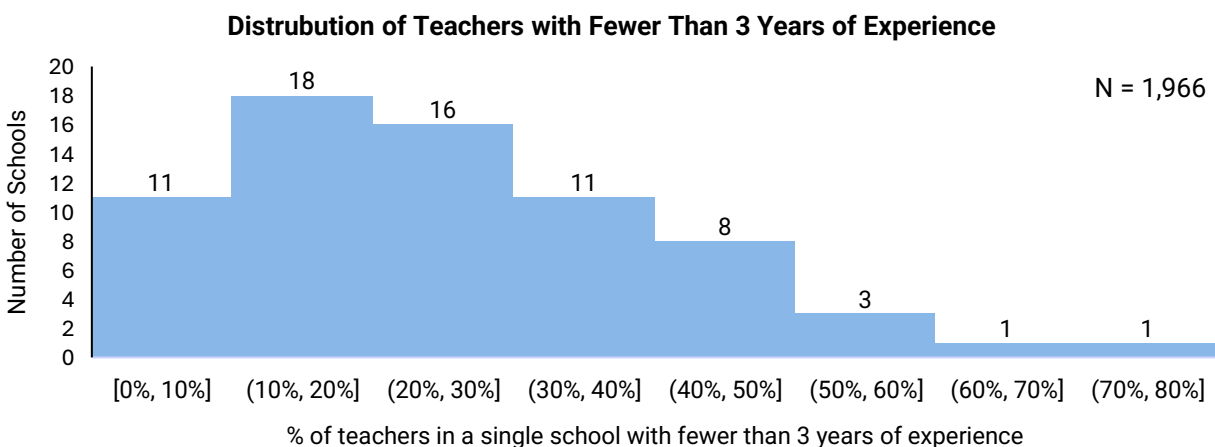
The process for hiring new teachers looks very different depending on the neighborhood a school is in. Some schools receive 20+ qualified applicants for a single teaching position, while others with the same opening will receive one or none. Although attempts have been made, the district lacks robust systems to funnel qualified applicants to high need schools or incentivize teachers to take hard-to-staff positions, resulting in significant inconsistencies in access to qualified teachers.

Although a teacher's years of experience does not always correlate with their effectiveness, having a very large number of teachers who are new to the profession in one building places a significant strain on the school's systems of support. This is particularly true in MPS, where there are a large numbers of teachers on permits as well as

international teachers. The chart to the right shows the variation in average teacher tenure between regions.



Additionally, the chart below shows the distribution of teachers with fewer than 3 years of experience, within the district's traditional schools (data was not available for Contracted schools). For example, there are 11 schools where 0 – 10% of teachers have fewer than 3 years of experience. By contrast, there are 8 schools where 40 – 50% of teachers have fewer than 3 years of experience.



When MGT coaches conducted site visits, they asked each principal how many substitutes were covering classrooms in their buildings that day. Although we only captured a single data point for each school, it showed a wide range, from 0 in some schools to as many as 13 in others.

In interviews, principals also described vastly different processes for finding substitutes. While some shared that they have a list of go-to substitutes and don't have many issues getting the people they need, others described a regular struggle to ensure there is an adult in every classroom.

In schools that struggle the most with staffing, burnout and turnover are high. Many principals noted that while they have dedicated and passionate staff, the regular churn of new hires—often underprepared for the demands of the role—creates instability and drains time and energy from veteran staff.

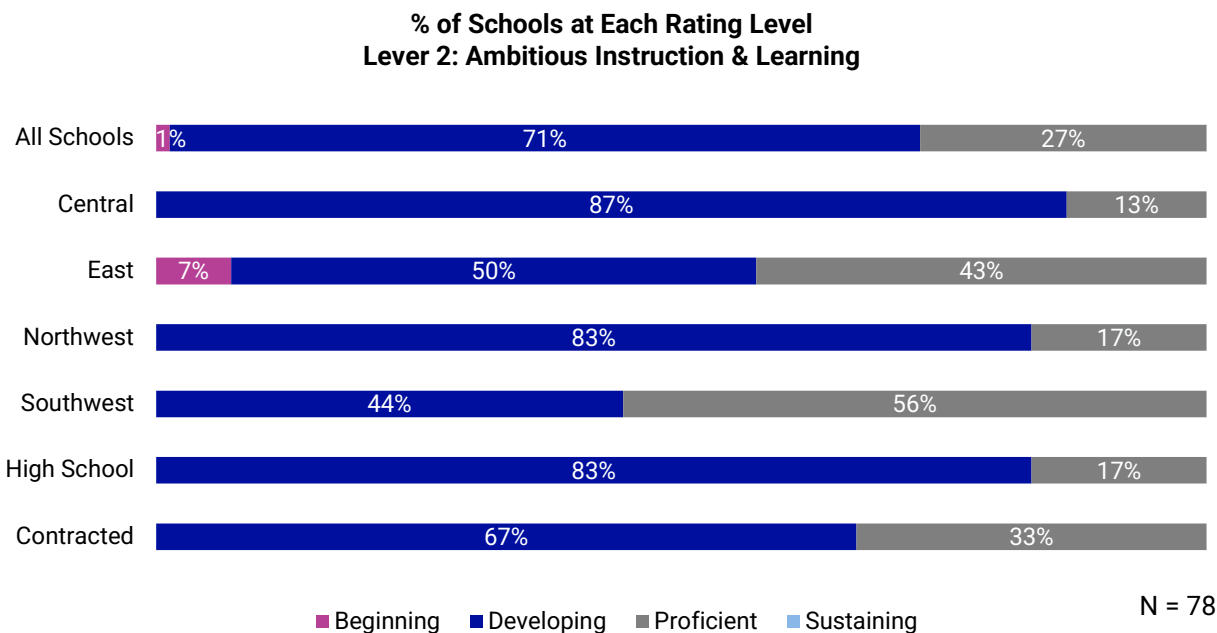
Strategic Principal Staffing

Similar patterns exist at the principal level, where leaders typically interview for specific school openings rather than at the district level. MPS does not have a robust principal pipeline, which makes strategic staffing harder because there is less competition for roles. Although not widespread, higher need schools, where it is more difficult to attract an effective principal, are sometimes led by an “Assistant Principal in Charge” (APIC) or a central office staff member in an interim capacity. The district does not systematically place principals or incentivize experienced principals to lead higher-need schools. Even specialized school models like Montessori or Bilingual Dual Language schools are not necessarily staffed with principals who have experience in those models.

Recommendations

1. Implement a strategic staffing process to ensure that high-need and specialized schools have principals whose skillsets match school needs.
2. Consider procedures and incentives that ensure the highest-need schools are staffed and supported appropriately by highly-qualified teachers.
3. Utilize data on student performance, implementation of evidence-based practices, and stakeholder experience to make staffing decisions.

Lever 2: Ambitious Instruction & Learning



This Lever focuses on ensuring high-quality teaching and learning through strong instructional preparation, effective delivery, and meaningful assessment practices.

This includes rigorous, engaging, and clear instruction alongside checks for understanding, providing feedback to students, and instructional adjustments based on student response. In addition, ambitious instruction emphasizes the structures and systems to support high-quality teaching and learning practices. These structures include:

- Collaborative planning and data analysis
- Assessment practices (diagnostic, formative, summative)
- Professional development
- Presence and implementation of high-quality instructional materials

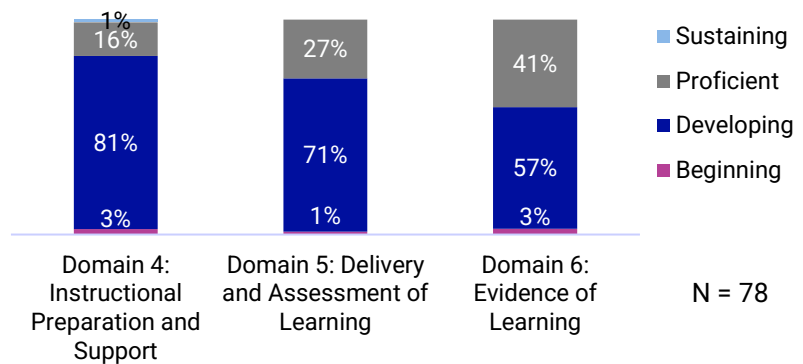
Lever 2 focuses on high-quality teaching and learning across subject areas and in addition, specifically assesses the strength of elementary reading instruction to the degree to which it aligns relates to the Science of Reading.

Celebrations

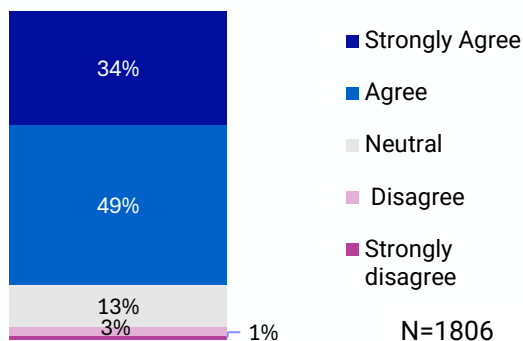
Teachers shared through interviews and surveys that their use of data to inform instruction has become stronger in recent years. A breakdown of ratings by Domain shows that Domain 6: Evidence of Learning was the strongest across the district, with 41% of schools earning a rating of

Proficient. In addition, 83% of MPS staff surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they feel equipped to analyze student assessments and artifacts of learning to make strategic instructional decisions. Educators in MPS are invested in the use of data and spoke to the

**% of Schools at Each Rating Level
All Schools: Lever 2 Domains**



Staff Survey Question: I feel equipped to analyze student assessments and artifacts of learning to make strategic instructional decisions



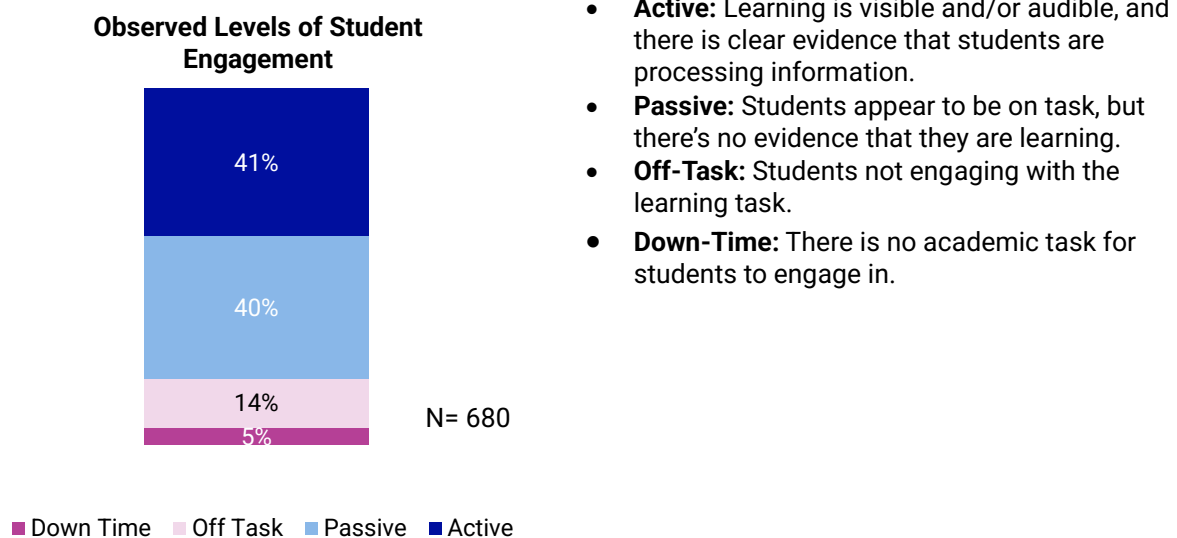
necessity of leveraging different data sources to differentiate for student needs. The district can build off this investment to refine and develop data practices across the district.

Objective 2.1: Drive instructional improvement by providing regular, high-quality opportunities for job-embedded professional development and structured teacher collaboration that are aligned to the district’s vision for teaching and learning.

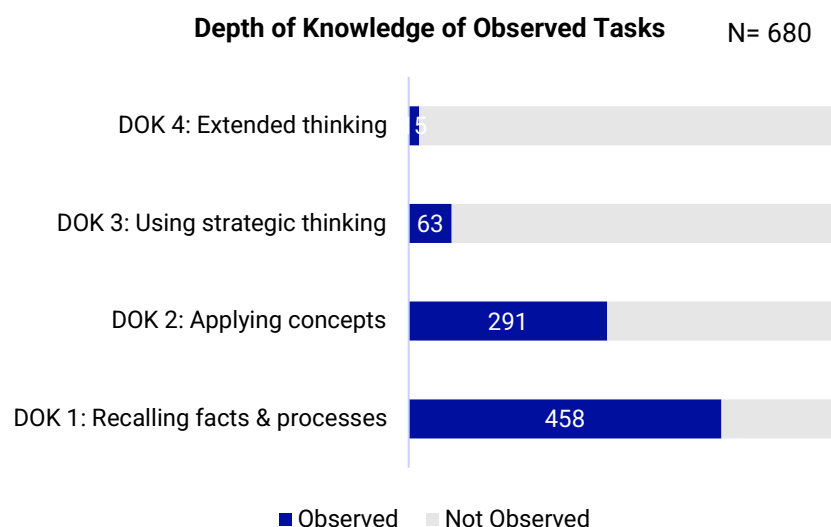
Findings

Inconsistent use of Evidence-Based Instructional Practices

As part of this instructional review, MGT coaches observed 680 classrooms for 15 minutes each. During classroom observations, we found a wide range of instructional strategies being used with mixed effectiveness. This observation data, while not a precise representation of all instruction in the district, illustrates trends in the range of instructional practices implemented across the district.



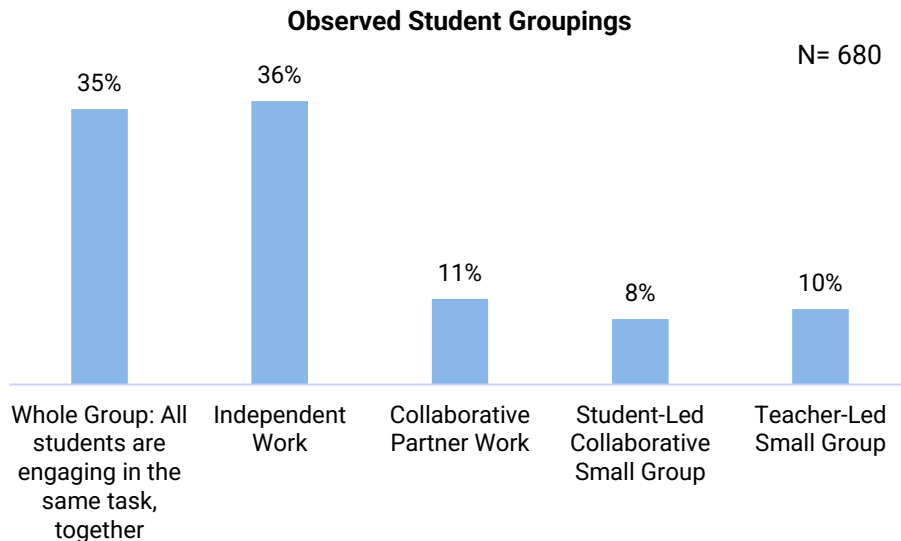
Active student engagement is essential to learning, because it represents opportunities for students to actively process and apply new knowledge and skills. Students are also engaging in learning when they are passively engaged, but that time often includes missed opportunities for active processing. In the classrooms we observed in MPS, students were actively engaged 41% of the time, and 19% of the time they were off-task or didn’t have an academic task to engage in.



Coaches also analyzed the rigor of the tasks they saw students engaging in. Overwhelmingly, students were given tasks at a Depth of Knowledge Level 1 or 2, which indicates relatively few opportunities for complex thinking. Student survey results also confirmed the need for more complex and rigorous

work, with 65% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that the work in their classes makes them think and is challenging, leaving clear room for improvement.

Finally, we quantified the proportion of time that students were observed in various groupings, including whole group, independent, small group, and partner work.



Collaborative student-led small groups and partner work is important because it creates opportunities for student discourse. In teacher-led small groups, teachers provide targeted instruction based on specific student

gaps and learning needs. In our observations, we observed students doing collaborative work 19% of the time and teacher-led small groups in 10% of classrooms.

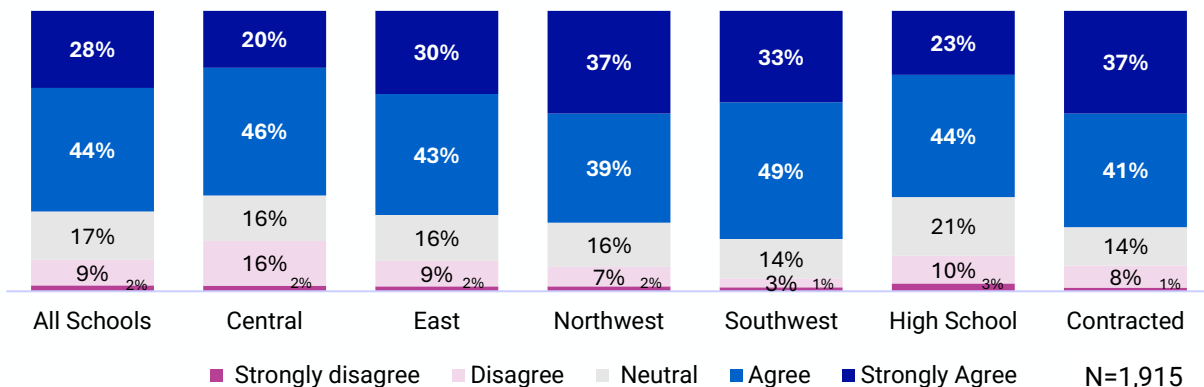
Time for Professional Development & Collaboration

In interviews and focus groups with central office staff and school leaders, the lack of time for high quality professional development and teacher collaboration was cited more often than any other single barrier to instructional improvement across the district.

In the 2024-25 school year, there were 9 days set aside for professional development or teacher records. In addition, teachers are required to spend one planning period per week engaging in school or district-led professional development, required collaboration time, or team/committee meetings. This time is insufficient to provide the depth of training necessary for teachers to implement new practices as well as new resources. Particularly given the large number of new teachers, teachers on permits, and international teachers that the district employs, more time is needed for training.

In order for teachers to continuously improve their practice, internalize lessons, and make data-driven plans for differentiation, they also need time for structured collaboration (typically in Professional Learning Communities, or PLCs). Although PLCs are most effective when implemented weekly, the expectation in MPS is for PLCs to occur once per month. This cadence does not allow teachers to routinely analyze formative data in depth, which is necessary for effective differentiation and small group instruction. The graph below shows teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their current collaborative time.

Staff Survey Question: Teachers collaborate effectively to continuously improve instruction and ensure that all students are learning.



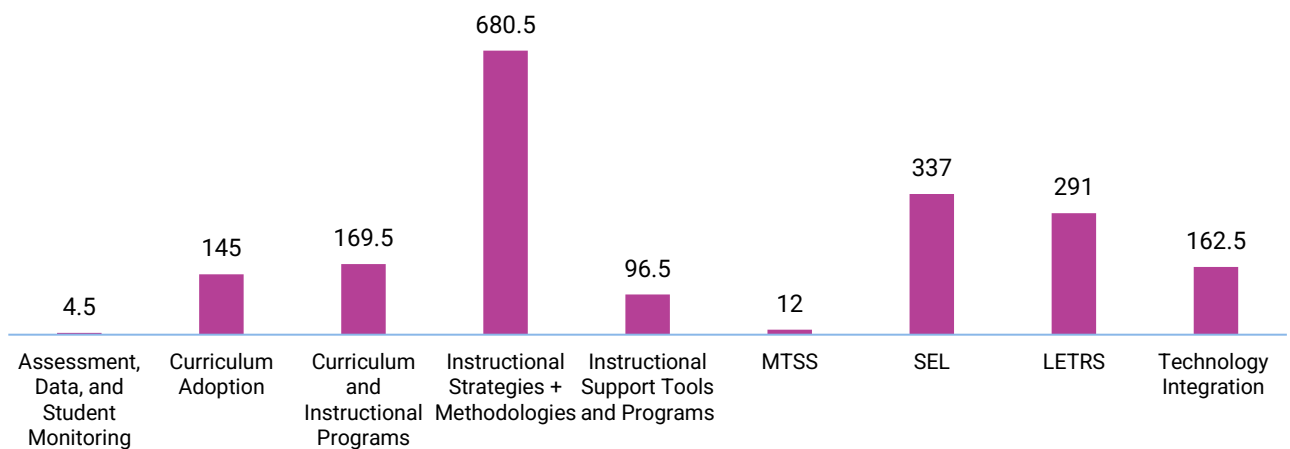
Quality and Focus of Professional Development & PLCs

While the amount of time allocated for training and collaboration presents a structural barrier, the lack of buy-in for district professional learning initiatives and district-mandated teacher collaboration, created through years of shifting initiatives, unclear expectations, and ineffective sessions, represents a larger, root-cause issue. In interviews, teachers

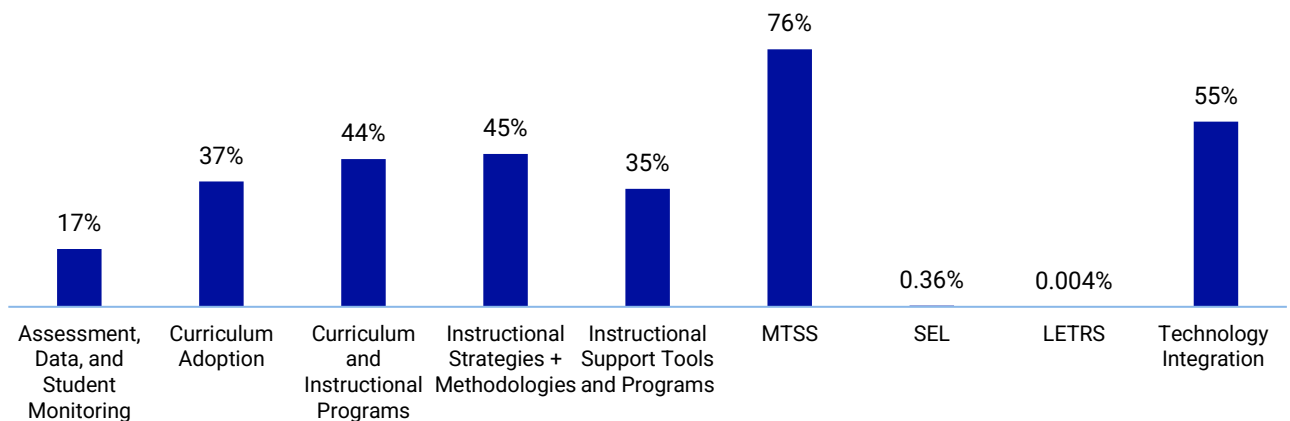
shared that districtwide professional development is often disconnected from their classroom realities, isn't focused on high-priority issues, or is targeted to new teachers but repetitive for veterans. By contrast, school-based professional development was seen as more responsive and useful.

In an effort to supplement the professional development offered during limited teacher time, MPS used ESSER II and III funding to pay teachers to attend after school and weekend trainings on a voluntary basis. MGT analyzed data on the supplemental professional development offered from July 2023 – June 2024 and found that it lacked focus and was typically poorly attended. The graphs below show the number of hours dedicated to various professional development topics offered by the district, as well as average attendance rates for each topic.

Time (Hours) Dedicated to Professional Development, by Topic



**Professional Development Attendance by Topic
Actual Attendance/Session Maximum**



This data demonstrates that the professional development offered by the district does not align with what teachers feel they need to be effective. Beyond the demonstrated lack of investment in the initiative from teachers, our analysis showed that there was little strategy or focus to the topics offered. For example, despite a strong emphasis from the state to ensure that all reading instruction is aligned to the Science of Reading, there was no supplemental literacy training offered aside from a relatively small number of LETRS courses that were poorly attended.

In addition to improving professional development offerings, there is a need to clarify and strengthen the structure and expectations for PLCs. Because teachers meet in PLCs relatively infrequently, the traditional recommendations for the types of data to analyze and instructional decisions to make are not fully aligned with teachers' reality. In addition, because of the wide variety of grade configurations and low enrollment in some parts of the district, many teachers don't have a partner or team who teaches the same course or grade level in their building. This makes the traditional PLC structure impossible to implement, and MPS has not yet developed a clear alternative model.

School-Based Bright Spots

Interviews and surveys did uncover pockets of success where intentional structures and leadership have made a difference. Some schools have creatively used administrative time, specials periods, or after-school hours to facilitate PLCs. In these cases, leaders have worked to develop buy-in from their staff around shared goals, and together they have found ways to work around contractual limitations and prioritize time for collaborative instructional improvement. There are also examples of effective use of data to inform instruction, particularly in schools that have adopted consistent collaborative protocols and expectations for data analysis and instructional planning. In these environments, collaboration is more frequent and focused, and school-based professional learning is aligned with school improvement goals. MPS can look to these bright spots as examples to replicate districtwide.

Recommendations

1. Create a professional development plan that is clearly and narrowly focused on implementation of the district's vision and goals.
2. Prioritize job-embedded support over districtwide professional learning sessions where possible to allow for customization and ensure that professional development time is meaningful and directly applicable to teacher practice.

3. Create and protect space in teachers' schedules for authentic, structured collaboration at least weekly and provide robust training and coaching on the PLC process.

Objective 2.2: Create an ambitious but realistic plan to support the implementation of district-adopted high-quality instructional materials that includes appropriate training, coaching, and accountability measures.

Findings

Investment in High-Quality Materials

Teachers and leaders at every level acknowledge the need for aligned instruction across the district, particularly to support the highly mobile student population. As a result, MPS has made a substantial investment in adopting new core, grade-level instructional materials, with the goal of creating a more cohesive and aligned instructional experience across the district.

MGT analyzed a list of district-adopted resources, and overall, they meet the criteria for high-quality instructional materials. Most core programs used have received strong ratings from EdReports and align with national standards such as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), and ACTFL for world languages. For example:

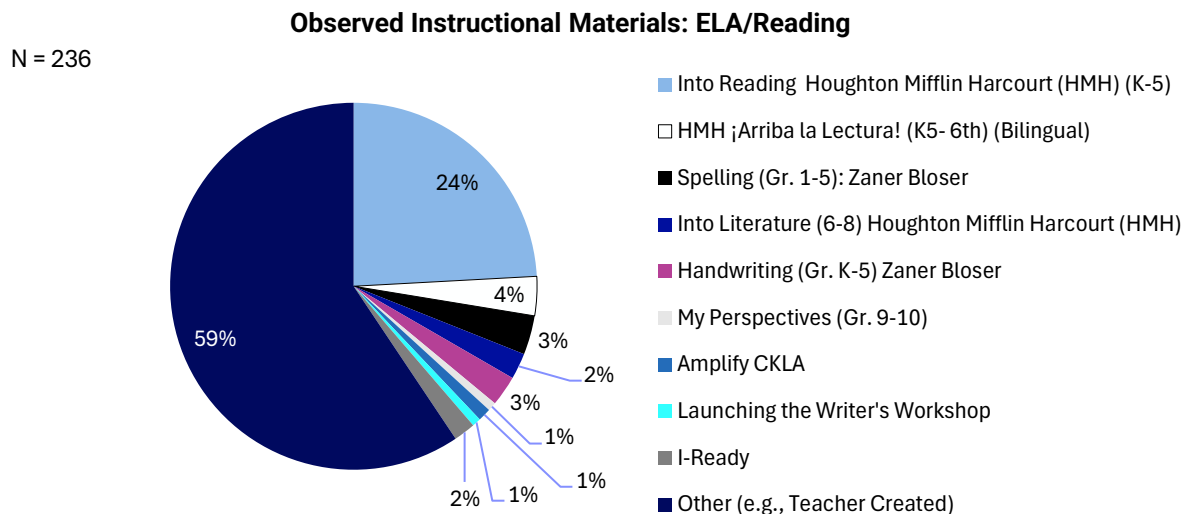
- **K–5 Literacy (HMH Into Reading)** is rated highly for foundational skills and knowledge-building, with strong alignment to standards and usability. It supports reading, writing, speaking, and listening, though some gaps exist in grammar, syntax, and writing integration.
- **6–12 Math (Illustrative Mathematics)** is praised for its conceptual rigor, coherence, and alignment to CCSS, offering a problem-based, student-centered approach.
- **6–12 ELA (HMH Into Literature, MyPerspectives)** meets expectations for alignment and usability, with a strong focus on evidence-based reading and writing.
- **Science (e.g., HMH Science Dimensions, Inspire Earth Science)** generally support NGSS-aligned instruction, though some high school programs like STEMscopes and Inspire Science have mixed reviews or lack formal evaluation.

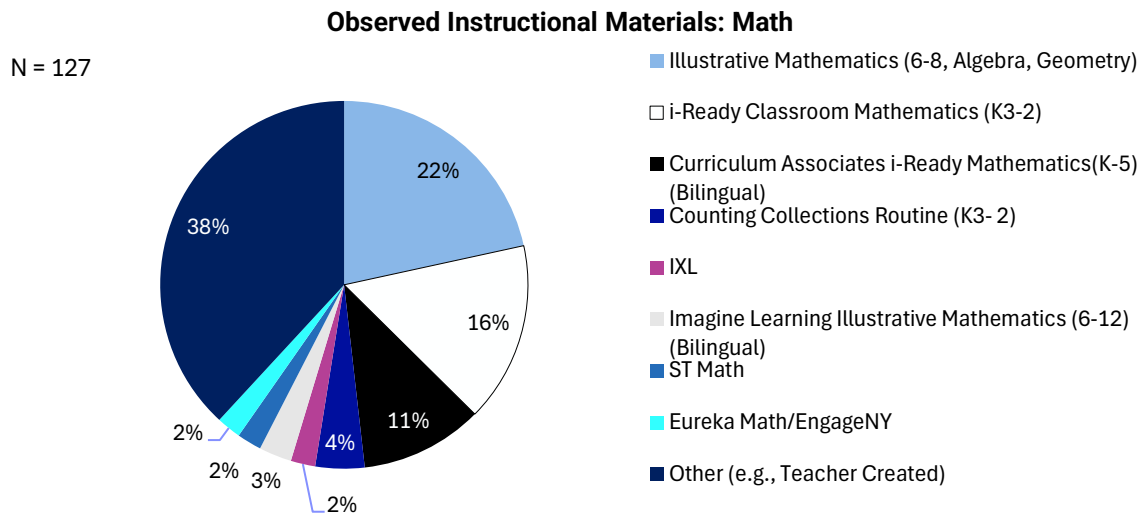
- **Social Studies and World Languages** programs are aligned with national standards and offer diverse, engaging content, though many lack EdReports reviews.
- **Specialized programs (e.g., Second Step, Xello, SPARK PE)** are evidence-based and aligned with relevant standards, supporting SEL, career readiness, and physical education.

Use of Core Instructional Materials

Despite the investment in resources, implementation remains highly inconsistent. Teachers, leaders, and district staff acknowledged that materials are not used in many classrooms, some even noting that materials remain unopened in closets across the district.

The graphs below show the instructional materials that MGT coaches observed during observations in Math and ELA classrooms; observations confirmed that core instructional materials are not widely used.





Similar trends were observed in Science and Social Studies classrooms.

Clarity & Training

Interviews revealed several barriers to effective implementation of core instructional materials. First, in addition to core programs, the district includes a broad range of supplemental programs in its adopted materials list. While this may be helpful in some cases, it creates confusion about what resources should be used when. It also sends mixed messages to teachers, undercutting the objective of aligned instruction districtwide. Additionally, some supplemental resources are redundant and don't fully align with core programs, leaving teachers on their own to determine how to structure their instruction.

Second, teachers cited a lack of training and support as a significant barrier to effective implementation. Many reported feeling unprepared to use the new materials. In some cases, teachers and school leaders also questioned whether adopted materials were the right fit for their students, leading some schools to seek out or purchase alternative materials. This also demonstrates a missed opportunity to train teachers and leaders on the instruction theory behind specific resources as well as the rationale for using vetted, high-quality resources over teacher-created or purchased materials.

Finally, MPS does not have systems or structures in place to support internalization of core materials. Although many leaders expressed frustration that they cannot require lesson plans, a traditional lesson plan is often not the most effective way to prepare for instruction. True high-quality materials include detailed daily lessons, including components of a traditional lesson plan. Instead of asking teachers to copy information from the teacher's guide into a planning template, MPS should implement lesson

internalization protocols, where teachers are asked to annotate their existing materials and practice delivering key components of the lesson.

Without clarity on which instructional materials to use, effective training, and a structured way for teachers to internalize their resources, implementation of district-adopted materials will remain inconsistent.

Recommendations

1. Generate buy-in from teachers by emphasizing the rationale and research behind key district-adopted materials.
2. Create concrete guidance for how to implement district-adopted resources, including curriculum maps, pacing guides, and clarity on the appropriate use of supplemental programs.
3. Create a realistic plan for implementation of new curricula, including all training and support, even if that means slowing down adoption and implementation processes.
4. Implement a lesson internalization process embedded within PLCs.

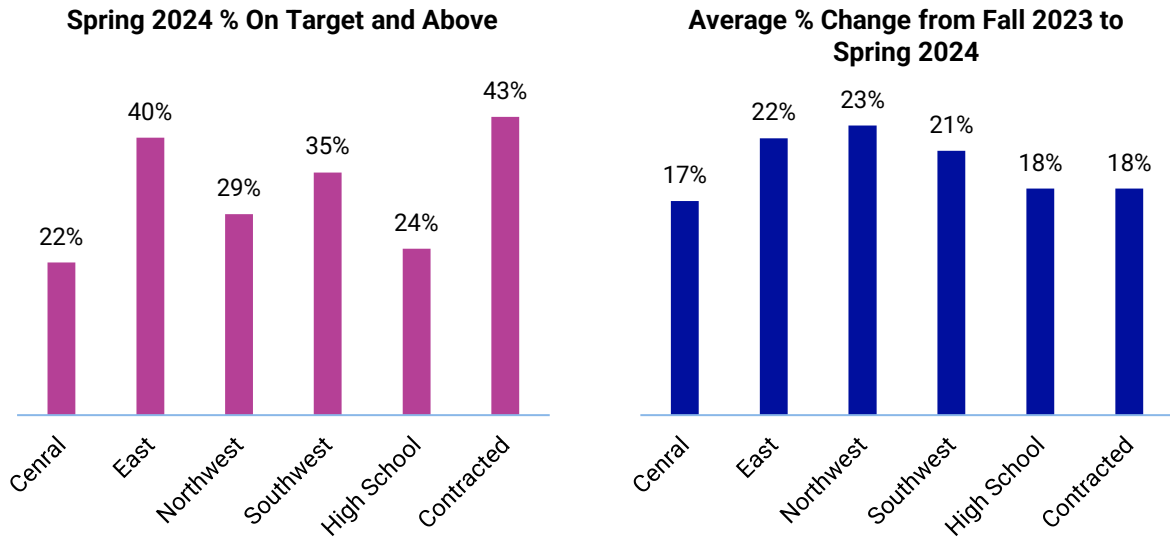
Objective 2.3: Ensure that all students have access to effective reading instruction by building understanding of, and buy-in for, the Science of Reading, and by providing targeted professional development and coaching for teachers as well as district and school leaders.

Findings

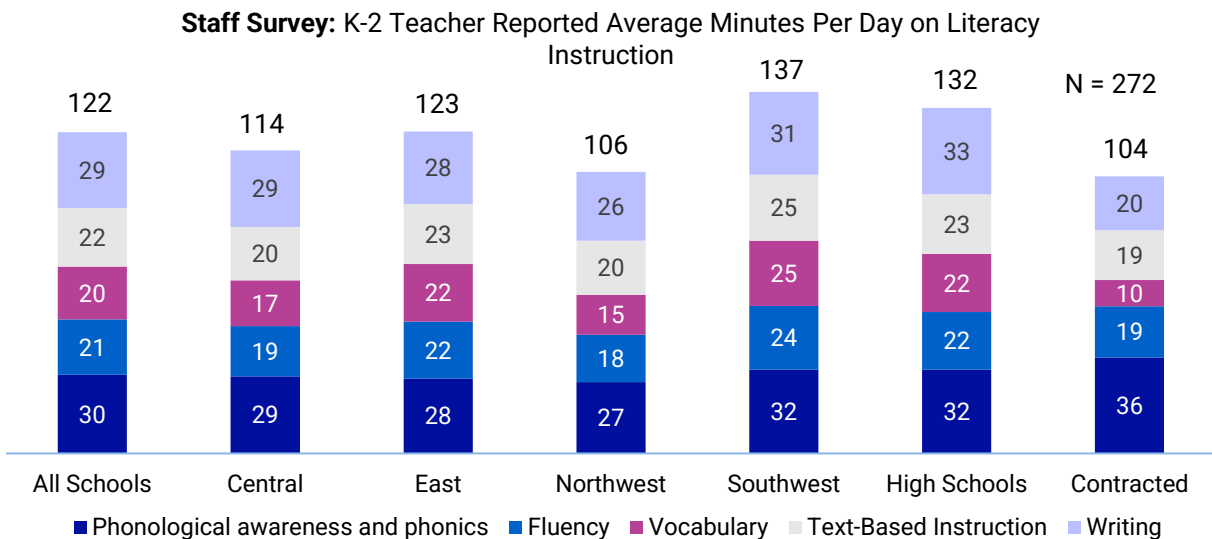
Varied Approaches to Reading in K-2 Classrooms

Our review of foundational literacy instruction across MPS K–2 classrooms reveals a complex and uneven landscape. While the district has adopted high-quality instructional materials and initiated professional development through LETRS (*Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling*, a popular professional learning course offered by Lexia), the implementation of these initiatives varies significantly across schools and classrooms, and early literacy performance reflects that inconsistency. The charts below show STAR Early Literacy data for the 2023-24 school year. This data reveals low overall proficiency, insufficient growth, and significant discrepancies in performance across regions.

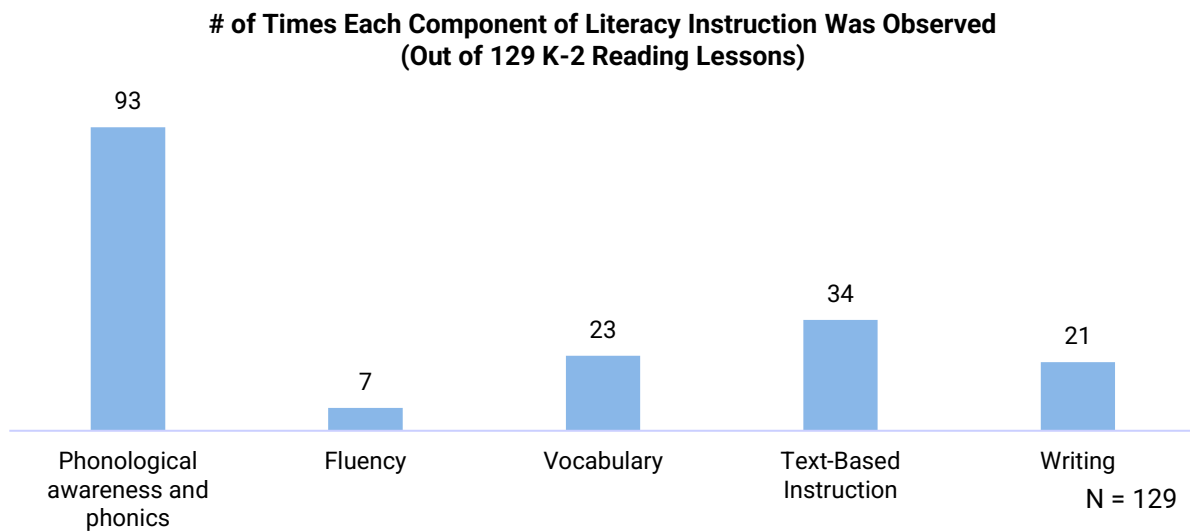
2023-24 STAR Early Literacy



When asked how much time they spend on key components of literacy instruction, K-2 teachers shared widely different responses, indicating a lack of clarity on instructional routines for early literacy. Even when averaged by region, we found discrepancies in the total time spent per day on reading instruction.



When MGT coaches observed K-2 reading classrooms, we saw some components of literacy instruction being implemented much more frequently than others.



These observations indicate that teachers may be overemphasizing phonics and phonemic awareness in their instruction, which may indicate a superficial understanding of the Science of Reading among teachers and leaders. While it's not a perfect correlation, these graphs show a connection between time spent on literacy and low performance, particularly in the Central and Northwest regions. Time is critically important. Research shows that students in grades K – 2 need at least 120 instructional minutes for core reading. Disparities in daily minutes add up - for example, if students in the Southwest region receive 137 minutes of literacy instruction daily, while students in Northwest region receive 106, in a 180-day school year this equates to 93 more hours of reading instruction.

Training for Teachers & Leaders

The primary root cause of this inconsistency is uneven understanding of the Science of Reading among teachers as well as school and district leaders.

During interviews, many school and district leaders demonstrated an incomplete understanding of Structured Literacy and the specific instructional shifts required under the Science of Reading. Many leaders reported dissatisfaction with the LETRS training sequence for administrators, and very few could articulate clearly what they look for in early literacy lessons beyond use of the core materials and phonics. In addition, some administrators were unfamiliar with the resources being used in their buildings or had not received adequate training. These same gaps in understanding were present among district leaders, many of whom were familiar with the compliance requirements of Act 20, such as screening and Reading Improvement Plans, but weren't able to articulate the implications for daily instruction. This lack of clarity at the leadership level leads to unclear expectations and unmet support needs for teachers.

Teacher interviews and surveys uncovered further gaps in training. While some educators expressed enthusiasm for the Science of Reading and appreciated the depth of LETRS training, many others described the rollout as disjointed, overwhelming, and poorly timed. Because of the limited time for professional development, teachers have been moving very slowly through an online version of the LETRS sequence, making it difficult to retain new learning. Several teachers also reported receiving minimal or no training before being expected to implement new curricula for elementary reading. Others noted that the LETRS training, while informative, lacked practical application and alignment with the HMH Into Reading core resource. The disconnect between training content and classroom realities has left many teachers feeling unprepared and unsupported, particularly when working with students who are significantly behind in foundational reading skills.

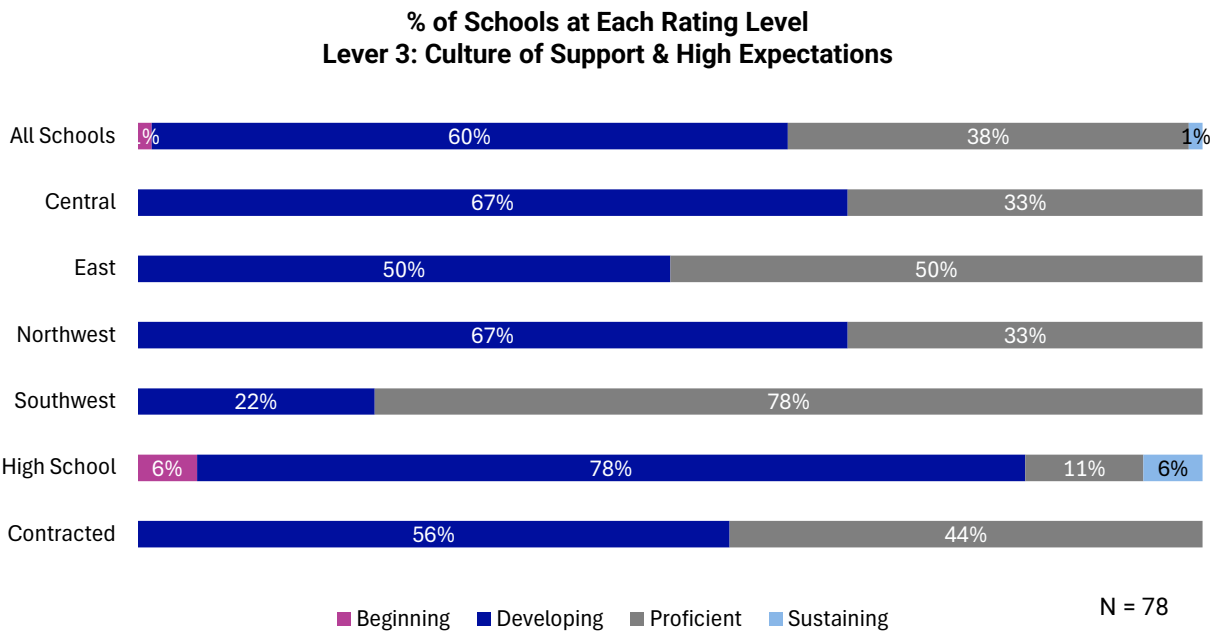
Instructional Routines

Finally, there is a need for clear guidance on what early reading instruction should look like across campuses. When asked, leaders had difficulty articulating what instructional routines and materials should be used for early literacy. In addition to HMH Into Reading, the district provides supplemental Spelling, Handwriting, and Writing resources. However, teachers do not have clarity on how and when to leverage each resource or how to ensure that they align. Although MGT coaches saw evidence of expectations for a 90-minute reading block in some elementary classrooms, this is not sufficient time for core reading instruction. Other schools and classrooms lacked even that level of structure.

Recommendations

1. Require all teachers, school leaders, and district leaders to complete comprehensive training in Structured Literacy.
2. Create clear guidance for schools and teachers to implement Structured Literacy, including timing, pacing, use of resources, and guidance for tier I, tier II and tier III instruction.
3. Align systems to support implementation of Structured Literacy, including modeling & coaching, walkthrough protocols, PLCs using aimsweb data, and intervention structures.

Lever 3: Culture of Support & High Expectations



This Lever focuses on creating a school environment where all students and staff are held accountable, and where classrooms are conducive to learning for all students. At the district level, it includes systems, policies, and practices that promote high expectations for all schools, a positive environment districtwide, and shared ownership of student success districtwide, across schools, regions, and departments. It also prioritizes a safe and positive environment by ensuring physical, emotional, and mental well-being, establishing clear behavioral expectations, and implementing proactive systems to support student behavior. Lever 3 also includes whole child development through access to academic and extracurricular opportunities, full use of facilities like libraries, and clear, productive roles for support staff.

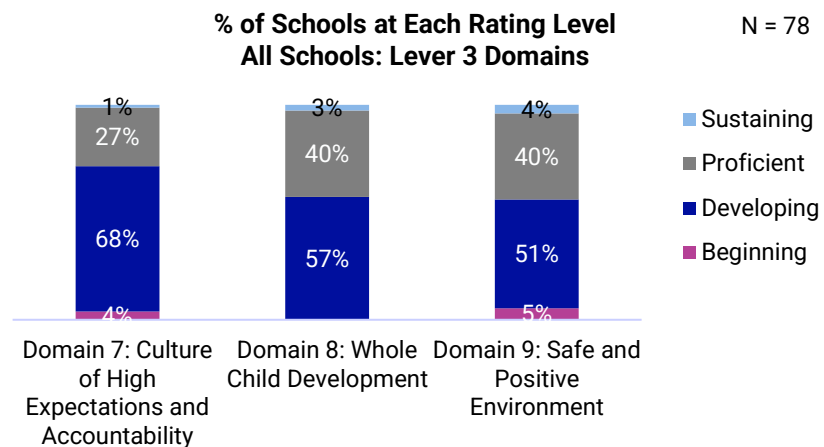
Celebrations

During interviews and focus groups, MGT coaches were consistently impressed by the level of commitment and passion that MPS teachers, leaders, and staff have for the students they support and for the district as a whole. There is a strong desire for improvement and willingness to work hard among MPS staff at every level. This energy creates the foundation for true collective efficacy to emerge, which is essential for long-term sustainable improvement.

The district's specialized school models are a bright spot, offering an impressive variety of options for students and families. Some schools also offer a wide range of extracurricular activities, including sports, clubs, and mentoring programs, which contribute to whole-child development

and provide students with meaningful opportunities to connect and grow. These efforts are supported by dedicated staff, including social workers, psychologists, and community partners, who help address students' emotional and behavioral needs.

Many schools have made significant strides in building welcoming, inclusive environments where students feel seen, valued, and supported. Programs like PBIS (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) and the Social-Emotional Learning curriculum Second Step are present throughout the district, although implementation varies. Schools are also leveraging student voice through leadership groups, advisory councils, and student-led initiatives, which foster a sense of ownership and belonging.



Objective 3.1: Intentionally build a districtwide culture of collective efficacy by enforcing high expectations, enhancing communication, and systematically celebrating success.

Findings

MPS is made up of an exceptionally passionate and hard-working staff. Many teachers and leaders shared in their interviews that they are proud alumni of MPS and send their own children to the district. Staff members believe in the work they do and have a strong desire for change, and we heard in interviews and focus groups that individuals are willing to work hard to support that change. However, district systems, structures, and norms often serve as barriers to staff efficacy and ultimately improved outcomes.

Expectations & Accountability Systems

As described in Lever 1, schools receive support from their regional team as well as the Department of Academics. The silos that exist in both of these departments create a web of inconsistent and unclear expectations at the school level.

Each academic department has its own priorities and guidance for teachers and leaders, and it's not always clear how to implement them all at the same time. Because each department does not have enough staff to provide training and coaching or conduct walkthroughs to monitor implementation, there is little accountability. Initiatives also tend to be disconnected, because they don't tie back to a shared vision for teaching and learning. In addition, the high level of turnover in district leadership and senior staff means that initiatives are sometimes abandoned without clear rationale.

In addition, Regional Superintendents have autonomy to create their own systems for support and accountability, which leads to inconsistency across regions. These fragmented systems combine to create an environment where individual schools and staff members disconnect from the system and focus just on what they can control, often waiting for initiatives to pass.

Communication

Amplifying these challenges is a lack of communication. Poor communication was cited as the number one challenge in the district by many central office staff, as well as by some school leaders and teachers. Many individuals shared that they learn important information from the media or from MTEA before they hear it through official communication channels. This creates confusion and also makes staff members feel undervalued and disempowered.

Opportunities to Celebrate and Analyze Successes

District staff described a culture of competition at central office. That culture, combined with insufficient opportunities for collaboration and the lack of a shared vision or focus, creates an environment where wins are not systematically identified, celebrated, or analyzed. Examples of excellence in every area exist within the district, but there are few, if any, real opportunities to learn what conditions and practices led to success and consider how they might be replicated elsewhere. When wins aren't identified and celebrated, it also creates staff disengagement and exacerbates burnout.

A culture of collective efficacy is an essential condition for long-term, sustainable improvement. To fully activate the passionate and dedicated staff already in the district,

MPS will need to improve systems accountability, communication, and sharing successful best practices within the district.

Recommendations

1. Create systems at the district level to hold all schools accountable to high expectations that are clearly aligned to the district vision.
2. Create systems for communication, including clear norms for how and when information is shared from senior leadership down to school-based staff, that empower staff and promote collaboration.
3. Systematically identify, celebrate, and analyze successes so that best practices can be shared across the district.

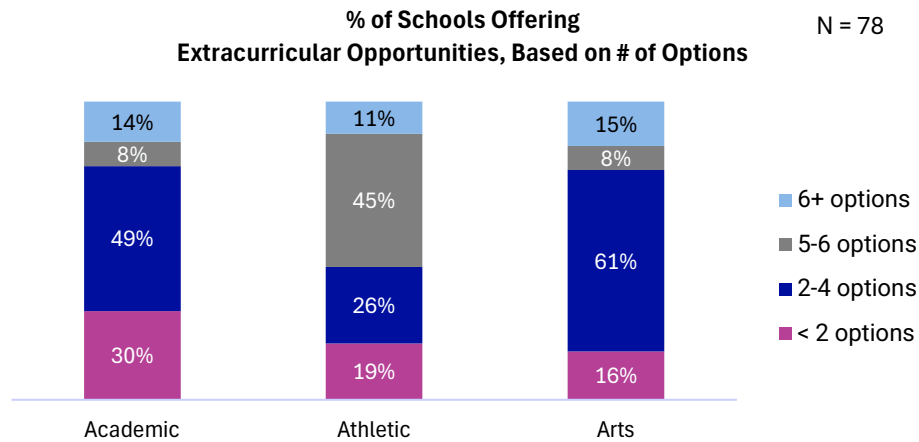
Objective 3.2: Provide intentional access to specialized and advanced academic models, college and career exploration, and extracurricular opportunities for all students districtwide.

Findings

MPS offers a variety of specialized programs, including International Baccalaureate (IB), Montessori, Project Lead the Way (PLTW), arts, and Bilingual Dual Language and Language Immersion schools. Restorative Justice programs exist in some schools, and partnerships provide additional wraparound support in some communities. Additionally, MGT coaches noted the number and variety of extracurricular programs in some schools, including academic enrichment, sports, arts, and hobby-based programs. However, not all students have the same level of access to these opportunities. We collected data specifically on specialized school models and extracurricular opportunities to illustrate these discrepancies.

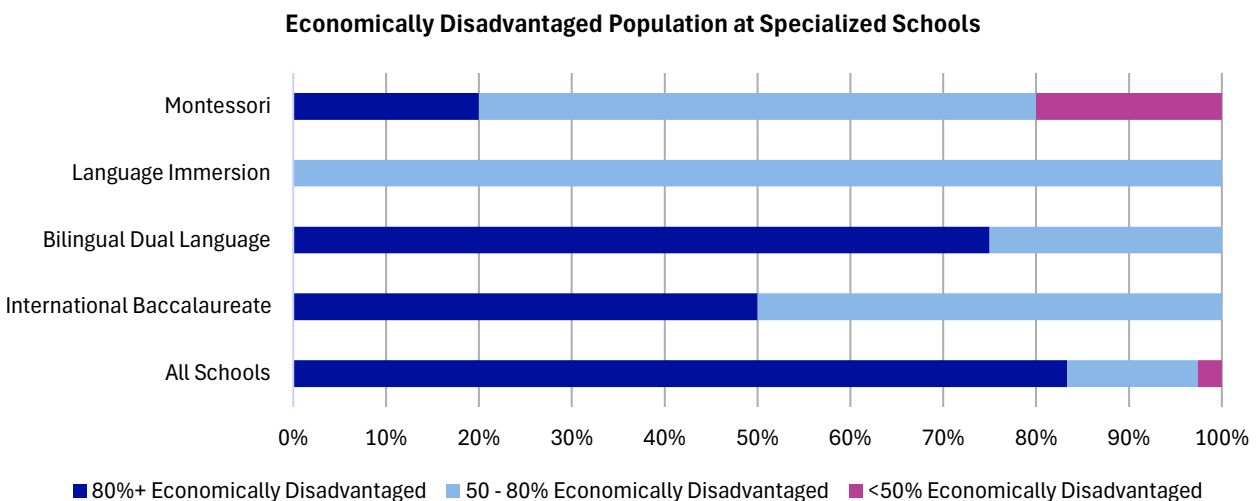
Extracurricular Opportunities

MGT coaches collected data on the availability of extracurricular opportunities at each school we visited. This analysis shows that there are significant discrepancies between schools in how many extracurricular options are available to students. For example, while 23% of schools have 5 or more options for Arts-based extracurriculars, 16% have fewer than 2. Notably, 30% of schools have fewer than 2 extracurricular options related to Academics.



Specialized School Models

Specialized schools, particularly Montessori and Bilingual/Language Immersion programs, are celebrated within MPS and by the greater Milwaukee community. These programs give students unique learning opportunities, skills that will be valuable into the future, and evidence-based programming to support social-emotional development. However, not all students have the same level of access to these programs in practice. MGT analyzed the student demographics at the Montessori, Bilingual Dual Language, Language Immersion, and International Baccalaureate (IB) schools in our sample and found that proportionally fewer specialized schools serve a high (greater than 80%) economically disadvantaged student population, compared to the district as a whole.



With the exception of Language Immersion schools, which do have language proficiency requirements to enroll, specialized schools typically follow the same enrollment

procedures as any other school in the district. The district is missing an opportunity to track enrollment patterns and create intentional systems to diversify access, including outreach programs to educate families about the specialized programs and encourage them to apply. For International Baccalaureate programs specifically, the Middle Years (MYP) and Primary Years (EYP) Programmes provide opportunities for students from all backgrounds to begin preparing for the rigors of IB starting as young as age three, while also focusing on developing the whole child and student inquiry. While MPS does have MYP and PYP schools, successful completion of those programs does not ensure that a student will be able to attend one of the district's IB high schools (e.g. Reagan HS), which are generally in higher demand. There is an opportunity for MPS to revisit its enrollment policies to ensure that all students in the district have the same level of access to these programs.

Recommendations

1. Revisit enrollment procedures for schools that offer specialized opportunities (e.g. Montessori, Bilingual Dual Language, IB, STEM, Fine Arts, etc.) to ensure equitable access for all students.
2. Reprioritize funding and/or partner with community organizations to supplement extracurricular opportunities in schools that do not currently have robust options for their students.

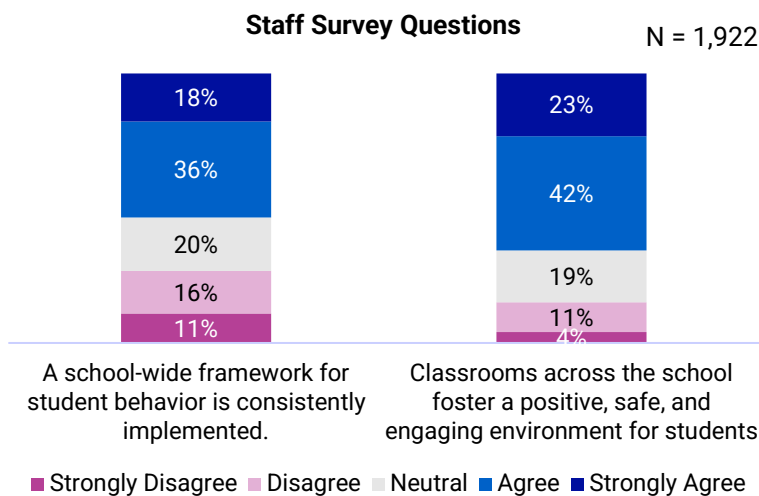
Objective 3.3: Establish a districtwide vision of positive school culture and align policies and resources to ensure staff are equipped to implement evidence-based behavior management strategies and discipline systems.

Findings

Across the district, student behavior was the most pressing challenge cited by teachers, with many reporting frequent disruptions that significantly impact teaching and learning. Teachers consistently expressed concern that behavioral expectations and consequences are inconsistently applied, both within and across schools, and many noted that their schools do not have sufficient resources to meet students' social-emotional and mental health needs. Our analysis of discipline data, student and staff perceptions, and classroom observations show that there is a need to re-establish expectations, revisit policies and resource allocation, and provide training and coaching to ensure that all teachers can effectively implement routines, procedures, and foundational classroom management strategies.

Alignment on Student Discipline

During MGT's one-on-one interviews, a disconnect emerged between teachers and leaders around what consequences are fair and appropriate for student infractions, illuminating the need for clearer framework to be applied across schools. In surveys, 27% of staff disagreed or strongly disagreed that a school-wide framework for student behavior is consistently implemented, and 15% disagreed or strongly disagreed that classrooms foster a positive, safe, and engaging environment for students. In interviews, many teachers cited examples of extreme behavior that resulted in few or no consequences.



School Leaders, on the other hand, often indicated that suspension is their only real option to address serious student behavior. In some cases, school leaders noted that they try to take a restorative approach and avoid suspensions where possible but are not always confident about the best approach.

Although most schools have established PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention and Support) systems, they are inconsistently implemented and insufficient, on their own, to change school culture and climate. There is a Restorative Practices program within the district, but it only implemented in a small portion of schools.

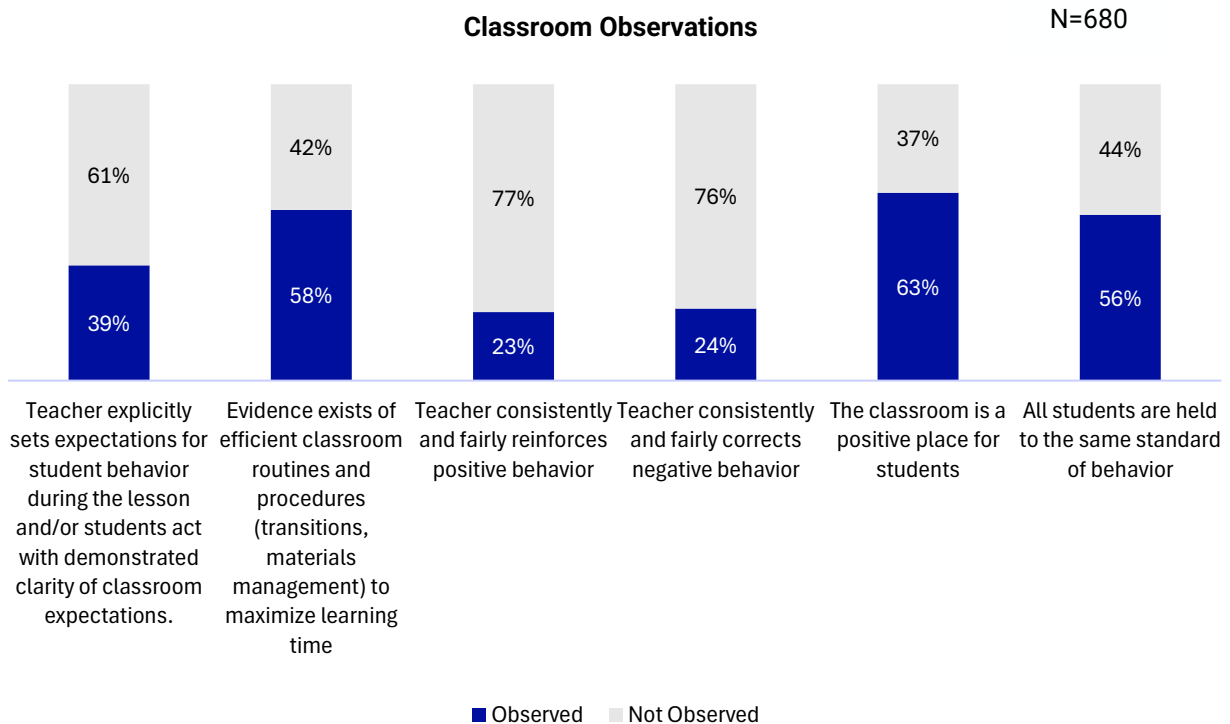
This data indicates a need to reestablish expectations for students and staff, including clarity around the district's philosophy for student discipline as well as concrete expectations for principals, teachers, and students. Once a vision and expectations are established, leaders can build buy-in from staff by engaging them in the process of determining consequences for students and clearly communicating why specific consequences were chosen and how it relates to the district vision.

Routines, Procedures, and Foundational Classroom Management Strategies

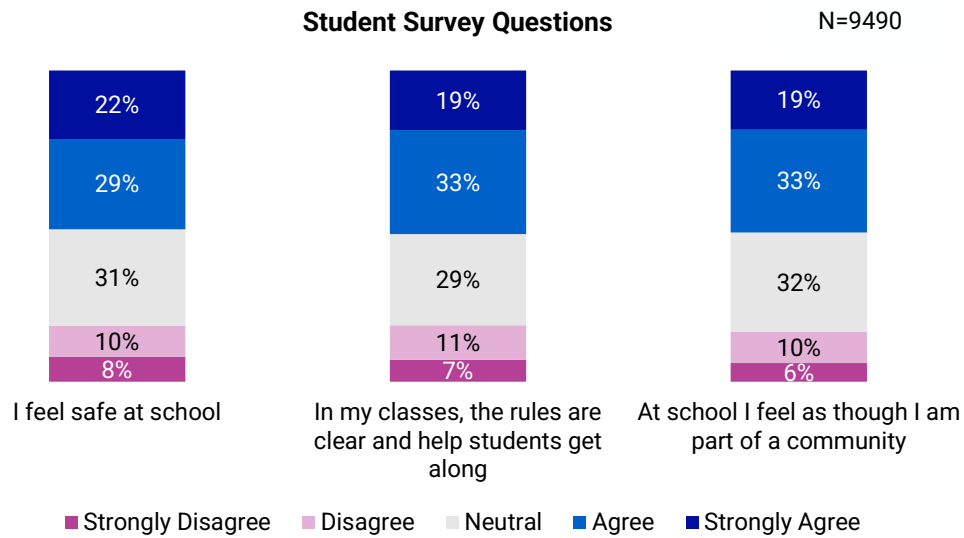
Classroom observations and student surveys also uncovered a real need to ensure that classroom management strategies are implemented in every classroom. Foundational classroom management practices are critical to establishing safe learning environments

for students, and implementing these practices well will significantly reduce the number of disciplinary actions needed.

In 56% of the classroom observations conducted, MGT coaches saw evidence that students are held to the same standard of behavior. However, they also found opportunities to more explicitly reinforce and correct behavior. Additionally, in approximately 40% of classroom observations, there was no evidence of clear expectations, routines, and procedures. Teachers, particularly new teachers, need greater support and training in classroom management strategies. Given the number of substitutes, permit teachers, and new teachers in the district, it is critically important to re-imagine district wide systems to support school staff in classroom management practices.



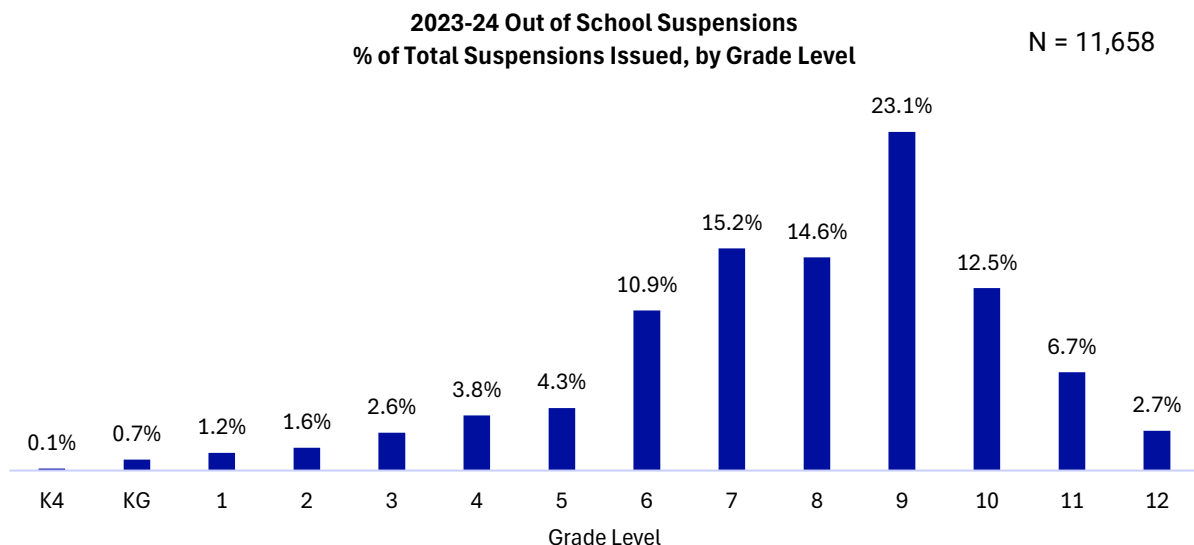
Student surveys affirm the need to improve classroom culture, with just over 50% of students indicating that they feel safe, rules are clear, and they feel like they are part of a community at school.



Students confirmed this data in Focus Group discussions, where they reported inconsistent discipline practices, uneven expectations across classrooms, and varying relationships with teachers.

Policies and Resource Allocation

An analysis of disciplinary actions from the 2023-24 school year revealed notable trends in out of school suspensions. Below shows the distribution of suspensions by grade.



First, although suspensions in early elementary are low relative to older grades, any exclusionary discipline for very young students must be taken seriously. Grade level data

also shows a clear uptick in suspensions in grades six and nine, and over 50% of suspensions during the 2023-24 school year were issued to students in grades 7 through 9.

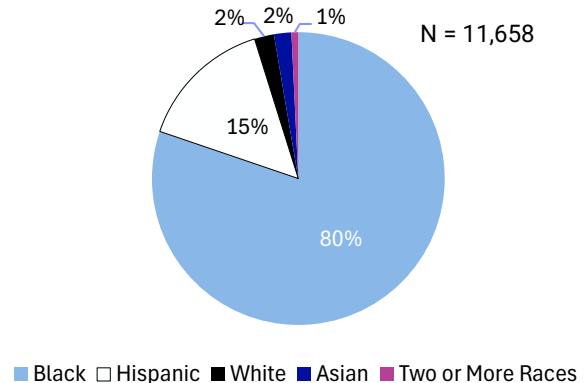
When the same suspension data is categorized by the race of the student, it's clear that suspensions are disproportionately issued to Black students. This trend is even more stark in expulsions over the same period, where 92% of expulsions during the 2023-24 school year were issued to Black students. According to State Report Card data, 49.5% of MPS students identified as Black during the 2023-24 school year.

Lastly, we reviewed the same suspension data categorized by region, which showed discrepancies that remained even after controlling for the size of each region.

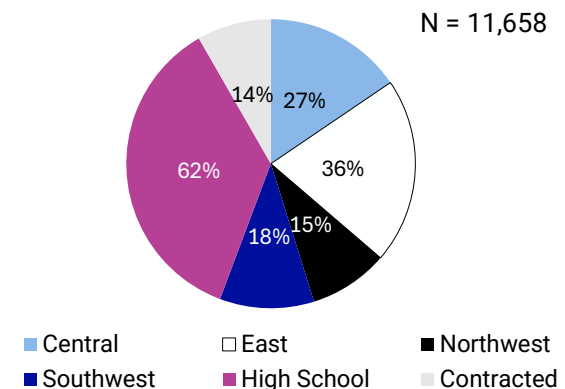
This data indicates an urgent need to rethink how schools are structured and how support resources are allocated. In particular, the district must do more to ensure that all students have safe, positive classroom and school environments. As an example, the regional structure in which all High Schools, including K-12 and 6-12 schools, are supervised by one Regional Superintendent, may not be sufficient to provide the targeted support needed for older students. Additionally, the large number of grade configurations in the district makes it difficult to target interventions at the middle school level. Lastly, a deeper analysis is needed to determine the root causes of disproportionately high suspension rates for Black students so that the district can align on strategies and prioritize resources so that all students have the opportunity achieve at high levels.

Altogether, this data indicates a need to approach improvements to student culture and discipline from multiple angles. First, by setting clear, aligned expectations and a vision for positive culture in the district. The lack of clarity and presence of multiple models (restorative justice, PBIS, trauma-informed schools) makes it difficult to identify root cause issues and hold staff and students accountable for clear expectations. Additionally,

**2023-24 Out of School Suspensions
% of Total Suspensions Assigned by Race**



**2023-24 Out of School Suspensions
% of Total Suspensions Assigned by Region**

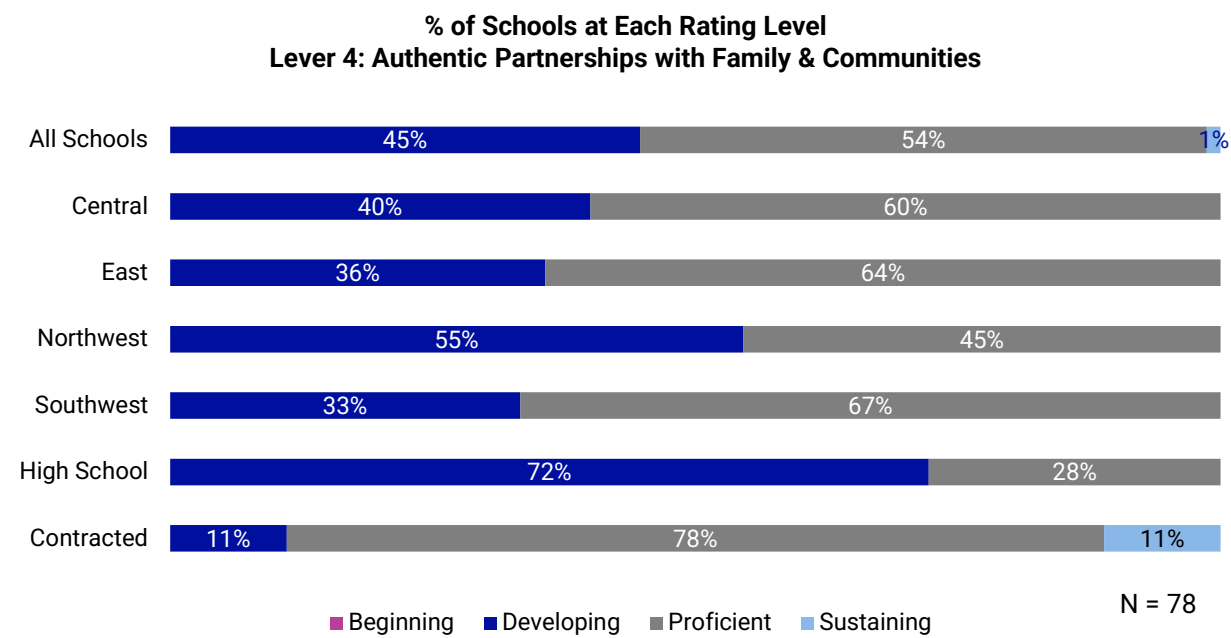


behavior challenges must be addressed at the systems level, by reprioritizing resources and revisiting grade reconfigurations, as well as at the classroom level, by ensuring that all teachers are equipped to create a positive learning environment.

Recommendations

1. Create a districtwide vision for positive student culture and evidence-based disciplinary practices.
2. Support all staff in collectively implementing foundational routines and strategies for proactive classroom and school management.
3. Collaborate with school staff about the process for addressing serious behavior incidents and clearly communicate the rationale for consequences that are aligned with the district vision.
4. Consider structural and policy changes at the district level to address disparities in suspensions, including grade configuration and resource allocation.

Lever 4: Authentic Partnerships with Family & Communities



This Lever emphasizes the importance of meaningful collaboration between schools, families, and the broader community to collectively support student success. It promotes student-centered decision-making, with a focus on all stakeholders (schools, families, and the community) coming together with a continuous focus on student outcomes. This also includes establishing clear and strategic communication channels that keep families informed about student progress and school initiatives. In order to have authentic partnerships with families and communities, schools must also create real opportunities for feedback and input on decision-making. Lastly, this Lever includes the concept of schools as service hubs that are responsive to family needs.

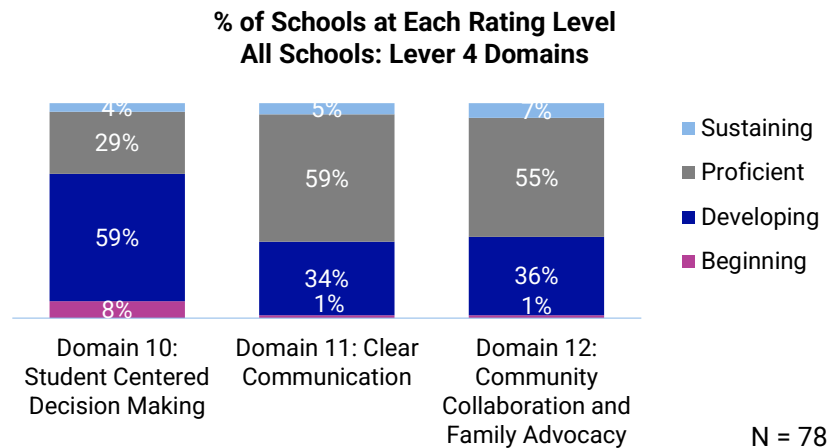
Celebrations

MPS has significant infrastructure and resources dedicated to engagement and communication with families. School leaders across the district emphasized an intentional effort to create warm, welcoming environments where families feel valued and included.

A key asset in MPS is the widespread presence of dedicated Parent Coordinators, who serve as vital liaisons between schools and families—organizing events, distributing newsletters, conducting surveys, and facilitating communication through

tools like Class Dojo, Remind, and School Messenger. Many schools host regular family engagement events such as cultural celebrations, literacy nights, and student performances, which are often well-attended and deeply appreciated by families. Over 60% of schools in the district received a Proficient or Sustaining rating for the Clear Communication and Community Collaboration and Family Advocacy Domains.

Schools also celebrate family involvement through parent councils, school engagement committees, and advisory boards, where families have opportunities to provide input and contribute to decision-making processes. Charter and partnership schools have also found success with innovative engagement strategies, such as monthly listening sessions and parent-led initiatives. This work is bolstered by targeted support for multilingual and refugee families, including translated materials and interpreter services.



Objective 4.1: Establish a vision for family engagement and align systems to support implementation.

Findings

Clear Vision and Roles

Despite the district’s significant infrastructure and investment in family engagement, MPS has not aligned family engagement practices with a clear, compelling, evidence-based vision. The expectations set for family engagement vary widely from school to school and in many cases are not clearly defined or monitored. In many schools, engagement is most often reactive, triggered by academic or behavioral concerns, rather than proactively focused on relationship-building and partnership. Interviews revealed that staff members

are not clear on the district's vision or philosophy for family engagement, or their role within it. For example, many teachers reported only contacting families when issues arise, and some expressed discomfort or lack of training, in addition to time constraints, as barriers to initiating positive outreach.

Parent Coordinator Role

Similarly, the role of the parent coordinator varies significantly across buildings, signaling a lack of unified vision across the district. Some Parent Coordinators are tasked with all schoolwide communication and event planning, while others spend a large portion of their time reaching out to families about individual student behavior issues. Some principals are able to protect the Parent Coordinator's time to maintain a narrow focus on family engagement, while others use them for a wide range of other duties, particularly when the school is short-staffed.

Aligned Resources

While some staff reported that there are districtwide resources that provide guidance for what family engagement should look and sound like, they aren't frequently referenced or implemented intentionally. This creates an environment where each individual leader, teacher, or Parent Coordinator can determine what family engagement should be in their building, which may or may not be aligned to research-based best practices.

Without a clear, compelling vision for family and community engagement that is research-based and focused on proactive relationship-building, MPS will continue to underleverage existing resources.

Recommendations

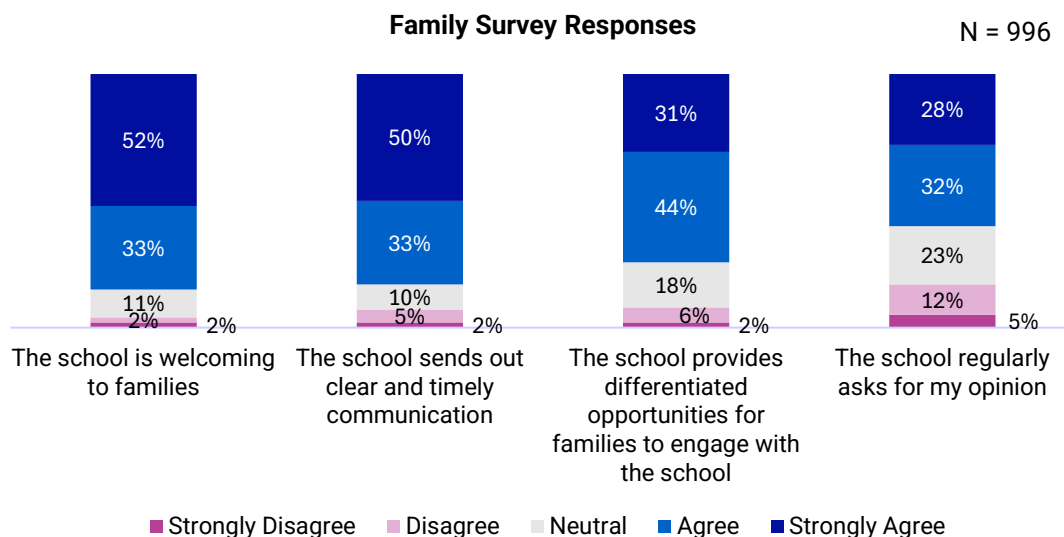
1. Create a vision and set measurable goals for family partnership and advocacy in MPS that is aligned to evidence-based best practices.
2. Clarify the Parent Coordinator role and set clear expectations for their work.
3. Provide training for staff (leaders, teachers, and parent coordinators) aligned to the district's vision and focused on evidence-based strategies for family engagement.

Objective 4.2: Empower families and community members to engage as partners in student learning and in the school improvement process.

Findings

Opportunities for Family Input

MPS provides a wide array of opportunities for family and community input – including through surveys, Parent Teacher Organizations, School Engagement Councils, and the District Advisory Council. Despite this, the Student-Centered Decision-Making Domain, which measures the degree to which schools engage families as partners in key decisions related to student outcomes, had the most Beginning and Developing ratings in Lever 4. Similarly, the question “The school regularly asks for my opinion on how things are going at the school” received fewer Agree and Strongly Agree responses than any other question related to family engagement.



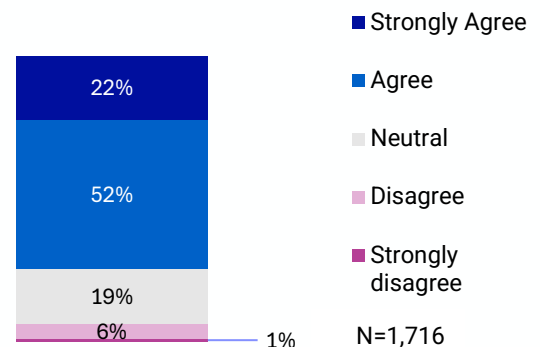
On surveys and in focus groups, family members and staff both expressed that while having School Engagement Councils and Parent Teacher Organizations are a good first step, their efforts are frequently superficial or event-based and lack the sustained, strategic engagement needed to build long-term partnerships with families. Parents often report feeling disconnected from decision-making processes, and while their input is sometimes solicited through surveys or meetings, there is limited evidence that this feedback is used to inform changes in school or district practice.

District Advisory Council

Similarly, MPS has a District Advisory Council (DAC) that meets monthly, with participation from family members across the district alongside staff and Board representatives. Stakeholders shared that while the DAC can be a forum for family members to share feedback, the time isn't used intentionally and it's often unclear what the district does with the feedback they receive. During the DAC meeting that MGT attended as part of this review, a large portion of the agenda was used for an informational session about Artificial Intelligence in schools, which no opportunity for members to give input on how AI should or should not be incorporated into teaching.

At the school and classroom level, practices vary significantly across the district to gather family input and feedback. In interviews, MGT coaches found that schools rely heavily on automated messaging systems like the Parent Portal, Class Dojo, and Remind to communicate with families but they frequently struggle to engage parents in two-way collaboration or problem-solving related to their student. These systems can be effective ways to share information, and they are particularly helpful in schools that struggle to maintain up-to-date contact information for families. However, they won't result in the types of authentic partnerships that lead to increased student achievement unless they are paired with genuine opportunities to connect, collaborate, and build relationships.

Staff Survey Question: I provide frequent academic updates to families



Recommendations

1. Build systems to seek authentic feedback from families on focused topics and clearly communicate how feedback is implemented.
2. Fully leverage Parent Engagement Organizations (e.g. PTA, SEC, etc.) and the District Advisory Council in strategic planning.
3. Provide training and guidance for teachers focused on building relationships with families and fostering two-way communication.

Objective 4.3: Identify the most successful family engagement practices within the district and implement systems to replicate those successes in all schools.

Findings

Inconsistencies Across the District

Across the district, there is a clear divide between schools that struggle to engage with families and those that have developed meaningful partnerships with families and their community. In schools that have successfully cultivated strong, sustained relationships with families, there is often a highly engaged Parent Coordinator who serves as vital connector between home and school, organizing regular newsletters, surveys, and events tailored to community needs. They host family nights, cultural celebrations, and workshops that not only inform but empower families to participate in their children's education.

For schools that struggle with engagement, events and Parent Organization meetings are poorly attended, and teachers cite operational barriers such as out-of-date contact information that prevent them from communicating with families.

Identifying and Replicating Bright Spots

There are bright spots that the district can learn from and replicate. However, there are limited opportunities to benchmark family engagement outcomes against school and district goals, which makes it difficult to systematically identify wins or analyze what practices and conditions lead to success. Although Parent Coordinators meet regularly, as a whole district and within their regions, the time is not used to share strategies that work and brainstorm solutions to shared challenges. This authentic collaboration does exist but is largely ad-hoc, creating gaps in effectiveness across the district. Systems can be improved to more effectively share out what is working and replicate success.

As the district creates a unified vision for family engagement, improves avenues of family input, the district can ensure it is collecting data and creating systems that can identify and replicate successful practices.

Recommendations

1. Set clear, measurable goals for family engagement at the school and district level, and collect data (e.g. attendance at events, contact logs, survey responses) to monitor progress and identify successes.

2. Create a Professional Learning Community (PLC) structure for Parent Coordinators to monitor school goals, brainstorm solutions to tough challenges, and amplify strategies that are proven to be effective.

Conclusion

Milwaukee Public Schools is in a period of transition, which represents a unique opportunity for change. For years, the district has seen disappointing academic performance. A variety of external factors have contributed to academic challenges, including declining enrollment and national teacher shortages. During the 2024-25 school year, the district's aging facilities compounded existing challenges when high levels of lead were detected in some buildings. This forced the district to shift focus and resources toward lead remediation and in some cases temporarily displaced entire schools.

Internally, turnover in senior leadership has led to frequently shifting initiatives and a culture of silos. This has eroded systems and created pockets of success but little to no systemwide improvement. MGT found little evidence of a compelling vision for teaching and learning, and structures for training, mentorship, and coaching reflected that lack of vision. As such, we found an enormous range of practices for leadership, instruction, student behavior, and family engagement across the district.

Despite these challenges, MPS has the opportunity to start a new chapter. The incoming administration and Board, leveraging these findings as well as the findings of the Operational Review, can chart a new course for the district. Although we have proposed a broad range of changes in this report, we recommend that the district focus on the following in their first year:

1. Establish a focused vision for teaching and learning, and communicate that vision clearly across the district and to all staff, students, and families.
2. Establish systems to support that vision, including goal-setting, progress monitoring, and systems of support. Dr. Cassellius has already begun this work by restructuring the district's central office and creating opportunities for school-based professional development.
3. Create a strategic plan and leverage outside resources to rapidly improve the quality of early literacy instruction to align with the Science of Reading.

This work can and should include identifying the bright spots that already exist within MPS, learning what conditions led to their success, and determining what practices can be replicated districtwide. Over time, the district has an opportunity to rebuild trust with a staff and community who are hungry for change, all of which will lead to increased academic outcomes and an improved learning experience for all students.