

EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY AUDIT REPORT

BAIRD MIDDLE SCHOOL



NATIONAL CENTER FOR URBAN SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION



www.ncust.com

9245 Sky Park Court Suite 120 San Diego, CA 92123

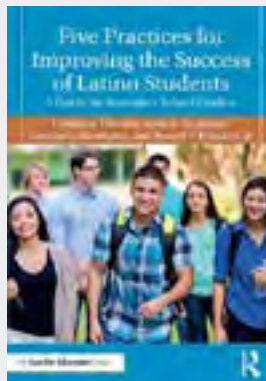
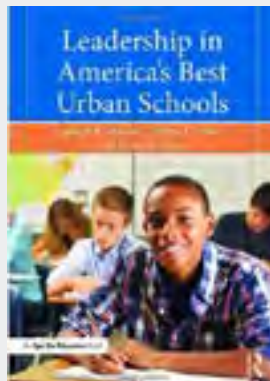


BACKGROUND

In 2005, San Diego State University founded the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) to help urban school districts and their partners transform urban schools into places where all students achieve academic proficiency, evidence a love of learning, and graduate well prepared to succeed in post-secondary education, the workplace, and their communities. To this end, NCUST identifies, celebrates, and studies urban schools where all demographic groups achieve outstanding educational successes. Our annual America's Best Urban Schools Award Program provides us the opportunity to learn from schools that exemplify both equitable and excellent learning results. We strive to disseminate all we learn from these schools as we endeavor to support other schools and districts that are eager to pursue similar outstanding results.

Our research has resulted in a substantial knowledge base regarding the beliefs, characteristics, structures, systems, and practices that lead all groups of students to excellent learning outcomes. Key findings are documented in these books: *Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools* (2012), *Leadership in America's Best Urban Schools* (2017); *Five Practices for Improving the Success of Latino Students: A Guide for Secondary School Leaders* (2018); and *Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools*, 2nd edition (2019). This knowledge base is the benchmark we utilize when conducting our equity audit process and is the focus of our work aimed at building the capacity of other educators. We have found impressive similarities across the high-performing schools we have studied despite differences in location, size, enrollment characteristics, grade-level configurations, expenditures, and other factors. In short, the educators in these schools improved curricula by teaching more rigorous content to a greater depth of understanding than other urban schools. They planned and delivered instruction in ways that were more likely to lead their students to mastery of the concepts and skills they were teaching. They fostered school cultures in which all students, teachers, parents, and support staff felt safe, cared for, valued, and respected. They built and implemented a coherent educational improvement system – a set of interdependent structures designed to support the ongoing improvement of student outcomes across a variety of indicators (e.g., achievement, extracurricular engagement, graduation, etc.). And, perhaps most importantly, these actions were guided by their shared belief in the capacity of all of their students to succeed.

On June 1 - 2, 2022, NCUST conducted an equity audit for Baird Middle School in the Fresno Unified School District. This audit was designed to explore the similarities and differences between the practices and structures in place at Baird Middle School and those that NCUST has identified in schools that have been very successful in educating all demographic groups of students. During the audit process, NCUST examined critical school characteristics, such as school culture, student access to rigorous curricula, and the quality of teaching and learning. In each of these areas, NCUST considered how processes, structures, and systems influenced what we found and how they could influence powerful, sustained improvement efforts. What follows is a description of our audit process, key findings emerging from the data, and recommendations intended to help Baird Middle School develop, refine, and prioritize their improvement plans in ways that will lead to higher levels of success for the diverse populations of students they serve.





METHODOLOGY

To begin the audit, Baird Middle School officials compiled and shared with the equity audit team a variety of data regarding school demographics, achievement, attendance, student behavior, and school success. In most cases, these data were disaggregated to highlight similarities and differences among different demographic groups.

NCUST staff conducted informal observations of the school's common areas, offices, cafeteria, library, playgrounds, and general school environment. These observations provided general information about the physical facility, how the facility was utilized to support teaching and learning, and how the facility influenced the culture of the school.

The equity audit team members conducted 17 classroom observations. An NCUST classroom observation protocol was utilized to document the part of the lesson observed, the number and demographics of students, and the cognitive demand of the activity in which students were engaged during the observation. In addition, evidence was collected regarding the climate and culture of the classroom, a variety of teaching practices utilized, teacher clarity and focus on mastery, student engagement, and levels of understanding exhibited by various groups of students.

In addition to the observations, the school principal was interviewed. Also, focus-group interviews were conducted with 30 individuals, including teachers (N=11), other non-certified/credentialed school staff members (N=4), students (N=12), and parents (N=3). Standard protocols were used and included open-ended questions relevant to the expertise of participants. As well, a few questions were common across groups to gather perspectives about core practices from multiple perspectives. Generally, participants were asked about their roles and responsibilities, experiences at school, and their opinions about strengths and needs at Baird Middle School. All stakeholders were thoughtful and reflective and contributed significantly to our understanding of Baird Middle School. Artifacts, such as master schedules, bell schedules, curriculum documents, school profiles, and data reports, also informed our study and understanding.

Upon completion of the interviews and observations, the NCUST team examined the data collected, identified themes, and compared the school's practices with the practices found in the high-performing schools NCUST has awarded and studied. The findings in this report reflect a triangulation of the multiple data sources cited above; however, it is important to note that the findings are based upon a snapshot of the school. Teaching and learning observed on the days of the visit may or may not be representative of typical teaching and learning occurring at Baird Middle School. Similarly, the interviews conducted may or may not be representative of the sentiments and opinions of all teachers and administrators at the school. That said, we were able to hear from many stakeholders, and clear themes emerged from the data across multiple stakeholder groups. As well, this aligned with our observations and patterns in the quantitative data.



GENERAL INFORMATION

Students at Baird Middle School

Baird Middle School serves approximately 576 students in grades five to eight. Enrollment during the most recent three years has decreased slightly.

Approximately 42.5% of the students meet eligibility criteria for the free- or reduced-price lunch program. The largest racial/ethnic group served is Latino/Hispanic, comprising 53% of the student population. The second largest racial/ethnic group is White/Caucasian, comprising 32% of the student population. Additionally, 5% of the students are Black/African American and 4% of the students are multi-racial. Approximately 20% of the students are designated as English learners and 9% receive special education services. Approximately 0.5% of the students receive foster care services and approximately 0.3% of the students are experiencing homelessness.

Staff at Baird Middle School

Students at Baird Middle School are served by a team of 23 teachers, two counselors/social workers, two administrators, one other certificated personnel, and six other non-certificated personnel.

An important tool for improving school culture, curricula, and instruction in high-performing schools is professional development. In high-performing schools, professional development is focused on a few critical improvement issues. As well, professional development influences real improvements in practice when the same few topics are pursued until changes in practice and/or changes in outcomes are achieved. Also, the likelihood of a positive impact on student learning is enhanced by professional development that is tightly aligned to the focus of teacher collaboration efforts and the focus of classroom observations and feedback. At Baird Middle School teachers and administrators described professional development efforts related to cultural proficiency, social and emotional learning, and interim assessment blocks (IABs). In prior years, professional development was focused on creating high-functioning professional learning communities (PLCs), response to intervention (RTI), and analyzing student data in order to make the connection between PLCs and RTI. These responses suggest that professional development at Baird Middle School occurs in a manner that is aligned to the functions emphasized in teacher collaboration meetings and classroom observations and feedback.

Leadership at Baird Middle School

The principal has led Baird Middle School for one year and has previously served at Baird Middle School for nine years.

In high-performing schools, instructional leaders regularly spend abundant time in classrooms observing teaching and learning and providing formative feedback to help teachers improve their craft. In many high-performing schools, principals spent 40% of the time during school days engaged in visiting classrooms and/or in engaged in teacher collaboration meetings. At Baird Middle School most teachers indicated that their teaching was observed by the administration team. At Baird Middle School, the principal reported spending approximately two hours per week in classrooms and approximately one hour in meetings with teachers.

Leaders in high-performing schools communicate with stakeholders in ways that reinforce a strong focus on improvement efforts. Written and oral communication emphasizes improvement initiatives by celebrating progress and highlighting opportunities to build upon recent efforts. At Baird Middle School the principal indicated that, most frequently, written and oral communications emphasized creating a positive student culture through daily announcements, creating a positive staff culture through individual conversations with staff, staff and student celebrations, and logistics. Also, teachers, counselors, and support personnel indicated that, most frequently, written and oral communications focused on celebrations, encouraging staff members, and logistical updates. The responses suggest that written and oral communication typically reinforce improvement priorities at Baird Middle School.



GENERAL INFORMATION

Student Attendance at Baird Middle School

During the 2020-2021 academic year, the average daily attendance at Baird Middle School was 98.2%. In the 2019-2020 academic year, the average daily attendance at Baird Middle School was 97.5%. In the 2020-2021 academic year, 2.2% of Baird Middle School students were chronically absent. This means that 2.2% of Baird Middle School students were absent from school on at least 10 percent of school days.

Each school that earns NCUST's America's Best Urban School Award demonstrates average daily attendance of at least 92% and many achieve 95% or 96% average daily attendance. As well, many America's Best Urban School Award winners have 10% or fewer of their students who are classified as chronically absent. Generally, students who attend school regularly are more likely to learn important academic concepts and are more likely to succeed in school.

The high rate of average daily attendance and the low rate of chronic absenteeism at Baird Middle School are important strengths that can be leveraged to improve academic achievement.

English Learners at Baird Middle School

Baird Middle School serves 117 English learners. The school utilizes the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) to determine each student's level of proficiency in communicating in English. In 2019, 42.9% of the students were making progress towards English language proficiency.

Student Discipline at Baird Middle School

In some cases, when students misbehave at Baird Middle School, students are referred to an administrator or counselor for assistance and support. In the 2021-2022 school year, the principal reported that 10 referrals were received by school officials.

During the 2021-2022 school year, seven students were suspended from Baird Middle School, resulting in seven lost days of instruction.

In the high-performing schools NCUST awards, the numbers of students suspended and the total number of days students are suspended are remarkably low for every demographic group (less than one day of suspension for each student in the demographic group). The low rate of suspension is indicative of a culture in which students and teachers work well together. The low rate of suspension also ensures better school attendance and better academic achievement. Similarly, we find a low rate of suspension at Baird Middle School. This is an important strength.

Student Achievement at Baird Middle School

Students at Baird Middle School take the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP). Students in grades 5 through 8 take the English language arts assessment and mathematics assessment. Additionally, students in grades 5 and 8 take the California Science Test (CST) assessment. The most recent assessment results are from the assessment administered in 2018-2019. More than 96% of students participated in the most recent administration of the assessment.

Those results indicate the percentage of Baird Middle School students who performed at the proficient or advanced level in English language arts is above the state-wide percentage in grades five through eight.

The data also indicate that the percentage of Baird Middle School students who performed at the proficient or advanced level in mathematics is above the state-wide percentage in grades five through eight. Additionally, the data indicate that the percentage of Baird Middle School students who performed at the proficient or advanced level in science is above the state-wide percentage in grades five and eight.



GENERAL INFORMATION

GRADE % AND STATE %	% PROFICIENT OR ADVANCED ON ELA 2018/19 STATE ASSESSMENT	% PROFICIENT OR ADVANCED ON MATH 2018/19 STATE ASSESSMENT	% PROFICIENT OR ADVANCED ON SCIENCE 2018/19 STATE ASSESSMENT
SCHOOL GRADE 5	69.9%	56.4%	49.7%
STATE GRADE 5	51.68%	37.99%	31.7%
SCHOOL GRADE 6	64.2%	55%	
STATE GRADE 6	50.0%	38.52%	
SCHOOL GRADE 7	62.9%	42%	
STATE GRADE 7	51.3%	37.8%	
SCHOOL GRADE 8	64.1%	43.4%	36.8%
STATE GRADE 8	49.40%	36.60%	30.84%

Additionally, the state assessment data for Baird Middle School students reveal variation in the performances of students from different demographic groups. For example, 74 percent of Baird Middle School's White/Caucasian students performed at the proficient or advanced level in English language arts; however, only 57 percent of Baird Middle School's Latino/Hispanic students performed at the proficient or advanced level on the same assessment. Similarly, 76 percent of Baird Middle School's Asian students performed at the proficient or advanced level in mathematics; however, only 57 percent of Baird Middle School's, Black/African American students performed at the proficient or advanced level on the same assessment.

	TOTAL # TESTED	% PROF. OR ADV. ON ELA 18/19	% PROF. OR ADV. ON Math 18/19
ASIAN	21	76.2%	66.7%
BLACK /AFRICAN AMERICAN	28	57.1%	42.9%
LATINO OR HISPANIC	292	56.9%	39%
MULTI-RACIAL	22	77.3%	86.4%
WHITE OR CAUCASIAN	222	74.3%	57.7%
STUDENTS MEETING LOW- INCOME CRITERIA	294	77.3%	86.4%
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS	20	5%	0%
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	28	50%	32.2%
STATE AVERAGE FOR ALL STUDENTS		51.10%	39.70%



GENERAL INFORMATION

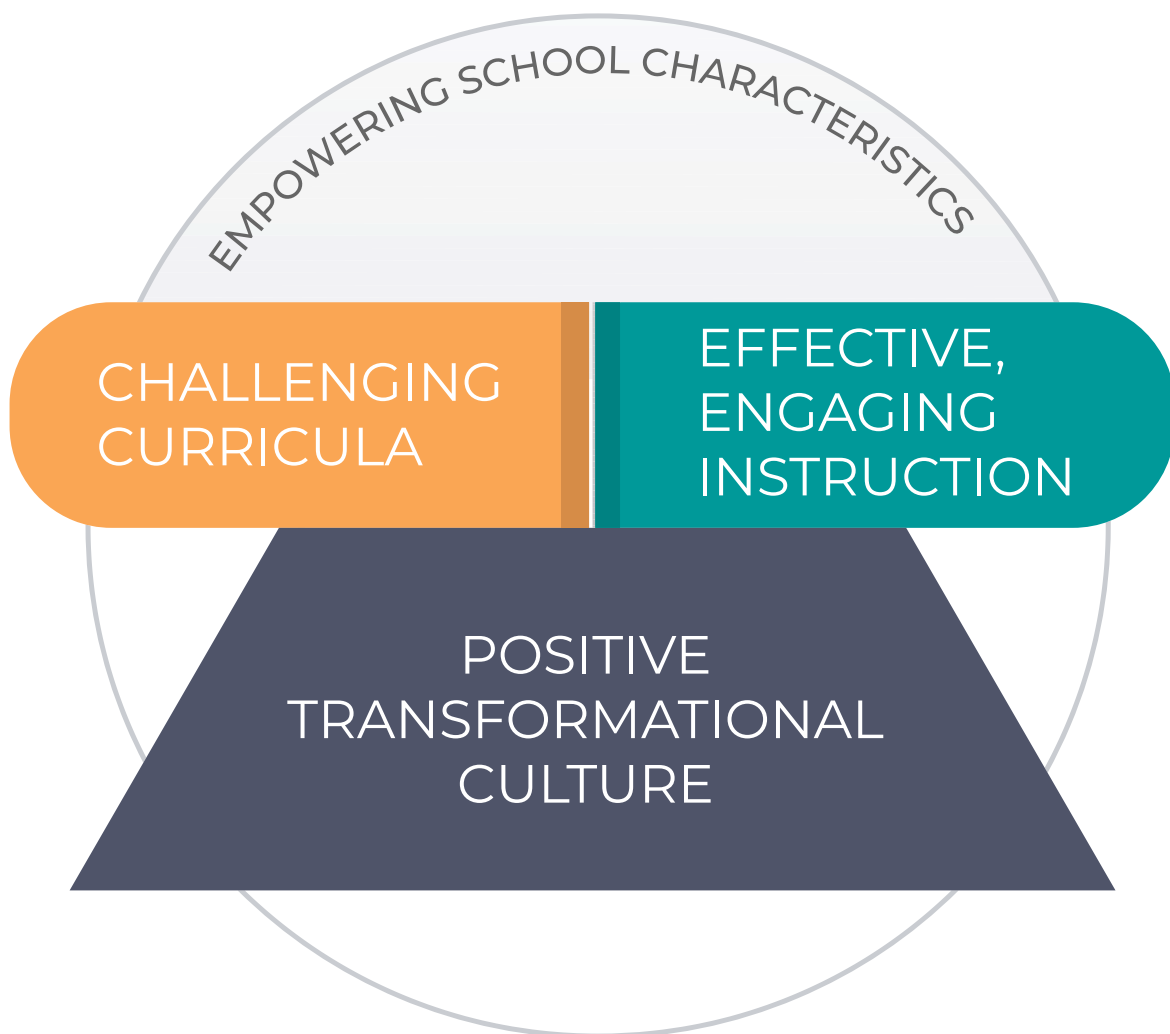
Schools that receive NCUST's America's Best Urban School Award demonstrate multiple academic successes for the students they serve. In the award-winning schools, the percentage of students achieving at the proficient or advanced level is greater than the statewide percentage at most grade levels and most subject areas. As well, in schools that receive NCUST's America's Best Urban School Award, each racial/ethnic group served outperforms overall statewide percentages. This report is designed to help educators at Baird Middle School chart a course toward ensuring that all of their students and each racial/ethnic group achieve at levels that exceed overall state percentages.

In the following pages, we present the findings of this audit by comparing the culture, curricula, and instruction found in very high-performing public schools that serve large populations of students from low-income families to what we have learned about Baird Middle School. In light of the audit findings, we provide recommendations for action.

FINDINGS

EMPOWERING SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

Schools that achieve equity and excellence for all the students they serve possess three empowering school characteristics: a positive, transformational culture; access to rigorous curricula for all students; and effective instruction that leads to engagement and mastery.





FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

Definition: A positive, transformational school culture provides the foundation for equitable and excellent learning outcomes. We define the culture as *positive* because high-performing schools displayed overwhelmingly healthy learning environments where administrators, teachers, staff members, and families treated one another as valued partners in the education of their students. Trust and mutual respect were evident in the relationships between and among all school personnel. Students from every demographic group perceived that the adults in the school knew them well and were committed to their success in school and beyond. Children and adults felt respected, valued, and appreciated. Adults took painstaking efforts to ensure that everyone felt safe and comfortable, both physically and emotionally. The culture was *transformational* because students, teachers, support personnel, and administrators were always focused on improving. Students from every racial/ethnic group described strategies educators had employed to transform traditional school practices and procedures to help ensure their academic success. Even when the school had achieved at levels far beyond typical expectations, educators were asking, “What can we do better to ensure the success of more of our students?”



Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

- 🔍 **Stakeholders at Baird Middle School described the school as diverse, a family, and inclusive.** Teachers characterized Baird Middle School as committed, impactful, and rewarding. One teacher stated, “I’m thinking from this practical demographic geographic viewpoint, we have a very unique thing here. We have this broad picture of what Fresno’s like, but we’re still a very small community, so I think that is pretty powerful,” when describing Baird Middle School. Parents described the school as wonderful, rigorous, and unique. Students portrayed the school as passionate, a community, and supportive. When we asked parents whether or not their children liked the school, they responded that their students like coming to school because of teachers they have connections with, friends, and special academic activities or opportunities. Similarly, when we asked students if they liked going to school at Baird Middle School, most students reported that they like coming to school.
- 🔍 **Students and parents reported that most educators at Baird Middle School cared about them.** Students described teachers who build relationships and connections with students and teachers who encourage students as evidence of their teachers’ care. One student stated the following when describing the passion of Baird Middle School teachers versus teachers at another school, “Like they don’t care about one certain person more than anyone else. And I felt that at my other school, like the teachers really didn’t care about anyone. They were just there. They’d get there as soon as class started and they left right after the bell rang. So I felt like they’re just kind of there for the money and not really...they weren’t really passionate.” Similarly, parents described some teachers who intentionally connect with students and teachers who voluntarily open up their classrooms outside of instructional hours to support students academically as evidence that teachers cared about their children. Conversely, students and parents described some teachers who often create a classroom culture where students fear being scolded. Other students expressed concerns about not being “liked” by certain teachers. Additionally, parents discussed instances when some teachers have communicated unprofessionally when parents reached out with questions or concerns as evidence of the teachers’ lack of care.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

- Administrators at Baird Middle School reported that most students felt joy being at school.** The administrator noted that many students enjoy Baird Middle School and enjoy socialization with friends. The administrator noted that the school works to create an inclusive environment where all students can feel part of the community. Conversely, the administrator noted that some students have complaints about interpersonal issues or compliance issues around expectations.
- Most students reported that Baird Middle School was a good place to be a student.** The most common reasons provided by students included socializing, caring teachers, and content areas they enjoy. Parent responses were similar and described Baird Middle School as having an “ethics of care” where, specifically, students of color and students with special needs can be supported. One parent noted, “I don’t see my child being successful anywhere else, other than Baird or...achieving the level of success that he has here.” Parents noted the Block 8 courses, electives, and fun activities that enrich the school experience for their students. In addition, parents noted that there are opportunities for students to be connected and supported by adults on campus. Teachers suggested that Baird Middle School was a good place for students, primarily because of the small size, and the life skills that are taught including organizational skills and ways to be kind and inclusive to peers. One teacher stated, “I feel like students have a lot more friends here than they would at a normal middle school because we encourage including everyone.” Other staff provided similar comments and emphasized that students are valued and the expectations are set high for students.

Students did not report formal opportunities where they can share their ideas or concerns such as a leadership team or suggestion box. However, most students did mention that they could talk to teachers they feel connected to, counselors, or the principal if they had ideas or concerns. One student noted that they were able to start a meaningful student club because of educators listening to their ideas. Parents did not indicate specific ways that educators involved them in decisions about their children. Many reported that teachers typically only communicated to parents to notify them if their student is struggling. Conversely, parents noted that the principal does encourage a welcoming environment.
- When equity audit team members observed classrooms at Baird Middle School they particularly examined classroom climate.** On a scale of “one” to “five,” with “one” being harsh/cold and “five” being caring/warm, observers reported an average rating of 3.75. The most common rating was “four.” Also, on a scale of “one” to “five,” with “one” being disdainful/disrespectful and “five” being respectful/courteous, observers reported an average rating of 3.8. The most common rating was “four.”
- As mentioned above, daily student attendance is an area of strength at Baird Middle School.** As well, the rate of chronic absenteeism at Baird Middle School is an area of strength. Strengths in these areas may be influenced by the extent to which students perceive a strong, positive, caring relationship with their teachers and other school personnel.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

- 🔍 **Most teachers and support personnel reported that student behavior at Baird Middle School made it easier for them to teach.** As examples, teachers noted, “Our kids don’t have the struggle in seventh grade that you see at a lot of other middle schools because they figured out the system...They don’t have to transition again. It is a bigger transition in fifth grade, but by the time we get to seventh grade, they’re rolling.” Baird Middle School utilizes a detention system and consequences that include school beautification. Some stakeholders noted that many times, the same groups of students are being sent out of class likely due to misbehaviors that begin with a lack of engagement in the classroom. As stated in the prior section, during the 2021-2022 school year, ten discipline referrals were received by office personnel. During the 2021-2022 school year, seven students received at least one out-of-school suspension. In total, Baird Middle School students lost seven days to suspensions.
- 🔍 **Students at Baird Middle School suggested that most school personnel were using teaching practices that helped them learn and succeed academically.** Students indicated that most teachers are often available for Academic Support Time (AST) before school starts to assist students when academic help is needed. Students also noted that the block schedule is helpful for managing workload and for maintaining excitement about certain days due to the alternating days of content that are taught. In addition, students noted that hands-on experiments and grade level cross-curricular projects are some of the teaching practices that help students learn and succeed academically. Others noted their excitement when learning activities include hands-on components, challenges, projects, or special lessons. Students noted they dislike busy work when explanations are not provided. They noted that some teachers are skilled in explaining concepts well and are eager to help students when needed. Additionally, parents commented about quarterly challenges that excite students. Conversely, parents noted that in some content areas, teaching practices are based more on procedural versus conceptual understandings which can make it challenging for their students to learn.
- 🔍 **Many teachers and staff reported that Baird Middle School was a good place to work.** In particular, they cited the supportive and family-like environment as reasons they liked Baird Middle School. Staff members gave examples of showing support to each other in moments of need, celebrating each other when exciting personal happenings occur, and eating lunch together. One staff member noted, “Here across the board, everybody is equal and that’s how you get more out of your folks too. It’s just a great place to work. You’re valued.” Staff members noted that the consistency in administration and the ability to easily approach and communicate with the administration as reasons why Baird Middle school was a good place to work. Additionally, staff members noted that this is a place where educators continue to challenge themselves and work hard. The school administrator correctly anticipated how school personnel felt about their work. In particular, the administrator indicated the culture of acceptance and colleagues who support one another. And, the principal noted that being a staff member at Baird Middle School often requires resourcefulness and hard work.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

🔍 **Comments from Baird Middle School teachers provided insight into their perspectives about the extent to which teachers worked together as a cohesive team.** When reflecting on their thoughts about collaboration and cohesion among Baird Middle School teachers, teachers made comments that many continue to collaborate despite the lack of requirements from the district contract, they collaborate on grade level projects that connect between content areas, and they often focus on a particular literacy standard across content areas. Some departments have collaborated to see how rigor changes in their content area from grade to grade. In addition, some grade level teams noted collaboration and consistency with grading practices that include standards-based grading. However, there are inconsistent grading practices across the four grade levels. The Baird Middle School team continues to look for ways to collaborate across the district with the same grade level content areas to ensure rigor and best practices for their grades. These comments suggest while some teams are cohesive, there is room for improving cohesiveness across all grade level teams and content area departments.

🔍 **In very successful urban schools, educators believe in their students' capacity to achieve at high levels.** Comments from most educators at Baird Middle School reflect a belief that students possess the capacity to achieve at high levels. For example, teachers commented about the rigorous expectations that they require of all students. They noted ways they prepare all students to be organized and how to adapt to the rigorous academic environment at Baird Middle School. One teacher stated, "I think we have an admin and staff who also believe that all kids can achieve academically. We don't have a culture that blames the kid. If the kid's not achieving, we look at what we can do for that child to get them where they need to be," when discussing how educators believe in students' capacity to achieve at high levels.

However, some students noted that they did not feel valued in every classroom. Also, some stakeholders noted that in some instances, when students do not master an academic concept during classroom instruction, it requires the student or the family to go out of their way to receive support. Classroom observations revealed lesson activities that required a moderate level of cognitive demand. For example, in most classrooms, observers noted that lesson activities required students to complete procedures without extending student thinking beyond procedures and without making connections to real situations. Similarly, observers noted that most of the questions teachers asked students required them to respond to questions or prompts that only required them to apply facts and procedures to real situations versus extending student thinking to solve and address real situations. These observations, in combination with teacher interview responses, may be indicative of room for growth in some teachers' belief in their students' capacity to achieve at high levels.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

9 In high-performing schools, educators continuously strive to improve teaching and learning, even when impressive goals have already been attained. School administrators at Baird Middle School described several issues where they wanted to influence greater improvement. Particularly, they described the need for improvement in Tier 2 intervention systems, supporting special education students, supporting English learners, and an increased focus on assessment and data analysis.

Teachers and other school personnel described several recent improvements at Baird Middle School including a focus on maintaining a student culture of inclusivity and mutual respect, cultural proficiency, and creating high-functioning professional learning communities (PLCs). As well, teachers and other school personnel described several issues where improvements continue to be needed including restarting professional learning communities (PLCs), ensuring cohesive grading practices across grade levels, and finding the most successful ways to collaborate as a school of “singletons.”

Students expressed an interest in seeing improvements related to a more restorative approach to discipline in some classrooms. For example, one student stated, “Sometimes it’s frustrating because I try to pay attention and grow and learn, but it’s sometimes hard when you burn bridges with someone too early in the school year,” when describing a relationship with a teacher. Other students noted the desire for more field trips, a less strict standard of dress, and more freedom with binders.

Additionally, parents hoped to see improvements related to increasing opportunities for parents who speak languages other than English to connect with teachers and school leaders. Parents noted that having a translator in the office or knowing who to contact at the school to stay connected in their first language is an urgent need. Further, parents noted that they would like clear systems for academic intervention that are embedded into the school day for their students. Many noted that there is often guesswork with their student’s academic support experience depending on whether or not a child has a personality that will ask for help. They feel that academic support should be provided in a way that is equal regardless of a student’s ability to ask for help and regardless of a parent’s advocacy. In addition, parents felt the desire for more opportunities to connect to the school as Baird Middle School is a non-neighborhood school and the bussing system means many parents do not often have a reason to visit the school. Lastly, parents hoped to have more professional and courteous communication from each teacher, and parents wanted to ensure that the content taught to students is the district-approved and district-adopted curriculum. In sum, Baird Middle School stakeholders perceived a need for ongoing improvement efforts. Stakeholders were consistent in describing issues that should be the focus of improvement.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Equity Audit Team found several indicators of strength related to the culture experienced by students at Baird Middle School. Those strengths include the following:

- Observers reported a family-like environment and sense of community where the staff cares about students.
- From a student perspective, students trusted adults and students conveyed adults want the best for them.
- Parents stated many staff care about their children and were committed to helping them achieve.
- All stakeholders agreed Baird is a good place for students to grow and learn.
- Students felt strongly they were learning life lessons that would help them through high school and beyond.
- Students felt they could talk with teachers, counselors, or administrators.
- One parent used the term “ethics of care” to describe the school culture.

Additionally, the Equity Audit Team found several indicators of concern related to the culture experienced by students at Baird Middle School. Those concerns include the following:

- The school culture can benefit from increased diversity among teachers and other support staff positions.
- Each parent said the majority of teachers went beyond to support their students, however, a small number of teachers they noted are hard for students and parents to connect with.

Also, the Equity Audit Team found several indicators of strength related to the culture experienced by teachers and other school personnel at Baird Middle School. Those strengths include the following:

- Teachers said they appreciated the collaborative culture that exists at Baird.
- They mourn the loss of dedicated collaboration time but many continue to meet informally without being required.
- They stated that there was a supportive environment for staff.
- There was a lot of celebration of personal events amongst staff members.
- They saw value in attending students’ games and performances to build deeper relationships.

Based on these strengths and concerns, the team offers the following recommendation:



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

1

We recommend educators and administrators at Baird Middle School begin planning and implementing strategies grounded in social-emotional learning (SEL) to ensure all classrooms are places where each student feels safe and cared for, and where teachers know each student as individuals. Research indicates that positive teacher-student relationships help shape student experiences in school even among students with home-based challenges, particularly in relation to academic success. Plans to integrate SEL-based approaches should include the following:

- A. **Professional Development:** Baird Middle School administrators, teachers, and counselors should work together to analyze discipline data and other data to identify and define who (which groups of students are removed from class or removed from school most frequently. For example, are Black male students who are also from low-income families suspended more than other groups of students?) As well, Baird Middle School administrators, teachers, and counselors should work together to identify the kinds of circumstances that have traditionally resulted in disciplinary actions against students. Baird Middle School Educators should ask themselves do all students at Baird Middle School feel valued and capable?

The analysis of referral data and suspension data (who misbehaves, when, and where) should be paired with professional development that focuses on **why** students misbehave. Baird Middle School administrators, teachers, and counselors should proactively identify student socio-emotional needs that may lead to troublesome behaviors. For example, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides comprehensive SEL resources, including surveys: <https://casel.org/covid-resources/>. School administrators and counselors should ensure that all Baird Middle School educators understand that student misbehavior is often due to real social/emotional needs and should not be interpreted as an indication that a student is unwilling to learn. As well, professional development should help teachers become aware of the potential impact of teacher comments, behaviors, routines, and procedures that could trigger student misbehavior. Additionally, professional development should help teachers become aware of alternative strategies or approaches that could minimize the likelihood of student misbehavior. When students are presented with engaging instruction that they are less likely to be distracted or to cause a disruption in the classroom.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

1

B. Schedules, Routines, Procedures: Once educators have a deeper understanding of who misbehaves, when, where, and why, professional development should focus on strategies for preventing misbehavior. Instead of waiting for predictably difficult situations to occur, teachers and administrators should be proactive in determining how to reduce the likelihood of those circumstances occurring. For example, if behavior problems were common at certain times of the day or in certain locations on the school campus, consideration might be given to strategies that could reduce the likelihood of problem behaviors occurring. As well, because it is likely that students will misbehave in response to certain social/emotional needs they are experiencing, educators can plan and implement strategies for addressing those needs proactively. Baird Middle School educators should work together to develop a structured program or process grounded in SEL strategies to support all students (and, especially the groups of students who have been disciplined most frequently) monitor their emotions, and manage their behavior. For example, Baird Middle School educators might consider the implementation of conflict resolution strategies to help students construct productive ways to express themselves without resorting to outbursts. By engaging in healthy social-emotional learning, students learn to self-identify the root causes of their emotions, self-regulate, and communicate. For example, programs such as the RULER Approach for building prosocial behavior and self-regulation strategies are found on the following websites: <https://ycei.org/ruler-research> and <https://www.rulerapproach.org/>. Strong prevention efforts should also include efforts to ensure that all students are likely to feel valued, respected, and capable throughout their school day. Baird Middle School educators should develop and commit to implementing specific practices and routines that are likely to make all Baird Middle School students feel valued, respected, and capable.

Even when schools implement preventative measures well, situations will occur when serious social/emotional needs trigger serious misbehavior. In such cases, Baird Middle School should have alternatives to students being held out of class for extended periods of time. Loss of learning time can accumulate adding to students falling behind in learning. For example, Baird Middle School should consider the implementation of restorative practices. Restorative practices are intended to turn conflict into teachable moments that can be used to improve student behavior instead of simply removing a student from the classroom or school. Teachers, support personnel, and counselors will need professional development that helps them implement restorative practices or similar approaches successfully.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

1

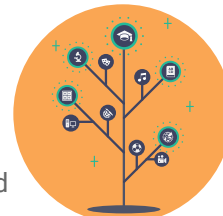
- C. **Teacher Collaboration:** Teacher collaborative planning meetings (PLC meetings) should be designed to help teachers deliberately plan how they will implement lessons in ways that ensure that their students are actively engaged, and feel valued, respected, and capable. PLC meetings should help teachers plan to implement their lessons in ways that maximize student engagement.
- D. **Classroom Observation and Feedback:** Classroom observations and feedback should focus explicitly on acknowledging and reinforcing teacher efforts to implement agreed upon strategies for preventing misbehavior and maximizing student engagement. Administrators should tailor feedback in ways that support teachers who need help in creating positive, supportive learning environments that are likely to minimize behavioral issues and lead all students to feel like valued and capable scholars.
- E. **Communication from Leaders:** Written and oral communication from school leaders should emphasize progress observed throughout <Baird Middle School in establishing an environment where each student is more likely to behave well and less likely to need removal from classrooms or from school.



FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

Definition: Educators in high-performing schools worked to ensure that all demographic groups of students (including students whose first language was not English, students who were performing two or three years below their grade level, and students with learning disabilities) had access to challenging curricula balanced with rich opportunities to engage in the visual and performing arts, world languages, technology, and other non-tested subjects. Teachers in each course of study engaged collaboratively to identify and develop a shared understanding of the key standards students in each grade must master. Together, teachers carefully designed instruction to provide every student the opportunity to learn and master the knowledge and skills necessary. Assignments and instructional activities were purposeful with clear learning objectives and explicit success criteria. Students perceived their work as meaningful and relevant to their backgrounds and futures. Teachers had a common method for assessing student mastery of course content. Regularly, after common assessments were administered, teachers and administrators met, reviewed data, identified strengths/needs, and planned improvement strategies.



Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

- 🔍 **Teachers at Baird Middle School found it difficult to share a common understanding of the specific standards and objectives their students needed to learn by various points in the academic year as there is only one content area teacher per each grade level.** Specifically, school administrators commented about their hopes of seeing teachers utilize tools such as IABs to ensure that student work meets the level of rigor that is recognized as meeting or exceeding the state standards. Further, it was noted that there are opportunities across the district to collaborate with grade level departments which could help address some of the “singleton” dilemmas. Additionally, teachers reported that some grade level teams develop a common way of standards-based grading and utilize similar rubrics. However, this is not consistent across all grades which they noted causes confusion for students as they move from grade to grade. In addition, some grade levels have chosen a common standard, such as a writing or reading standard, to focus on across multiple content areas.
- 🔍 **In high-performing schools, educators teach state standards, but they also work as a team to ensure that their approach to the state standards is at least as rigorous as required by state assessments and as rigorous as the curricula taught in schools that serve affluent communities.** The equity audit team found that educators at Baird Middle School approached state standards in a manner that was rigorous in some classrooms and less rigorous in others. Evidence included:
 - Some teachers reported that their collaboration meetings included regular discussions designed to ensure that teachers approached state standards with high levels of rigor.
 - During our visits to classrooms, we found that the rigor of lessons and content varied across classrooms. This suggests that the curriculum students access and learn is primarily dependent upon the classroom to which they are assigned. This might suggest that teachers in the same content area should collaborate to ensure that students are receiving a guaranteed and viable curriculum. Also, during our classroom observations, we rated each lesson from “one” to “five” where “one” indicated that the activities observed were not likely to lead any students to grade-level mastery and where “five” indicated that the activities observed were likely to lead all students to grade-level mastery. On average, we rated the lessons observed 3.6. The most common rating was “four.” This suggests that some lessons challenged students with a level of rigor that was likely to lead students to high levels of mastery.



FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

- When conducting classroom observations, we also attended to issues of cognitive demand. During our classroom observations, we rated the cognitive demand of lesson activities from “one” to “five” where “one” indicated that the classroom activities observed only required memorization and recall of basic facts, and “five” indicated that the classroom activities observed required students to extend their thinking and address and solve real problems. On average, we rated the cognitive demand of classroom activities observed as “three.” This suggests that most activities required a moderate level of cognitive demand. Similarly, during classroom observations, we rated the cognitive demand of the questions students were expected to answer from “one” to “five” where “one” indicated that the questions only required memorization and recall of basic facts and “five” indicated that the questions required students to extend their thinking and address and solve real problems. On average, we rated the cognitive demand of questions observed as 2.9. This suggests that most questions required a moderate level of cognitive demand.
- 🔍 **In high-performing schools, all students (regardless of race/ethnicity, language background, or disability status) were expected to learn rigorous academic content. Expectations were high; however, teachers also ensured that students had high levels of support to maximize the likelihood that students could achieve the expectations.** At Baird Middle School observers found the following evidence regarding the level of rigor provided to diverse student populations:
 - Where observers were able to identify students with mild disabilities during classroom observations, the observers noted that students with mild disabilities were expected to learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn. As well, students with mild disabilities were supported in ways that increased the likelihood they would learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn.
 - Where observers were able to identify students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds during classroom observations, the observers noted that all racial/ethnic groups of students were expected to learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn. As well, all racial/ethnic groups of students were supported in ways that increased the likelihood they would learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn.
 - Where observers were able to identify students with different language backgrounds during classroom observations, the observers noted that students with emerging English proficiency were expected to learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn. As well, students with emerging English proficiency were supported in ways that increased the likelihood they would learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn.



FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

- 🔍 **In high-performing schools, educators use common, formative assessments to ensure that all students have learned critical academic objectives. Results from common formative assessments provide teachers with information about the extent to which students have mastered specific concepts and skills. Teachers review assessment results promptly to determine what they need to do to ensure students have acquired the knowledge that is prerequisite to the subsequent concepts to be taught.** AAt Baird Middle School, most teachers do not administer common formative assessments. Teachers create their own assessments and since there is only one content area teacher per grade level, grading can be subjective. In addition, only some teachers have utilized common formative assessments that are used across the state such as IABS. This could cause learning expectations to vary, so student levels of preparation for subsequent grade levels may vary.
- 🔍 **In high-performing schools, when students do not develop a strong understanding of concepts after initial instruction, students receive prompt intervention tailored to identify and address their needs successfully.** At Baird Middle School intervention was provided in a manner that was conducted within classrooms, before school during academic support time (AST), or less formally during Block 8. Some teachers noted the expectation of planning Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 lessons and interventions. In prior years, the administrator noted that there was a dedicated time to Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions during the school day. Parents noted that it can often be difficult to find tailored academic support for their students. This has led some parents to hire private tutors for their students.
- 🔍 **In very successful schools, the curriculum includes rich opportunities for students to engage in the visual and performing arts, world languages, technology, sports, and leadership opportunities.** Data from our observations and interviews indicated that Baird Middle School students have access to a rich array of extracurricular activities. Students and parents reported on the high-quality athletics department where many students feel welcome to participate. It was noted that despite being a small school, Baird Middle School has won many athletic competitions, finals, and titles over the years. Stakeholders are very proud of this which is shown through banners and celebratory communication. Students noted different music programs, language classes, the garden program, and the technology program. Students and parents mentioned access to different clubs, many of which were aimed to promote inclusivity across different populations of students. In addition, for some grade levels, there is an elective wheel where students can have exposure to different types of electives. Stakeholders also mentioned different field trip opportunities. In addition, the promotion of 8th graders to high school was an event celebrated by many due to its excellence. Conversely, students did not discuss art or leadership opportunities. Also, some parents were concerned that the way that some fundraising for extracurricular activities is approached might ostracize some students and families.



FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Equity Audit Team found several indicators of strength related to the curriculum experienced by students at Baird Middle School. Those strengths include the following:

- Students felt the hands-on activities helped them learn. An example was performing scenes from a play and conducting interesting science experiments.
- Students experienced a rich list of enrichment courses and activities.
- Academic Support Time (AST) was valued by students to receive support and enrichment.
- Teachers collaborated in regards to supporting students participating in extracurricular activities (sports and other performances). For example, when students missed an academic class, PE teachers allowed students to go to make up things they may have missed.
- High school credit courses in Spanish and Algebra are offered.

Additionally, the Equity Audit Team found one indicator of concern related to the curriculum experienced by students at Baird Middle School. This concern includes the following:

- Possibly due to the time of year, observations revealed a low level of expectations for rigorous content in a number of classes.

Based on these strengths and concerns, the team offers the following recommendation:



FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

2

When students do not demonstrate mastery of critical academic skills selected, time needs to be set aside to help teachers increase levels of student understanding. As well, time should be dedicated to providing students real-world opportunities to apply the concepts they have learned. Both intervention and enrichment should be timely, focused, and tailored in ways that help ensure that all students develop deep understandings of key academic standards. Implementation of this recommendation will consume time in ways that might decrease the likelihood that teachers cover all the standards assessed. NCUST, however, has observed many schools that have benefited substantially from this investment of time. “Covering” content has little value if it does not lead students to high rates of understanding and mastery.

- A. **Professional Development:** Teachers (with the support of school leaders and district specialists) need to invest time in analyzing common formative assessment results related to the one or two critical academic skills selected. Specifically, teachers need to be able to identify which concepts and skills their students mastered and which their students did not master. Professional development should strengthen teachers’ capacity to examine student work, exit tickets, and common formative assessments in ways that enable them to determine appropriate prescriptions for intervention and enrichment. In particular, teacher professional development should strengthen teachers’ ability to pinpoint student misconceptions and define how intervention should eliminate those misconceptions. Teachers should work together to develop reasonable hypotheses about the misconceptions that might have prevented student success. As well, they should develop strategies for testing those hypotheses.
- B. **Schedules, Routines, Procedures:** After analyzing common formative assessment data, and before advancing toward the next academic standard, schedules should include time for teachers to work with their students to correct misconceptions and maximize the likelihood that all students will develop understanding and mastery. As well, this time should be utilized to help students acquire even deeper understandings of the concepts they mastered. Both the intervention strategies and enrichment strategies utilized should emphasize approaches that students will perceive as different from the approaches utilized during the teacher’s initial instruction.



FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

2

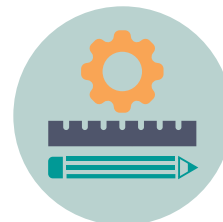
- C. **Teacher Collaboration:** Once teachers have a strong sense of what students did not understand regarding the critical academic skills selected and why students might not have developed an accurate in-depth understanding, teachers should work together (with the support of school leaders and district specialists) to develop strategies tailored to help students overcome their misconceptions and master the concepts and skills that will lead them to high rates of proficiency. Similarly, teacher collaboration meetings should support teachers in planning strong enrichment lessons that allow students to apply the concepts and skills they have learned in interesting and engaging ways. Teachers should be supported in designing enrichment activities that integrate a wide array of disciplines/skills including (but not limited to) expository writing, public speaking, art, drama, media production, data collection, creative writing, and debate. In PLCs, teachers should work together to ensure that enrichment activities are likely to inspire a love of learning.
- D. **Classroom Observation and Feedback:** Classroom observations should be tailored to ensure that teachers are implementing both intervention lessons and enrichment lessons in ways that reflect the quality of their planning efforts. Feedback should reinforce strong teaching practices. As well, feedback should support teachers who may need assistance in implementing intervention and enrichment lessons in ways that advance student mastery.
- E. **Communication from Leaders:** Written and oral communication from Baird Middle School's leadership team should highlight the progress teachers are making in implementing effective intervention and enrichment lessons. In particular, leaders should acknowledge the number of students who were able to demonstrate mastery as a result of a teacher's intervention. As well, leaders should acknowledge and celebrate students' successes in demonstrating the ability to apply challenging concepts and skills to real-world situations.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY

Definition: Effective instruction is instruction that results in students engaging in efforts to learn and growing closer to mastering the content the teacher endeavors to teach. In high-performing schools, NCUST researchers found educators utilizing instructional practices that 1) led all students to feel valued and capable and 2) focused on ensuring getting all students to understand and master key concepts and skills. Both of these goals were facilitated when teachers provided clear instruction; ensured that lessons were culturally, socially, and personally relevant to their students; checked student understanding, provided feedback, and adapted instruction accordingly; built student fluency with gatekeeper vocabulary; promoted successful student practice, and nurtured students' love of learning. With such instruction, students from all racial/ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds thrived academically.



In an effort to understand the kind and quality of instruction provided at Baird Middle School, the equity audit team observed almost every classroom. The team used an observation protocol designed to capture the similarities and differences between the characteristics of teaching and learning found in high-performing schools and those observed in Baird Middle School classrooms. Additionally, interviews with school administrators and focus groups with teachers, parents, and students provided additional insight regarding instruction at Baird Middle School.

Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

- 🔍 **In high-performing schools, there were a few, clear, and consistent expectations that elevated the quality of instruction in ways that resulted in greater student engagement and greater student success for all demographic groups of students.** At Baird Middle School the school administrator emphasized a focus on common formative assessments, data analysis, utilizing IABs to ensure a common level of rigor, and Tier 2/Tier 3 interventions as instructional issues. These issues were similar to the instructional issues that some teachers perceived were most important, including creating common grading practices across grade levels, and finding ways to compare data with other common grade levels and content areas. Some teachers also mentioned a continued focus on project-based learning and incorporating literacy standards across content areas.
- 🔍 **Lessons observed at Baird Middle School occasionally were conducted in ways that made all students feel valued and capable.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed was conducted in a manner that made students feel valued and capable. In 29.4% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that Baird Middle School students felt valued and capable. During those lessons, observers noted that teachers gave praise and encouragement, honored different opinions and methods for solving problems, and showed courtesy and respect. On the other hand, in 70.6% of the lessons, observers found only slight evidence or no evidence that the teacher was leading students to feel valued and capable. Lessons would have been more likely to lead all students to feel valued and capable if teachers had more frequently shown care for all students by praising them, acknowledging them, and having high-quality relationships with all students. In addition, lessons would have been more likely to lead all students to feel valued and capable if teachers had cared enough to respectfully demand high academic and engagement expectations from each student.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY

Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

- 🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers planned and delivered lessons aimed at leading students to master the lesson objective the first time it was taught.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed was conducted in a manner that led all students to develop a deep understanding and mastery of lesson objectives. In 41.2% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Baird Middle School delivered lessons that helped all students develop a deep understanding and mastery of lesson objectives. In those lessons, equity audit team members noted that teachers helped students to understand their assignments by referring to digital directions, teachers checked in individually with students, and teachers allowed students to work collaboratively to learn from each other. On the other hand, in 58.5% of the lessons, observers noted only slight evidence or no evidence of this practice. Lessons would have been more likely to lead students to develop understanding and mastery if teachers had more frequently focused on student success with the learning objective by checking in with each and every student to gauge their level of understanding during multiple parts of the lesson. Further, teachers could have more frequently structured lesson activities to maximize the likelihood that students would learn the lesson objective.
- 🔍 A factor that influences the pursuit of understanding and mastery of lesson objectives, is the extent to which the lesson objective is clear to students.** In each classroom observation, observers rated the extent to which the lesson objective was clear to them. A score of “one” meant that the rater had difficulty determining the lesson objective. A score of “five” meant that the rater perceived that the lesson objective was specific and clear. The average rating for all lessons observed was 4.1. This suggests that many lesson objectives were clear to the observer. Similarly, for each classroom observation, observers rated the likelihood that the lesson objective was clear to students. A score of “one” meant that the observer saw no evidence that the teacher had done anything to ensure that students understood what they were learning and why. A score of “five” meant that the students demonstrated that they understood specifically and clearly what they were expected to learn and why. The average rating for all lessons observed was 4.0. This suggests that many lesson objectives ensured that students understood what they were learning and why.
- 🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers designed lessons to enhance students’ clarity about key lesson concepts and to minimize students’ misconceptions.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed at Baird Middle School was conducted in a manner that promoted clarity. In 29.4% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was either considerable or exemplary evidence that teachers at Baird Middle School delivered lessons that enhanced students’ clarity about key lesson concepts. In those lessons, observers noted that teachers gave students rubrics with specific instructions, teachers provided auditory and visual support to complete assignments, and teachers emphasized the learning process by supporting students to use different methods to solve problems. In contrast, in 70.6% of the lessons, observers found slight evidence or no evidence of this practice. Lessons would have been more likely to promote clarity among students if teachers had more frequently ensured that students clearly understood what they were expected to learn. Also, lessons might have been more likely to promote clarity among students if teachers had planned and implemented strategies to help students avoid common misconceptions about important lesson concepts.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY

Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers designed lessons to include frequent opportunities to check students' understanding, provide feedback, and adapt instruction accordingly.

Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed was conducted with frequent checks for student understanding, frequent teacher feedback, and appropriate adaptation of the lesson in response to checks for student understanding. In 29.4% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Baird Middle School delivered lessons in ways that modeled frequent checks for understanding, frequent teacher feedback, and appropriate adaptation of the lesson. Observers noted that teachers listened to students and observed group activity, teachers redirected students and asked questions, and teachers gave feedback and positive comments to students. In contrast, in 70.6% of the lessons, observers noted only slight evidence or no evidence of this practice. Lessons would have been more likely to model strong checking for understanding, providing feedback, and adapting instruction if teachers had planned specific questions, they could ask or strategies they could use to elicit responses from many or all students. Teachers might have planned to ensure that they spoke less and their students spoke more. Also, lessons would have been more effective if teachers had planned strategies they could use when students made errors that were fairly predictable.

🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers designed lessons that were responsive to the cultural, social, and personal backgrounds of the students they served. Often lessons helped students see connections between key academic standards and their own cultural, social, and personal backgrounds and interests. Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed was presented in a manner that helped students relate (culturally, socially, or personally) to the content being taught. In 11.8% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was either considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Baird Middle School delivered lessons that helped all students relate to the content being taught. In those lessons, observers noted that teachers gave students the opportunity to use creativity, teachers guided students to build personal portfolios, and teachers asked compelling questions to help students make connections between the academic content and their lives. In contrast, in 88.2% of the lessons, observers noted only slight evidence or no evidence suggesting that lessons were responsive to students' cultural, social, and personal backgrounds. The promotion of culturally, socially, and personally responsive teaching might have been enhanced if teacher collaborative planning could have helped teachers consider, "How could this concept be presented in a way that would resonate with our students at Baird Middle School? How might we make this concept seem less foreign to our students and more connected to their backgrounds and experiences?"



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY

Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

- 🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers provided lessons that built their students' fluency with gatekeeper vocabulary. Often lessons gave all students many opportunities to use key lesson vocabulary in ways that helped students develop familiarity and comfort with the vocabulary.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed helped students build fluency with vocabulary that was central to the lesson content and helped students integrate the lesson vocabulary into their speaking vocabulary. In 23.5% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was either considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Baird Middle School delivered lessons that built their students' fluency with gatekeeper vocabulary. In these lessons, observers noted that teachers had students apply the vocabulary they learned to their assignments, teachers had students speak to partners regarding lesson vocabulary, and teachers reviewed and connected vocabulary to similar terms. On the other hand, in 76.5% of the lessons, equity audit team members observed only slight evidence or no evidence of this practice. Lessons would have been more likely to help students build fluency with gatekeeper vocabulary if teachers had more frequently engaged students in meaningful conversations that required students to use the vocabulary frequently. Prior planning could help teachers design activities, simulations, games, skits, and other activities that would engage students in using gatekeeper vocabulary frequently.
- 🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers designed lessons that promoted students' successful practice of concepts and skills. Teachers allowed students to practice skills independently only when they knew that independent practice was likely to be successful.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which, in each lesson observed, students were allowed to practice independently only when they had demonstrated a reasonable likelihood of success. In 56.3% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Baird Middle School delivered lessons that promoted students' successful practice of concepts and skills. In those lessons, observers noted that teachers modeled the work and led students to complete the work in groups before they worked independently. In addition, teachers asked questions during the assignments to monitor and guide student progress. Further, teachers used strategies such as leading students through multiple attempts to improve at a task, guiding students through partner talk before individual practice, and circulating the room to guide students if responses were incorrect. Observers noted that in these lessons, students demonstrated they were able to successfully apply knowledge and skills independently. On the other hand, in 43.7% of the lessons, observers noted only slight evidence or no evidence of this practice. Lessons would have been more likely to help students experience successful practice if teachers had more frequently checked to make sure that students had a reasonable level of understanding before releasing students to pursue tasks independently.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY

Key Findings at Baird Middle School:

- 🔍 **In high-performing schools, teachers designed lessons that led students to love learning. Students became excited about learning academic content because their teachers helped them understand how the content was relevant to their current or future lives. Students often perceived lessons as relevant because teachers engaged them in interesting projects. Teachers used interesting applications of technology to inspire engagement and mastery. Teachers maximized student engagement and mastery by creating frequent opportunities for students to interact with and learn from each other.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed contributed to students developing a love of learning. In 35.3% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Baird Middle School delivered lessons that led students to love learning. Observers noted that teachers gave students opportunities to publicly share their work which was compelling for students, teachers gave students encouragement and praise, and teachers gave students opportunities to see their progress in learning over time. In contrast, in 64.7% of lessons, equity audit team members found only slight evidence or no evidence of this practice.

When students perceive that academic content is relevant to them, they are much more likely to love learning. Equity audit team members rated the extent to which students were likely to perceive the learning activities observed as relevant to the students' lives. A score of "one" meant the observer believed none of the students in the classroom were likely to perceive the classroom learning activities as relevant to their lives. A score of "five" meant the observer believed all students in the classroom were likely to perceive the classroom learning activities as relevant to their lives. The average rating for all lessons observed was 3.4.

Also, when students are engaged in talking with their peers about lesson concepts and ideas, they are more likely to enjoy lessons and learn to love learning. Equity audit team members rated the extent to which students talked with their peers or with the teacher about the lesson concepts and ideas. A score of "one" meant the observer did not observe any students speaking with their peers or with the teacher about the lesson concepts and ideas. A score of "five" meant the observer saw all students in the classroom speaking frequently with their peers or with the teacher about the lesson concepts and ideas. The average rating for all lessons observed was 3.5.

Lessons would have been more likely to lead students to love learning if teachers had more frequently demonstrated enthusiasm about the content students were learning, engaged students in projects or other activities that required them to apply the concepts being learned in meaningful, relevant ways, engaged students in deep discussions about lesson concepts, or engaged students in activities that required the integration of the content being learned with high-interest areas such as art, music, drama, physical education, technology, etc.

- 🔍 **Also, observers rated the extent to which students were likely to perceive their classroom as engaging.** In each classroom observation, equity audit team members rated the classroom climate as "one" if they perceived students found the class uninteresting or tedious. Observers rated the class as "five" if they perceived students found the class engaging and stimulating. On average, classrooms observed were rated 3.4.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Equity Audit Team found several indicators of strength related to the instruction experienced by students at Baird Middle School. Those strengths include the following:

- Students reported electives such as music and technology were very engaging and enjoyable leading them to feel capable of the subject matter.
- Science was another content area students looked forward to.

Additionally, the Equity Audit Team found one indicator of concern related to the instruction experienced by students at Baird Middle School. This concern includes the following:

- The rigor evidenced in many classrooms was low and did not challenge students to think deeply.

Based on these strengths and concerns, the team offers the following recommendations:



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

3

Baird Middle School leaders and teachers should work together to exemplify a focus on understanding and mastery, with a high level of fidelity, and in ways that are likely to generate higher levels of student success. School leaders should endeavor to ensure that a focus on understanding and mastery becomes a strength of Baird Middle School educators. Every educator should be encouraged to commit to exemplifying this practice.

- A. **Professional Development:** Teachers can focus on understanding and mastery only when they have great clarity about what they want their students to master. Baird Middle School teachers should receive professional development and support in deconstructing standards so they know specifically what students will need to know and understand in order to demonstrate mastery of standards (especially in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies). It is not enough for teachers to write or post a standard. They must know what the standard implies their students must learn.

Additionally, professional development should help Baird Middle School teachers understand that they are not truly providing an objective-driven lesson unless they are constantly adjusting their teaching so that each and every student is making visible progress toward understanding and mastery. A real focus on understanding and mastery (See Chapter 2 of Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools, 2nd edition, Johnson, Uline, and Perez) requires teachers to shape each lesson activity, each question, and each piece of teacher feedback in ways that are designed to ensure that each and every student achieves understanding and mastery. Teachers at Baird Middle School should work together to establish a rubric that helps them identify the attributes of lessons that enhance a strong focus on understanding and mastery. Teachers should have ongoing professional development that provides them the opportunity to read about, see, discuss, try, and receive feedback related to the attributes described in the rubric.

- B. **Schedules, Routines, Procedures:** In order to ensure that teachers receive abundant support, it might be necessary to focus on a few teachers at a time as they seek to implement a deep focus on understanding and mastery. The first teachers who receive support should receive special attention from administrators, district specialists, and teacher collaboration teams. As some teachers develop strength, they can become resources to help their colleagues.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recommendations**
- 3**
- C. Teacher Collaboration:** Teacher collaboration meetings at Baird Middle School should be designed to help teachers deconstruct critical academic standards as they prepare lessons. Teachers should be able to explain, in clear language, what their students must know and be able to do, as a result of their lesson. As well, collaboration meetings should be designed to help teachers describe the mental road map students must follow in order to arrive at the destination (what the student should know and be able to do as a result of the lesson). In the high-performing schools NCUST has studied, this type of deconstruction conversation is a team activity. The work of de-constructing standards can be supported by PLC leaders, coaches, administrators, and teachers themselves. This work will inform what students should know, the design of performance-based objectives, the level of rigor required in questions the teacher will ask, and the assignments and tasks teachers want students to complete.
- D. Classroom Observation and Feedback:** School leaders should observe teachers as they implement lessons with a strong focus on mastery and understanding. Feedback should primarily emphasize support and encouragement for teachers. Leaders should pay particular attention to acknowledging and celebrating implementation that addresses elements of the rubric created by the school's educators. Leaders should also offer supportive assistance in helping teachers overcome some of the challenges associated with teaching objective-based lessons well.
- E. Communication from Leaders:** Leaders should send reports to teachers that celebrate classrooms for their efforts to implement objective-based lessons that focus on mastery and understanding. Leaders should make special efforts to commend teachers when their lessons adhere to elements of the rubric they created.





NEXT STEPS

This report provides a large amount of information about school culture, curriculum, and instruction at Baird Middle School. We recommend that school personnel take time to read and understand the various findings and recommendations contained herein. While reading the report, it is important to keep in mind that the report is based on a snapshot of Baird Middle School. While the equity audit team endeavored to look comprehensively at the school and acquire input from an array of stakeholders, the report is based on information acquired over a narrow span of time from a limited number of stakeholders. As well, it is important to keep in mind that the report compares Baird Middle School with schools that NCUST has awarded, where every demographic group outperforms state averages. This high bar is likely to suggest areas of improvement that would not be specified in more typical audit reviews. If there are questions regarding any of the findings or recommendations, we encourage school leaders to contact the equity audit team leader. NCUST is happy to engage in conversations about the report with the school principal, with the school's leadership team, or with the school's faculty.

Secondly, we acknowledge that stakeholders may disagree with the findings and/or recommendations in this report. Where there are disagreements concerning important issues, school personnel may wish to consider identifying and implementing strategies for acquiring additional objective information about issues of concern. The equity audit team leader would be happy to help suggest ways that school personnel can collect additional information to influence their understanding of important issues discussed in this report.

Finally, the report includes many recommendations. It is important for stakeholders to review and prioritize these recommendations. Stakeholders should consider which recommendations are most likely to yield important improvements for Baird Middle School students. We encourage schools to limit the focus to three or four important recommendations.

When high-priority recommendations are identified, we encourage attention to each of the steps specified. It is particularly important for school personnel to determine how they will monitor their progress toward implementation.

Finally, it is important for everyone involved to commit to pursuing high-priority recommendations with a spirit of teamwork and support. It will be important for stakeholders to remind each other that the reason for each improvement effort is grounded in their common interest in seeing all demographic groups of students at Baird Middle School excel. As well, it will be important for all stakeholders to understand their roles in implementing each improvement effort and to feel that they have abundant support designed to ensure their success. It will be especially important to identify and celebrate both small and large successes. As well, it will be important to determine how stakeholders will support each other constructively through setbacks and disappointments. This report highlights that Baird Middle School has many important strengths. By deliberately pursuing a few high-priority recommendations, we are confident that Baird Middle School will develop many more strengths that elevate learning outcomes for all groups of students.

EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY AUDIT REPORT

GASTON MIDDLE SCHOOL



NATIONAL CENTER FOR URBAN SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION



www.ncust.com

9245 Sky Park Court Suite 120 San Diego, CA 92123

SDSU

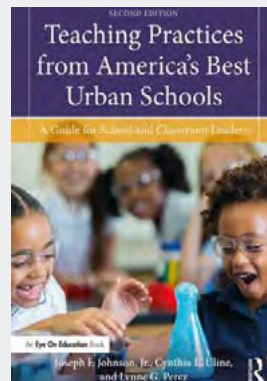
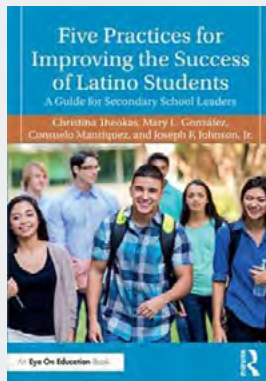
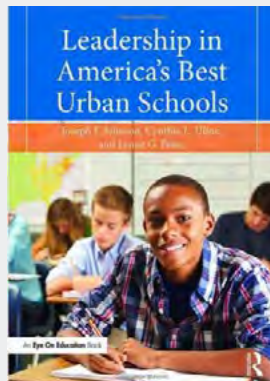
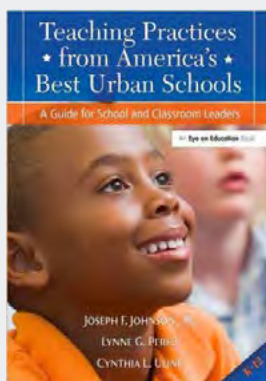
San Diego State
University

BACKGROUND

In 2005, San Diego State University founded the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) to help urban school districts and their partners transform urban schools into places where all students achieve academic proficiency, evidence a love of learning, and graduate well prepared to succeed in post-secondary education, the workplace, and their communities. To this end, NCUST identifies, celebrates, and studies urban schools where all demographic groups achieve outstanding educational successes. Our annual America's Best Urban Schools Award Program provides us the opportunity to learn from schools that exemplify both equitable and excellent learning results. We strive to disseminate all we learn from these schools as we endeavor to support other schools and districts that are eager to pursue similar outstanding results.

Our research has resulted in a substantial knowledge base regarding the beliefs, characteristics, structures, systems, and practices that lead all groups of students to excellent learning outcomes. Key findings are documented in these books: *Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools* (2012), *Leadership in America's Best Urban Schools* (2017); *Five Practices for Improving the Success of Latino Students: A Guide for Secondary School Leaders* (2018); and *Teaching Practices from America's Best Urban Schools*, 2nd edition (2019). This knowledge base is the benchmark we utilize when conducting our equity audit process and is the focus of our work aimed at building the capacity of other educators. We have found impressive similarities across the high-performing schools we have studied despite differences in location, size, enrollment characteristics, grade-level configurations, expenditures, and other factors. In short, the educators in these schools improved curricula by teaching more rigorous content to a greater depth of understanding than other urban schools. They planned and delivered instruction in ways that were more likely to lead their students to mastery of the concepts and skills they were teaching. They fostered school cultures in which all students, teachers, parents, and support staff felt safe, cared for, valued, and respected. They built and implemented a coherent educational improvement system – a set of interdependent structures designed to support the ongoing improvement of student outcomes across a variety of indicators (e.g., achievement, extracurricular engagement, graduation, etc.). And, perhaps most importantly, these actions were guided by their shared belief in the capacity of all of their students to succeed.

On May 26-27, 2022, NCUST conducted an equity audit for Gaston Middle School in the Fresno Unified School District. This audit was designed to explore the similarities and differences between the practices and structures in place at Gaston Middle School and those that NCUST has identified in schools that have been very successful in educating all demographic groups of students. During the audit process, NCUST examined critical school characteristics, such as school culture, student access to rigorous curricula, and the quality of teaching and learning. In each of these areas, NCUST considered how processes, structures, and systems influenced what we found and how they could influence powerful, sustained improvement efforts. What follows is a description of our audit process, key findings emerging from the data, and recommendations intended to help Gaston Middle School develop, refine, and prioritize their improvement plans in ways that will lead to higher levels of success for the diverse populations of students they serve.





METHODOLOGY

To begin the audit, Gaston Middle School officials compiled and shared with the equity audit team a variety of data regarding school demographics, achievement, attendance, student behavior, and school success. In most cases, these data were disaggregated to highlight similarities and differences among different demographic groups.

NCUST staff conducted informal observations of the school's common areas, offices, cafeteria, library, playgrounds, and general school environment. These observations provided general information about the physical facility, how the facility was utilized to support teaching and learning, and how the facility influenced the culture of the school.

The equity audit team members conducted 46 classroom observations. An NCUST classroom observation protocol was utilized to document the part of the lesson observed, the number and demographics of students, and the cognitive demand of the activity in which students were engaged during the observation. In addition, evidence was collected regarding the climate and culture of the classroom, a variety of teaching practices utilized, teacher clarity and focus on mastery, student engagement, and levels of understanding exhibited by various groups of students.

In addition to the observations, the school principal was interviewed, and two other school-level administrators were interviewed. Also, focus-group interviews were conducted with 40 individuals, including teachers (N=18), students (N=16), and parents (N=6). Standard protocols were used and included open-ended questions relevant to the expertise of participants. As well, a few questions were common across groups to gather perspectives about core practices from multiple perspectives. Generally, participants were asked about their roles and responsibilities, experiences at school, and their opinions about strengths and needs at Gaston Middle School. All stakeholders were thoughtful and reflective and contributed significantly to our understanding of Gaston Middle School. Artifacts, such as master schedules, bell schedules, curriculum documents, school profiles, and data reports, also informed our study and understanding.

Upon completion of the interviews and observations, the NCUST team examined the data collected, identified themes, and compared the school's practices with the practices found in the high-performing schools NCUST has awarded and studied. The findings in this report reflect a triangulation of the multiple data sources cited above; however, it is important to note that the findings are based upon a snapshot of the school. Teaching and learning observed on the days of the visit may or may not be representative of typical teaching and learning occurring at Gaston Middle School. Similarly, the interviews conducted may or may not be representative of the sentiments and opinions of all teachers and administrators at the school. That said, we were able to hear from many stakeholders, and clear themes emerged from the data across multiple stakeholder groups. As well, this aligned with our observations and patterns in the quantitative data.



GENERAL INFORMATION

Students at Gaston Middle School

Gaston Middle School serves approximately 780 students in grades seven and eight. Enrollment during the most recent three years has decreased slightly.

Approximately 94.8% of the students meet the eligibility criteria for the free- or reduced-price lunch program. The largest racial/ethnic group served is Latino/Hispanic comprising 74.4% of the student population. The second-largest racial/ethnic group is Black/African American, comprising 14% of the student population. Additionally, 6.3% of the students are Asian and 2.5% of the students are multi-racial and 2.3% are white. Approximately 31.6% of the students are designated as English learners, and 19.8% receive special education services. Approximately 1.1% of the students receive foster care services and approximately 0.6% of the students are experiencing homelessness.

Staff at Gaston Middle School

Students at Gaston Middle School are served by a team of 48 teachers, five counselors/social workers, two nurses, four administrators, one other certificated personnel, and ten other non-certificated personnel. Among teachers, the largest racial/ethnic group is White/Caucasian at 40%, the second-largest racial/ethnic group is Latino/Hispanic at 33%. Additionally, 19% of the teachers are Black/African American. Approximately 54% of the teachers are female and 46% are male.

Among the school's teachers, 75% have at least three years of teaching experience and 89% are fully certified to assume their teaching assignments.

An important tool for improving school culture, curricula, and instruction in high-performing schools is professional development. In high-performing schools, professional development is focused on a few critical improvement issues. As well, professional development influences real improvements in practice when the same few topics are pursued until changes in practice and/or changes in outcomes are achieved. Also, the likelihood of a positive impact on student learning is enhanced by professional development that is tightly aligned to the focus of teacher collaboration efforts and the focus of classroom observations and feedback. At Gaston Middle School teachers and administrators described professional development efforts related to cultural proficiency, supporting English language learners, academic discourse, and collaborative tasks. These responses suggest that professional development at Gaston Middle School occurs in a manner that is aligned to the functions emphasized in teacher collaboration meetings, classroom observations, and feedback. Additionally, these responses suggest that professional development is focused, coherent, and sustained so that teachers improve in a limited number of important practices. While professional development has its strengths at Gaston Middle School, some teachers noted a desire for more rigorous professional development as their expertise in teaching develops. Some teachers stated, "I feel it's really repetitive. It has been recently," when speaking about the quality of professional development. Others stated, "I feel like it was good my first year, to get the basics. But now that I'm really trying to develop a more wide range of curriculum that meets the needs of all students, it's more difficult. It's the same jargon." Teachers desired more communication for input in determining what they need for professional development.

Leadership at Gaston Middle School

The principal has led Gaston Middle School for three years. The principal was part of the original planning team of Gaston Middle School beginning in the 2013-2014 school year.



GENERAL INFORMATION

In high-performing schools, instructional leaders regularly spend abundant time in classrooms observing teaching and learning and providing formative feedback to help teachers improve their craft. In many high-performing schools, principals spent 40% of the time during school days engaged in visiting classrooms and/or in engaged in teacher collaboration meetings. At Gaston Middle School most teachers indicated that their teaching was observed by the administration team including the principal and vice principals. Similarly, the school administrator indicated that the principal, vice principals, and guidance learning director (GLA) spent time conducting classroom observations. Teachers reported that observations often occur one to two times weekly and that feedback is given through their electronic chat platform. Additionally, teachers noted that due to the various circumstances that have emerged due to the pandemic, observations are less frequent in certain months. Teachers also noted that observations are often more frequent during formal evaluation years, or when teachers have students with more challenging behavioral needs. At Gaston Middle School, the principal reported spending approximately 5 to 10 hours per week before COVID in classrooms and approximately 3 to 4 hours per week in meetings with teachers. In a typical week, before COVID, with approximately 35 hours, the principal spent approximately 14% to 29% percent of the school day in classrooms. In a typical week, with approximately 35 hours, the principal spent approximately 9% to 11% in meetings with teachers. These meetings include professional learning community work, culture and climate work, instructional leadership team meetings, completion of operational tasks, and building of relationships. When observing classrooms, school leaders noted they give direct support, coach teachers, and model instruction.

Leaders in high-performing schools communicate with stakeholders in ways that reinforce a strong focus on improvement efforts. Written and oral communication emphasizes improvement initiatives by celebrating progress and highlighting opportunities to build upon recent efforts. At Gaston Middle School the principal indicated that, most frequently, written and oral communication included a focus on weekly updates, curriculum and instruction, classroom management, and feedback to teachers naming strengths and asking questions. Before COVID, weekly communication included sending an update each week about the measurable progress towards the quarter goals in categories such as attendance, i-Ready academic data, and student culture or behavioral data. Also, teachers indicated that, most frequently, written and oral communication focused on important updates, attendance rates for students, and celebrations of student and staff success. Teachers noted that communication is incredibly positive. They used statements such as, “When there are staff-wide concerns, the principal is definitely able to share those concerns, but definitely the ratio of positive to concerns is 50 to one. He is our biggest cheerleader.” Others agreed with this sentiment and stated the following about communication, “Even when it’s a concern, I think that the way that it’s posed is more positive than it is negative. And that is huge because it’s not necessarily singling out anyone.” The responses suggest that written and oral communication typically reinforce improvement priorities at Gaston Middle School.

Student Attendance at Gaston Middle School

During the 2020-2021 academic year, the average daily attendance at Gaston Middle School was 95%. In the 2019-2020 academic year, the average daily attendance at Gaston Middle School was 94.4%. In the 2020-2021 academic year, 11% of Gaston Middle School students were chronically absent. This means that 11% of Gaston Middle School students were absent from school on at least 10 percent of school days.

Each school that earns NCUST’s America’s Best Urban School Award demonstrates average daily attendance of at least 92% and many achieve 95% or 96% average daily attendance. As well, many America’s Best Urban School Award winners have 10% or fewer of their students who are classified as chronically absent. Generally, students who attend school regularly are more likely to learn important academic concepts and are more likely to succeed in school.

The high rate of average daily attendance and the low rate of chronic absenteeism at Gaston Middle School are important strengths that can be leveraged to improve academic achievement.



GENERAL INFORMATION

English Learners at Gaston Middle School

Gaston Middle School serves 278 English learners. The school utilizes the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) to determine each student's level of proficiency in communicating in English. In 2019, 41.2% of the students were making progress towards English language proficiency.

Student Discipline at Gaston Middle School

In some cases, when students misbehave at Gaston Middle School, students are referred to an administrator or counselor for assistance and support. In 2020-2021, there were 1,037 referrals received by school officials.

In some cases, when students misbehave at Gaston Middle School, school administrators assign students to in-school suspension. This means students remain at school; however, they miss the opportunity to participate in classroom learning activities. At Gaston Middle School, during 2020-2021, eight students received an in-school suspension at least once. In 2020-2021, Gaston Middle School students spent a total of 4.6 days in in-school suspension.

In some cases, administrators at Gaston Middle School have suspended students from school. This means that students missed one or more days of school because of a disciplinary incident. In total, during 2020-2021, 172 students were suspended at least once. Among the total, 27% of the students suspended were Black/African American, 25% of the students suspended were White/Caucasian, and 19% of the students suspended were Asian. These data suggest that Black/African American and White/Caucasian students at Gaston Middle School are suspended at disproportionate rates.

Some students were suspended for more than one day. When the total number of days each student was suspended during 2020-2021 was aggregated, we found that Gaston Middle School students spent 575 days in out-of-school suspension during 2020-2021.

Additionally, during the 2020-2021 school year, no students were expelled from Gaston Middle School.

In the high-performing schools NCUST awards, the numbers of students suspended and the total number of days students are suspended are remarkably low for every demographic group (less than one day of suspension for each student in the demographic group). The high rate of suspension at Gaston Middle School is a focus of the recommendations shared later in this report.

Student Achievement at Gaston Middle School

Students at Gaston Middle School take the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP). Students in grades 7 and 8 take the English language arts assessment and mathematics assessment. Additionally, students in grade 8 take the California Science Test (CST) assessment. The most recent assessment results are from the assessment administered in 2018-2019. More than 95% of students participated in the most recent administration of the assessment.

Those results indicate that the percentage of Gaston Middle School students who performed at the proficient or advanced level in English language arts is substantially below the state-wide percentage at each grade level.

The data also indicate that the percentage of Gaston Middle School students who performed at the proficient or advanced level in mathematics is substantially below the state-wide percentage at each grade level.

Additionally, the data indicate that the percentage of Gaston Middle School students who performed at the proficient or advanced level in science is substantially below the state-wide percentage at each grade level.



GENERAL INFORMATION

GRADE % AND STATE %	% PROFICIENT OR ADVANCED ON ELA 2018/19 STATE ASSESSMENT	% PROFICIENT OR ADVANCED ON MATH 2018/19 STATE ASSESSMENT	% PROFICIENT OR ADVANCED ON SCIENCE 2018/19 STATE ASSESSMENT
SCHOOL GRADE 7	20.5%	12.9%	
STATE GRADE 7	51.3%	37.8%	
SCHOOL GRADE 8	16%	9.3%	7.8%
STATE GRADE 8	49.40%	36.60%	30.84%

Additionally, the state assessment data for Gaston Middle School students reveal variation in the performances of students from different demographic groups. For example, 45% of Gaston Middle School's Asian students performed at the proficient or advanced level in English language arts; however, only 10% of Gaston Middle School's Black/African American students performed at the proficient or advanced level on the same assessment. Similarly, 31.7% of Gaston Middle School's Asian students performed at the proficient or advanced level in mathematics; however, only 3.6% of Gaston Middle School's Black/African American students performed at the proficient or advanced level on the same assessment.

	TOTAL # TESTED	% PROF. OR ADV. ON ELA 18/19	% PROF. OR ADV. ON Math 18/19
ASIAN	47	45.2%	31.7%
BLACK /AFRICAN AMERICAN	140	10%	3.6%
LATINO OR HISPANIC	608	18.5%	11.5%
MULTI-RACIAL	12	8.33%	0%
WHITE OR CAUCASIAN	21	14.28%	9.52%
STUDENTS MEETING LOW- INCOME CRITERIA	808	18.12%	11.04%
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS	192	2.62%	1.55%
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	104	1.92%	2.02%
STATE AVERAGE FOR ALL STUDENTS		51.10%	39.70%



GENERAL INFORMATION

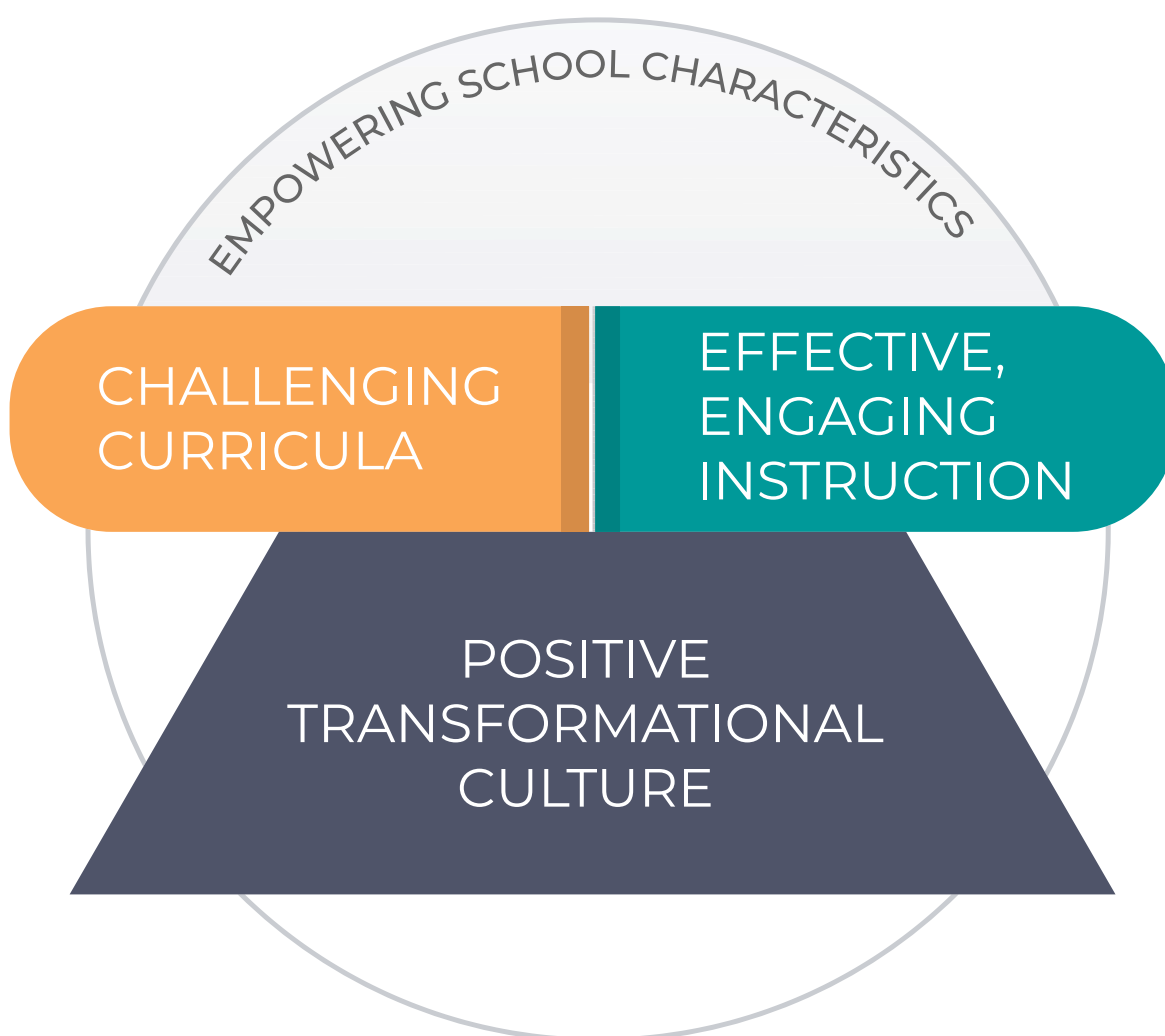
Schools that receive NCUST's America's Best Urban School Award demonstrate multiple academic successes for the students they serve. In the award-winning schools, the percentage of students achieving at the proficient or advanced level is greater than the statewide percentage at most grade levels and most subject areas. As well, in schools that receive NCUST's America's Best Urban School Award, each racial/ethnic group served outperforms overall statewide percentages. This report is designed to help educators at Gaston Middle School chart a course toward ensuring that all of their students and each racial/ethnic group achieve at levels that exceed overall state percentages.

In the following pages, we present the findings of this audit by comparing the culture, curricula, and instruction found in very high-performing public schools that serve large populations of students from low-income families to what we have learned about Gaston Middle School. In light of the audit findings, we provide recommendations for action.

FINDINGS

EMPOWERING SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

Schools that achieve equity and excellence for all the students they serve possess three empowering school characteristics: a positive, transformational culture; access to rigorous curricula for all students; and effective instruction that leads to engagement and mastery.





FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

Definition: A positive, transformational school culture provides the foundation for equitable and excellent learning outcomes. We define the culture as *positive* because high-performing schools displayed overwhelmingly healthy learning environments where administrators, teachers, staff members, and families treated one another as valued partners in the education of their students. Trust and mutual respect were evident in the relationships between and among all school personnel. Students from every demographic group perceived that the adults in the school knew them well and were committed to their success in school and beyond. Children and adults felt respected, valued, and appreciated. Adults took painstaking efforts to ensure that everyone felt safe and comfortable, both physically and emotionally. The culture was *transformational* because students, teachers, support personnel, and administrators were always focused on improving. Students from every racial/ethnic group described strategies educators had employed to transform traditional school practices and procedures to help ensure their academic success. Even when the school had achieved at levels far beyond typical expectations, educators were asking, “What can we do better to ensure the success of more of our students?”



Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

- 🔍 **Stakeholders at Gaston Middle School described the school as connected, community, family, and inspiring.** Teachers characterized Gaston Middle School as pleasant, exciting, and supportive. Parents used the words awesome, positive, and helpful to describe the school. Students portrayed the school as energetic, great, fun, and supportive. When we asked parents whether or not their children liked the school, they responded that their children enjoy coming to school. Many parents noted that their students do not want to miss a day of school. One parent stated, “But this school, they don’t want to miss it. I don’t know what it is,” when speaking about their student’s enjoyment of the school. And when we asked students if they liked going to school at Gaston Middle School, most students reported they like coming to school. One student stated, “I feel like it’s a place where I can be myself.” Conversely, some students described Gaston Middle School as chaotic and violent because of student fights and interpersonal problems. One student noted, “I know people get in fights because other people start gossiping about them. Or some of them just want to pick fights because they don’t like them.”
- 🔍 **Most students and parents reported that educators at Gaston Middle School cared about them.** Students noted that teachers and staff are proud and care for them because of the school signage, rewards, and educators’ communication when describing evidence of care. Further, students reported they know educators care about them because they push students to be better and because they give students multiple chances to improve or turn in their work. Similarly, parents described educators as knowing students well and attending to students’ varying needs. One parent stated, “They care. Yeah. They care. They really care. They really care here.” Conversely, some students described a lack of fairness or care from some teachers as evidence of a lack of care.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

- Administrators at Gaston Middle School reported that most students felt connected to Gaston Middle School.** Administrators also noted that the way students feel about Gaston Middle School can vary. They reported that some students genuinely enjoy being at Gaston Middle School, while others might feel they are not listened to or not heard. The principal noted that social media can lead to interpersonal problems for students that affect how they feel about school. In addition, administrators reported that survey data has shown that students have felt more connected to Gaston Middle School over the last few years because of an increase in communication from educators through utilizing the school's chat platform and through phone calls.
- Most students reported that Gaston Middle School was a good place to be a student.** The most common reasons provided by students included their teachers, access to classes they enjoy, and events that happen on campus. Parents suggested that Gaston Middle School was a good place for students mostly because of the successful ways teachers help students learn, the positive communication they receive from educators, and the way educators care about their students. Teachers suggested that Gaston Middle School was a good place for students, primarily because teachers are focused on helping students grow academically and they care about students. Further, teachers noted that it is a good place to be a student because of the opportunities students have to get to know and express their individual cultures and identities and because teachers take time to build partnerships with students and families. Lastly, they noted that Gaston Middle School has a "unique footprint" in part because students have access to many electives and opportunities. Conversely, some teachers noted that there are many misbehaviors and interruptions during learning time. Students did note their concerns with safety on campus due to fights. Some students stated, "There's so many fights that go on...right outside of my class, there was a fight." Others said, "We don't have enough people to deal with those fights," when discussing their concerns.

Students did not mention explicit opportunities to share their ideas and concerns such as a student council or suggestion boxes. However, some students did mention that they have educators on campus that listened to them. The administration team did note their usage of data from student surveys that are utilized to inform their decision-making around school culture. Also, parents claimed that educators listened to them and involved them in decisions regarding their students' academic success. Parents noted that they receive frequent, specific, and positive communication about ways in which their students are succeeding. Parents noted this typically takes place through text messages from educators on campus.
- When equity audit team members observed classrooms at Gaston Middle School they particularly examined classroom climate.** On a scale of "one" to "five," with "one" being harsh/cold and "five" being caring/warm, observers reported an average rating of 3.15. The most common rating was "four." Also, on a scale of "one" to "five," with "one" being disdainful/disrespectful and "five" being respectful/courteous, observers reported an average rating of 3.4. The most common rating was "four."
- As mentioned above, daily student attendance is an area of strength at Gaston Middle School.** As well, the rate of chronic absenteeism at Gaston Middle School presents an opportunity for improvement. Strengths in these areas may be influenced by the extent to which students perceive a strong, positive, caring relationship with their teachers and other school personnel. Further, the school has a strong focus on attendance, and attendance success is celebrated with students, families, and staff.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

- Most teachers and support personnel reported that student behavior at Gaston Middle School made it more difficult for them to teach.** As examples, teachers discussed problems with behavior management, school culture, and more fights, particularly in the 2021-2022 school year. Teachers noted that most fights and problems on campus arise from issues that begin on social media and on cell phones. However, many teachers have a positive mindset about how classroom management and school culture can improve over time. Teachers frequently discussed relationship building with students, collaborating with others around student behavioral concerns, and maintaining a trauma-informed lens. Students mentioned that fights are a frequent problem on campus. Parents noted that most of their students know who to approach if they are having a problem with bullying. Restorative practices are also being implemented school-wide and there are consistent meetings and structures where staff can problem-solve around student behavior. As stated in the prior section, during the 2020-2021 school year, there were 1,037 referrals received by school officials. Among the total, 27% of the students suspended were Black/African American, 25% of the students suspended were White, and 19% of the students suspended were Asian. These data suggest that Black/African American and White students at Gaston Middle School are suspended at disproportionate rates.
- Students at Gaston Middle School suggested that school personnel were using teaching practices that helped them learn and succeed academically.** Students indicated that their teachers utilize literature that is of interest, that teachers help them to learn strategies around staying calm and focused, and that teachers help students to understand content specifically when they need additional assistance. Additionally, parents commented about the impressive focus that teachers have on their students' academic success. Parents noted that they are able to see progress in how their children improve their understanding of academic content over time. One parent stated, "If it's a project, if it's something that she doesn't understand, like on math, they'll explain to her, that teacher will explain to her until she gets it and she gets it. She says, 'Mom, I don't know. But now I understand.'"
- Many teachers, counselors, and support staff reported that Gaston Middle School was a good place to work.** In particular, they cited a supportive administration, collaborative colleagues, and a common goal to support students as reasons they liked Gaston Middle School. Further, teachers noted that Gaston Middle School is a place where teachers can take risks, be creative, and incorporate culturally relevant teaching into their practice. When discussing why Gaston Middle school was a good place to work, teachers said comments such as, "And that's something that I've enjoyed being here...I felt that it is a different environment where you have a lot of creative freedom as a teacher. And when it doesn't work, you're told, 'Okay, that didn't work. Let's try something else.'" The school administrator correctly anticipated how school personnel felt about their work. In particular, the administrator indicated that teachers enjoy being at Gaston Middle School and that there are challenges. The administrator noted that staff felt less connected to one another during COVID, but as there are more opportunities to connect, staff culture will continue to improve.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

- Comments from Gaston Middle School teachers provided insight into their perspectives about the extent to which teachers worked together as a cohesive team.** In the focus groups, teachers made comments such as how they find collaboration to be extremely beneficial to their teaching when reflecting on their thoughts about collaboration and cohesion among Gaston Middle School teachers. One teacher stated, “I think collaboration is probably the most important thing when it comes to planning because if you’re not on the same page, if you’re not together, it’s much harder to determine what’s working and what’s not.” Further, there is ample time during each school day for teachers to work together, and teachers are supported by the administration team during some collaboration sessions. Many teachers noted that content teams utilize the same curriculum, and work to maintain the same pace in their scope and sequence. However, some stakeholders noted there is less time to collaborate as a whole staff due to bargaining negotiations. These comments suggest that teachers at Gaston Middle School work together as a cohesive team.
- In very successful urban schools, educators believe in their students’ capacity to achieve at high levels.** Comments from educators at Gaston Middle School reflect a belief that students possess the capacity to achieve at high levels. For example, teachers commented on their practices of adapting instruction, holding students to high standards, and collaborating amongst colleagues to meet the academic needs of students because of their unwavering belief that all students can achieve at high levels. Teachers said comments such as, “We cater to the needs of the students to make sure their learning is a success for them, not just for the teacher to feel like their lesson went well, but for them and their learning experience,” when discussing their belief in students’ capacity to achieve at high levels. Further, teachers were proud to discuss how their students compete successfully in academic competitions across Fresno when discussing their belief in their students’ capacity to achieve at high levels. Teachers said, “The fact that our kids can go and compete with the other schools, the more affluent schools, compete with them and beat them at times, tells me that our students are right on par with them. They’re being taught at the same level, the same rigor as those other students are. They can compete. They can keep up with their peers.” Teachers also discussed equitable grading policies that aim to give students opportunities to show their mastery of content through extending deadlines or accepting late work.

However, classroom observations revealed lesson activities that required a low level of cognitive demand. For example, in most classrooms observed, observers noted that lesson activities required students to complete procedures without connections to real situations. Similarly, observers noted that in many classrooms the students were asked to respond to questions or prompts that required them to only memorize and recall basic facts. These observations, in combination with teacher interview responses, may be indicative of room for growth in teachers’ belief in their students’ capacity to achieve at high levels.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

q In high-performing schools, educators continuously strive to improve teaching and learning, even when impressive goals have already been attained. School administrators at Gaston Middle School described several issues where they wanted to influence greater improvement. Particularly, they described further developing cultural proficiency, supporting English learners, and improving academic discourse, and collaborative tasks as areas of focus. In addition, school administrators noted a need to refocus on quarterly attendance, academic, and student behavioral goals.

Teachers and other school personnel described several recent improvements at Gaston Middle School including maintaining high behavioral expectations for students and ensuring students are receiving rigorous instruction. Further, some content area teachers had recently adopted a new curriculum. As well, teachers and other school personnel described several issues where improvements continue to be needed including improving behavior problems with more consistent intervention systems across campus. This would include policies around cell phone usage in classrooms. One teacher noted, "I feel that if the school tightens up their structures, it would make a huge difference." In addition, teachers suggested it would be helpful to have more staff support in classrooms with a high number of students with IEPs. Also, they discussed a desire for more rigorous and differentiated professional development including ways to grow a deeper knowledge of supporting English language learners and students with Tier 3 behavioral concerns.

Students expressed an interest in seeing improvements related to hiring more staff as a way to reduce fights and higher quality food choices during lunch. Additionally, parents hoped to see improvements related to acquiring a better understanding of their student's academic progress. Some parents wanted more parent education classes where they could learn how to better assist their students academically. One parent stated, "I think one thing, they should be able to have a class for the parents and get them more knowledgeable about what they are being taught. Because, like I said, I thought I was doing it right." Other parents suggested having more talent shows or more drama and theater extracurriculars. Other parents suggested more security, while some noted this might cause fear for students. Also, parents suggested that Gaston Middle School should have a snack bar for students as many students report to parents about their hunger throughout the day. In sum, Gaston Middle School stakeholders perceived a need for ongoing improvement efforts. Stakeholders were consistent in describing issues that should be the focus of improvement.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Equity Audit Team found several indicators of strength related to the culture experienced by students at Gaston Middle School. Those strengths include the following:

- Students spoke positively about their activities and sports as being fun and reasons to come to school.
- Students appreciated the school facility and are proud to attend the school.
- Some students said the school was safe and teachers and administrators push you to be your best.
- Students receive multiple opportunities to complete assignments.
- The Folklorico program is highly appreciated and open to students from all backgrounds.
- The music program is a highlight for students.
- Each student is able to have two electives each year.
- Students have an opportunity to participate in a number of field trips.
- There is a hotline number on their ID cards that they can use when needed. There are Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, and Hmong student groups.

Additionally, the Equity Audit Team found several indicators of concern related to the culture experienced by students at Gaston Middle School. Those concerns include the following:

- Students spoke about fights on campus and some called the school chaotic.
- Students want different and more food.
- Students feel there are no consequences for students who fight and misbehave.
- Students were yelled at by some staff members.
- Educators at Gaston Middle school should examine their practices around restorative practices, and student supervision during passing periods and lunch in order to develop a climate where all students feel they are safe, valued, capable, respected, and intelligent.
- An examination of hallway displays to ensure all cultures are celebrated will lead students to feel more of a sense of belonging at Gaston.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Staff should ensure all students and parents are aware of extra-curricular opportunities and are encouraged to participate in at least one of the programs/sports offered at the school.

Also, the Equity Audit Team found several indicators of strength related to the culture experienced by teachers and other school personnel at Gaston Middle School. Those strengths include the following:

- Staff reported a very supportive and friendly culture by administrators and office staff.
- Teachers have two preps a day and reported using the time to collaborate.
- The structure of the master schedule allows for PLCs to meet with an administrator available for support.
- Teachers are proud of the building; they feel connected to other staff members.

Finally, the Equity Audit Team found several indicators of concern related to the culture experienced by school personnel at Gaston Middle School. Those concerns include the following:

- Staff are concerned about student discipline and have challenges with students experiencing social and emotional issues.
- According to some teachers, routines, and procedures are of concern to the efficiency of the school operations.
- There is a concern about teacher turnover.

Based on these strengths and concerns, the team offers the following recommendation:



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

1

Educators at Gaston Middle School should agree upon and implement a strategy for leading students to perceive themselves as young scholars who are capable of learning challenging academic content.

- A. **Professional Development:** Educators at Gaston Middle School should engage in professional development that helps them learn about strategies that have worked well to help diverse groups of students think of themselves as capable scholars. For example, some approaches can be found at <https://www.fcps.edu/academics/elementary-school-academics/k-6advanced-academics/young-scholars-k-12> or at <http://youngscholarsprogram.org/>. Gaston Middle School does not necessarily need to replicate one of these programs. Instead, the professional development should lead educators to consider the following questions:
 - What are the habits of young scholars that all Travis Elementary School students should develop? Specific scholarly habits should be specified, displayed prominently in classrooms and hallways, and discussed regularly.
 - How can educators and support staff acknowledge and celebrate the progress of students in demonstrating the habits of young scholars? Educators should agree upon specific strategies for recognizing students who exhibit scholarly behavior. There should be frequent opportunities to celebrate students as they exhibit scholarly behavior. Educators should be thoughtful about ways to engage parents in the celebration of students' scholarly behavior.
 - How can educators structure tasks and questions in ways that challenge students to grow as young scholars? Educators should commit to offering students challenging tasks and questions that push them to apply the concepts they are learning to real-life situations. Each day, in every class session, there should be at least one task that encourages students to feel like they are being empowered to use what they are learning to address real and important issues.
- B. **Schedules, Routines, Procedures:** Based upon insights acquired through the professional development described above, educators at Gaston Middle School should agree upon and commit to specific schedules, routines, and procedures that might help ensure that all Gaston Middle School students perceive themselves as capable scholars. All school personnel should develop a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in contributing to a powerful, school-wide effort to influence how students perceive themselves.



FINDINGS

POSITIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURE

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

1

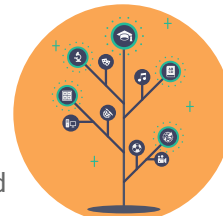
- C. **Teacher Collaboration:** Based on the school-wide commitments made (regarding the changes to schedules, routines, and procedures described above), teacher collaboration teams should support each other in developing and implementing lesson strategies that are likely to lead students to perceive themselves as capable scholars and leaders.
- D. **Classroom Observation and Feedback:** Classroom observations and feedback should be structured to acknowledge and celebrate teachers' progress in implementing agreed upon strategies and promoting students' sense of academic efficacy. As well, observations and feedback should offer teachers practical, useful suggestions for improving their implementation of agreed upon strategies.
- E. **Communication from Leaders:** Written and oral communication from school leaders should emphasize progress observed throughout Gaston Middle School in establishing environments in which students are more likely to perceive themselves as young scholars and leaders.



FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

Definition: Educators in high-performing schools worked to ensure that all demographic groups of students (including students whose first language was not English, students who were performing two or three years below their grade level, and students with learning disabilities) had access to challenging curricula balanced with rich opportunities to engage in the visual and performing arts, world languages, technology, and other non-tested subjects. Teachers in each course of study engaged collaboratively to identify and develop a shared understanding of the key standards students in each grade must master. Together, teachers carefully designed instruction to provide every student the opportunity to learn and master the knowledge and skills necessary. Assignments and instructional activities were purposeful with clear learning objectives and explicit success criteria. Students perceived their work as meaningful and relevant to their backgrounds and futures. Teachers had a common method for assessing student mastery of course content. Regularly, after common assessments were administered, teachers and administrators met, reviewed data, identified strengths/needs, and planned improvement strategies.



Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

- 🔍 **Teachers at Gaston Middle School who taught the same grade level shared a common understanding of the specific standards and objectives their students needed to learn by various points in the academic year.** Specifically, school administrators commented that collaborative planning leads to shared lesson planning and common teaching across classrooms. Further, administrators noted the functioning grade level and content area teams that are led by lead teachers and administrators. Additionally, teachers have opportunities to collaborate daily with one another. Some teachers reported their collaborative work and the positive impact this has had on their continued growth as teachers. Others noted that their teams adhere to the common scope and sequences and curricula that are provided while continuing to adapt to meet the needs of all learners.
- 🔍 **In high-performing schools, educators teach state standards, but they also work as a team to ensure that their approach to the state standards is at least as rigorous as required by state assessments and as rigorous as the curricula taught in schools that serve affluent communities.** The equity audit team found that educators at Gaston Middle School approached state standards in a manner that was rigorous in some classrooms and less rigorous in others. Evidence included:
 - Teachers reported that their collaboration meetings included regular discussions designed to ensure that teachers approached state standards with high levels of rigor.
 - During our visits to classrooms, we found inconsistency in the level of rigor associated with lessons and assignments across classrooms within the same grade level. During our classroom observations, we rated each lesson from “one” to “five” where “one” indicated that the activities observed were not likely to lead any students to grade-level mastery and where “five” indicated that the activities observed were likely to lead all students to grade-level mastery. On average, we rated the lessons observed 2.3. This suggests that most lessons challenged students with a level of rigor that was not likely to lead students to high levels of mastery.



FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

- When conducting classroom observations, we also attended to issues of cognitive demand. During our classroom observations, we rated the cognitive demand of lesson activities from “one” to “five” where “one” indicated that the classroom activities observed only required memorization and recall of basic facts, and “five” indicated that the classroom activities observed required students to extend their thinking and address and solve real problems. On average, we rated the cognitive demand of classroom activities observed 2.34. This suggests that most activities required a low level of cognitive demand. Similarly, during classroom observations, we rated the cognitive demand of the questions students were expected to answer from “one” to “five” where “one” indicated that the questions only required memorization and recall of basic facts and “five” indicated that the questions required students to extend their thinking and address and solve real problems. On average, we rated the cognitive demand of questions observed 2.2. This suggests that most questions required a low level of cognitive demand.
- In high-performing schools, all students (regardless of race/ethnicity, language background, or disability status) were expected to learn rigorous academic content. Expectations were high; however, teachers also ensured that students had high levels of support to maximize the likelihood that students could achieve the expectations.** At Gaston Middle School observers found the following evidence regarding the level of rigor provided to diverse student populations:
 - Where observers were able to identify students with mild disabilities during classroom observations, the observers noted that students with mild disabilities were expected to learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn. As well, students with mild disabilities were supported in ways that increased the likelihood they would learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn.
 - Where observers were able to identify students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds during classroom observations, the observers noted that some Black/African American students were not expected to learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn. It was noted that in some classrooms, most Black/African American students were allowed to opt-out of learning and play computer games. As well, in some classrooms, Black/African American students were not supported in ways that increased the likelihood they would learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn.
 - Where observers were able to identify students with different language backgrounds during classroom observations, the observers noted that students with emerging English proficiency were expected to learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn. As well, students with emerging English proficiency were supported in ways that increased the likelihood they would learn the same rigorous standards all students were expected to learn.



FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

- 🔍 **In high-performing schools, educators use common, formative assessments to ensure that all students have learned critical academic objectives. Results from common formative assessments provide teachers with information about the extent to which students have mastered specific concepts and skills. Teachers review assessment results promptly to determine what they need to do to ensure students have acquired the knowledge that is pre-requisite to the subsequent concepts to be taught.** At Gaston Middle School, teachers administer common formative assessments. Teachers in all professional learning communities (PLCs) are expected to create their own formative assessments. They have daily collaboration time where the creation of common formative assessments and analysis of them can occur.
- 🔍 **In high-performing schools, when students do not develop a strong understanding of concepts after initial instruction, students receive prompt intervention tailored to identify and address their needs successfully.** At Gaston Middle School intervention was provided in classrooms through differentiation and with Tier 2 Interventionists. Teachers noted that they offer intervention to students after school as well.
- 🔍 **In very successful schools, the curriculum includes rich opportunities for students to engage in the visual and performing arts, world languages, technology, sports, and leadership opportunities.** Data from our observations and interviews indicated that Gaston Middle School students have access to a rich array of extracurricular activities. In particular, the school administrator reported that students have access to two electives. The school administrator stated, "Our school's a little different in the sense that we have probably double the elective teachers of any middle school because our kids get two electives." They noted there are ten electives offered to students. Teachers indicated that students have other rich opportunities including dance teams (Folklorico), academic teams, and sports teams as well. Also, students often noted their music classes and the variety of skills they are learning. Parents reported that their students enjoy the many sports offered to their children at Gaston Middle School.





FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Equity Audit Team found several indicators of strength related to the curriculum experienced by students at Gaston Middle School. Those strengths include the following:

- Students reported the novels read in ELA were interesting and relevant to them.
- The students enjoy music and band other electives.
- History was another curricular area students found interesting.

Additionally, the Equity Audit Team found several indicators of concern related to the curriculum experienced by students at Gaston Middle School. Those concerns include the following:

- The curriculum experienced by students was of low rigor.
- Observers noted a heavy reliance on computers, worksheets, and videos.
- Observers noted little evidence that students received standards-based curriculum.

Based on these strengths and concerns, the team offers the following recommendation:



FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

2

To help ensure that Gaston Middle School students master some of the most important critical academic skills, district leaders, school leaders, and teachers should work together to identify a small number of critical academic standards (in mathematics, English language arts, and science) that will receive special attention and extra time. Concentrated effort should be devoted to helping ensure that teachers teach these standards in ways that result in students achieving deep understanding and mastery. By building the capacity of teachers to succeed with a small number of standards, school and district leaders can increase the likelihood that educators understand how planning processes are intended to influence lesson implementation. Implementation of this recommendation will consume time in ways that might decrease the likelihood that teachers cover all of the standards assessed. NCUST, however, has observed many schools that have benefited substantially from this investment of time. “Covering” content has little value if it does not lead students to high rates of understanding and mastery.

- A. **Professional Development:** Teams that include Gaston Middle School teachers, leaders, and district specialists should convene to identify one or two critical academic standards in each discipline (especially, but not limited to mathematics, English language arts, social studies, and science). The one or two standards selected should be challenging standards that Gaston Middle School students have not typically mastered when they took state assessments. As well, the standards selected should be sufficiently important that, when students demonstrate mastery, their performance on state assessments should improve measurably and students’ perception of their ability to learn challenging standards should be elevated considerably. The teams of teachers, leaders, and specialists should spend time working together to describe in depth the concepts and skills students would need to master to perform well on the standards selected. Teachers who participate in these conversations should acquire a clear and detailed understanding of the level of rigor students need to demonstrate to have a high likelihood of demonstrating mastery. As part of professional development, teachers should develop, adopt, or adapt (from other sources) short common formative assessments that provide a clear indication of whether each student has mastered a specific standard.
- B. **Schedules, Routines, Procedures:** Each team should establish a tentative schedule for teaching the concepts and skills students will need to master related to each standard. The schedule should include anticipated dates for administering common formative assessments, immediately scoring the assessments, and providing intervention and enrichment in response to the assessment results.

Additionally, school leaders should commit to expending a considerable amount of time each week observing teachers as they seek to teach the one or two critical academic standards selected. Every classroom teacher should benefit from at least two short observations each week.



FINDINGS

ACCESS TO CHALLENGING CURRICULA FOR ALL STUDENTS

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

2

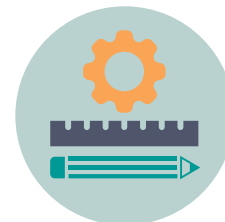
- C. **Teacher Collaboration:** Lesson planning processes should be interwoven into teacher collaborative planning processes related to the one or two standards selected. Teachers should have abundant support in planning lessons that have a high likelihood of leading students to master the standards. **In particular, lesson planning should emphasize strategies for helping students relate to and see the importance of the concepts and skills they are being asked to learn.**
- D. **Classroom Observation and Feedback:** Classroom observations should be tailored to ensure that teachers are implementing lessons in ways that reflect the quality of their planning efforts. Leaders should highlight exemplary lessons in ways that help other teachers see how their colleagues are successfully leading Gaston Middle School students to learn challenging academic standards. As teachers encounter difficulty implementing the lessons they planned, practical support should be provided. Additionally, feedback should emphasize growth as teachers improve their ability to teach the critical academic standards.
- E. **Communication from Leaders:** Written and oral communication from Gaston Middle School's leadership team should highlight the progress teachers are making in increasing the likelihood that students engage in challenging academic activities, answer thought-provoking questions, and demonstrate deep understanding and mastery of grade-level standards. As well, written and oral communication should emphasize suggestions for strengthening questions and lesson activities so that students are more likely to demonstrate mastery of challenging objectives and standards.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY

Definition: Effective instruction is instruction that results in students engaging in efforts to learn and growing closer to mastering the content the teacher endeavors to teach. In high-performing schools, NCUST researchers found educators utilizing instructional practices that 1) led all students to feel valued and capable and 2) focused on ensuring getting all students to understand and master key concepts and skills. Both of these goals were facilitated when teachers provided clear instruction; ensured that lessons were culturally, socially, and personally relevant to their students; checked student understanding, provided feedback, and adapted instruction accordingly; built student fluency with gatekeeper vocabulary; promoted successful student practice, and nurtured students' love of learning. With such instruction, students from all racial/ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds thrived academically.



In an effort to understand the kind and quality of instruction provided at Gaston Middle School, the equity audit team observed almost every classroom. The team used an observation protocol designed to capture the similarities and differences between the characteristics of teaching and learning found in high-performing schools and those observed in Gaston Middle School classrooms. Additionally, interviews with school administrators and focus groups with teachers, parents, and students provided additional insight regarding instruction at Gaston Middle School.

Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

- 🔍 **In high-performing schools, there were a few, clear, and consistent expectations that elevated the quality of instruction in ways that resulted in greater student engagement and greater student success for all demographic groups of students.** At Gaston Middle School the school administrator emphasized instructional issues including supporting English learners, improving academic discourse, collaborative tasks, and cultural proficiency. Further, the administrator noted an instructional need and focus on increasing the rigor of student tasks to match the level of rigor on state testing. In addition, administrators noted a continued need to use common formative assessments and i-Ready to target specific students and to monitor their growth closely. These issues were similar to the instructional issues that teachers perceived were most important, including ensuring that students have access to rigorous instruction and that academic expectations are high for students.
- 🔍 **Lessons observed at Gaston Middle School occasionally were conducted in ways that made all students feel valued and capable.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed was conducted in a manner that made students feel valued and capable. In 13% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that Gaston Middle School students felt valued and capable. During those lessons, observers noted that teachers used respectful and caring speech, teachers worked hard to ensure all students were listening and paying attention, and teachers showed support to students. On the other hand, in 87% of the lessons, observers found only slight evidence or no evidence that the teacher was leading students to feel valued and capable. Lessons would have been more likely to lead all students to feel valued and capable if teachers had more frequently shown care for all students by praising them, acknowledging them, and having high-quality relationships with all students. In addition, lessons would have been more likely to lead all students to feel valued and capable if teachers had cared enough to respectfully demand high academic and engagement expectations.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY

Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

- 🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers planned and delivered lessons aimed at leading students to master the lesson objective the first time it was taught.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed was conducted in a manner that led all students to develop a deep understanding and mastery of lesson objectives. In 17.4% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Gaston Middle School delivered lessons that helped all students develop a deep understanding and mastery of lesson objectives. In those lessons, equity audit team members noted that teachers repeated the assignment details numerous times, teachers circulated the classroom to ensure students understood the task, and teachers encouraged and supported late finishers. On the other hand, in 82.6% of the lessons, observers noted only slight evidence or no evidence of this practice. Lessons would have been more likely to lead students to develop understanding and mastery if teachers had more frequently focused on student success with the learning objective by checking in with each and every student to gauge their level of understanding during multiple parts of the lesson. Further, teachers could have more frequently structured lesson activities to maximize the likelihood that students would learn the lesson objective.
- 🔍 A factor that influences the pursuit of understanding and mastery of lesson objectives, is the extent to which the lesson objective is clear to students.** In each classroom observation, observers rated the extent to which the lesson objective was clear to them. A score of “one” meant that the rater had difficulty determining the lesson objective. A score of “five” meant that the rater perceived that the lesson objective was specific and clear. The average rating for all lessons observed was 2.7. This suggests that in some classrooms the rater perceived that the lesson objectives were specific and clear, but in most classrooms, there was room for growth. Similarly, for each classroom observation, observers rated the likelihood that the lesson objective was clear to students. A score of “one” meant that the observer saw no evidence that the teacher had done anything to ensure that students understood what they were learning and why. A score of “five” meant that the students demonstrated that they understood specifically and clearly what they were expected to learn and why. The average rating for all lessons observed was 2.6. This suggests that most lessons displayed little evidence that teachers had done anything to ensure that students understood what they were learning and why.
- 🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers designed lessons to enhance students’ clarity about key lesson concepts and to minimize students’ misconceptions.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed at Gaston Middle School was conducted in a manner that promoted clarity. In 26.1% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was either considerable or exemplary evidence that teachers at Gaston Middle School delivered lessons that enhanced students’ clarity about key lesson concepts. In those lessons, observers noted that teachers stated the learning expectations with considerable clarity and used repetition to promote clarity. Furthermore, in those lessons teachers asked students to describe their steps or process to determine a solution, and teachers supported students in finding evidence to support their claims. In contrast, in 73.9% of the lessons, observers found slight evidence or no evidence of this practice. Lessons would have been more likely to promote clarity among students if teachers had more frequently ensured that students clearly understood what they were expected to learn. Also, lessons might have been more likely to promote clarity among students if teachers had planned and implemented strategies to help students avoid common misconceptions about important lesson concepts.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY

Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

- 🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers designed lessons to include frequent opportunities to check students' understanding, provide feedback, and adapt instruction accordingly.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed was conducted with frequent checks for student understanding, frequent teacher feedback, and appropriate adaptation of the lesson in response to checks for student understanding. In 11.1% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Gaston Middle School delivered lessons in ways that modeled frequent checks for understanding, frequent teacher feedback, and appropriate adaptation of the lesson. Observers noted that teachers used proximity to continuously check for student understanding, teachers provided feedback and encouragement to all students, and teachers called upon individual students randomly to ensure participation of all students. In contrast, in 88.9% of the lessons, observers noted only slight evidence or no evidence of this practice. Lessons would have been more likely to model strong checking for understanding, providing feedback, and adapting instruction if teachers had planned specific questions, they could ask or strategies they could use to elicit responses from many or all students. Teachers might have planned to ensure that they spoke less and their students spoke more. Also, lessons would have been more effective if teachers had planned strategies they could use when students made errors that were fairly predictable.
- 🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers designed lessons that were responsive to the cultural, social, and personal backgrounds of the students they served.** Often lessons helped students see connections between key academic standards and their own cultural, social, and personal backgrounds and interests. Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed was presented in a manner that helped students relate (culturally, socially, or personally) to the content being taught. In 13% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was either considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Gaston Middle School delivered lessons that helped all students relate to the content being taught. In those lessons, observers noted that teachers allowed creativity and innovation, teachers gave students the opportunity to use the music of their choice in lessons, and teachers initiated conversations to which students could relate. Lastly, teachers utilized texts that were likely perceived as interesting by students. In contrast, in 87% of the lessons, observers noted only slight evidence or no evidence suggesting that lessons were responsive to students' cultural, social, and personal backgrounds. The promotion of culturally, socially, and personally responsive teaching might have been enhanced if teacher collaborative planning could have helped teachers consider, "How could this concept be presented in a way that would resonate with our students at Gaston Middle School? How might we make this concept seem less foreign to our students and more connected to their backgrounds and experiences?"



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY

Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

- 🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers provided lessons that built their students' fluency with gatekeeper vocabulary. Often lessons gave all students many opportunities to use key lesson vocabulary in ways that helped students develop familiarity and comfort with the vocabulary.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed helped students build fluency with vocabulary that was central to the lesson content and helped students integrate the lesson vocabulary into their speaking vocabulary. In 6.7% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was either considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Gaston Middle School delivered lessons that built their students' fluency with gatekeeper vocabulary. In these lessons, observers noted that teachers reviewed key vocabulary words in depth, teachers used models for students to visualize vocabulary, and teachers required students to use academic vocabulary and symbols with rubrics. On the other hand, in 93.3% of the lessons, equity audit team members observed only slight evidence or no evidence of this practice. Lessons would have been more likely to help students build fluency with gatekeeper vocabulary if teachers had more often engaged students in meaningful conversations that required students to use the vocabulary frequently. Prior planning could help teachers design activities, simulations, games, skits, and other activities that would engage students in using gatekeeper vocabulary frequently.
- 🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers designed lessons that promoted students' successful practice of concepts and skills. Teachers allowed students to practice skills independently only when they knew that independent practice was likely to be successful.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which, in each lesson observed, students were allowed to practice independently only when they had demonstrated a reasonable likelihood of success. In 21.8% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Gaston Middle School delivered lessons that promoted students' successful practice of concepts and skills. In those lessons, observers noted that teachers walked students through the work before allowing them to practice independently by modeling and explaining the activities to students. On the other hand, in 78.2% of the lessons, observers noted only slight evidence or no evidence of this practice. Lessons would have been more likely to help students experience successful practice if teachers had more frequently checked to make sure that students had a reasonable level of understanding before releasing students to pursue tasks independently.
- 🔍 In high-performing schools, teachers designed lessons that led students to love learning. Students became excited about learning academic content because their teachers helped them understand how the content was relevant to their current or future lives. Students often perceived lessons as relevant because teachers engaged them in interesting projects. Teachers used interesting applications of technology to inspire engagement and mastery. Teachers maximized student engagement and mastery by creating frequent opportunities for students to interact with and learn from each other.** Equity audit team members rated the extent to which each lesson observed contributed to students developing a love of learning. In 8.7% of the lessons, observers perceived that there was considerable evidence or exemplary evidence that teachers at Gaston Middle School delivered lessons that led students to love learning. Observers noted that these teachers utilized music, allowed students to be creative, and showed their excitement about the academic content. In contrast, in 91.3% of lessons, equity audit team members found only slight evidence or no evidence of this practice.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY

Key Findings at Gaston Middle School:

When students perceive that academic content is relevant to them, they are much more likely to love learning. Equity audit team members rated the extent to which students were likely to perceive the learning activities observed as relevant to the students' lives. A score of "one" meant the observer believed none of the students in the classroom were likely to perceive the classroom learning activities as relevant to their lives. A score of "five" meant the observer believed all students in the classroom were likely to perceive the classroom learning activities as relevant to their lives. The average rating for all lessons observed was 2.6.

Also, when students are engaged in talking with their peers about lesson concepts and ideas, they are more likely to enjoy lessons and learn to love learning. Equity audit team members rated the extent to which students talked with their peers or with the teacher about the lesson concepts and ideas. A score of "one" meant the observer did not observe any students speaking with their peers or with the teacher about the lesson concepts and ideas. A score of "five" meant the observer saw all students in the classroom speaking frequently with their peers or with the teacher about the lesson concepts and ideas. The average rating for all lessons observed was 1.7.

Lessons would have been more likely to lead students to love learning if teachers had more frequently demonstrated enthusiasm about the content students were learning, engaged students in projects or other activities that required them to apply the concepts being learned in meaningful, relevant ways, engaged students in deep discussions about lesson concepts, or engaged students in activities that required the integration of the content being learned with high-interest areas such as art, music, drama, physical education, technology, etc.

- 🔍 **Also, observers rated the extent to which students were likely to perceive their classroom as engaging.** In each classroom observation, equity audit team members rated the classroom climate as "one" if they perceived students found the class uninteresting or tedious. Observers rated the class as "five" if they perceived students found the class engaging and stimulating. On average, the classrooms observed were rated 2.6.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Equity Audit Team found one indicator of strength related to the instruction experienced by students at Gaston Middle School. This strength includes the following:

- Some students noted English language arts and history content areas as interesting.

Additionally, the Equity Audit Team found several indicators of concern related to the instruction experienced by students at Gaston Middle School. Those concerns include the following:

- Instruction was dominated by teacher voices. Observers noted a lack of student voice and engagement.
- Teachers relied on technology and worksheets. Teaching practices in general were ineffective in enabling students to master learning objectives. Observers noted a lack of clarity of the purpose of learning objectives which prevented students from mastering objectives.
- Classroom management is of concern and is preventing students from maximizing learning. Further, observers noted inconsistent management practices throughout the school.
- Observers noted inconsistent delivery of instruction among the same content and grade levels.
- Instruction and questions asked were at a low level of rigor.

Based on these strengths and concerns, the team offers the following recommendations:



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

3

Gaston Middle School educators should work together to identify two instructional practices that have the potential to accelerate learning, especially for students who, historically, have not experienced academic success. Intensive efforts should be made to ensure that teachers at Gaston Middle School demonstrate these practices in every lesson, with a high level of fidelity, and in ways that are likely to generate higher levels of student success. School leaders should endeavor to brand these two practices as part of “the Gaston Middle School way of teaching.” Every educator should be encouraged to commit to exemplifying these two practices.

- A. **Professional Development:** Regular professional development activities should engage teachers in examining the selected teaching practices and discussing 1) *why* the practices are more likely to result in higher levels of student success, 2) *what* teachers do to maximize the effectiveness of the practices, and 3) *how* the practices are different from efforts that might be less effective in improving learning results. Teachers should be challenged to create rubrics for determining the quality of their implementation of the practices. Professional development activities should include opportunities for teachers to discuss the practices; see the practices being implemented; discuss the factors that contribute to successful implementation; try to implement the practices in a supportive environment; receive helpful, constructive support; and try again. District specialists and school leaders should work to identify teachers who model the two practices particularly well. Efforts should be made to videotape lessons that model these two practices.
- B. **Schedules, Routines, Procedures:** Educators at Gaston Middle School should work together to develop routines that allow teachers opportunities to observe each other’s classrooms. Teachers should be encouraged to volunteer to have their lessons observed by colleagues. Colleagues should utilize the rubrics established to reinforce the positive elements that contribute to the desired teaching practices. Efforts should not focus on criticizing. Instead, efforts should focus on acknowledging and celebrating growth and improvement. After listening to positive comments from colleagues, school leaders, and district specialists, each teacher who was observed should have the opportunity to ask, “How could I have used this practice in a way that did an even better job of helping my students learn the concept I was trying to teach?” These interactions should be designed to ensure that teachers feel supported and respected.

Additionally, school leaders should commit to expending a considerable amount of time each week observing teachers as they seek to implement the two selected teaching practices. Every classroom teacher should benefit from at least two short observations each week.



FINDINGS

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION THAT LEADS TO ENGAGEMENT AND MASTERY SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recommendations**
- 3**
- C. Teacher Collaboration:** Collaborative planning meetings should be focused on helping teachers implement these two practices well. District leaders should work with the Gaston Middle School principal and Gaston Middle School teachers to refine collaborative planning meeting protocols in ways that help teachers implement the two practices well. To ensure that planning results in higher quality lesson delivery, in each collaborative planning meeting, an amount of time should be devoted to reviewing clips of lessons and providing constructive feedback about the use of the two teaching practices.
- D. Classroom Observation and Feedback:** School leaders should utilize the rubrics developed in recommendation 1A above in regular observations of lessons. Feedback should be tailored in ways that reinforce the strengths related to each of the two practices. As well, feedback should include constructive ideas that could help teachers maximize the impact of the two practices.
- E. Communication from Leaders:** Leaders should send weekly reports to teachers that highlight strengths observed (e.g., In 90% of the observations this week, teachers were observed getting at least 3/4th of their students to respond to questions that required some higher order thinking). Reports should emphasize growth and improvement in teaching practices and the impact on student learning.





NEXT STEPS

This report provides a large amount of information about school culture, curriculum, and instruction at Gaston Middle School. We recommend that school personnel take time to read and understand the various findings and recommendations contained herein. While reading the report, it is important to keep in mind that the report is based on a snapshot of Gaston Middle School. While the equity audit team endeavored to look comprehensively at the school and acquire input from an array of stakeholders, the report is based on information acquired over a narrow span of time from a limited number of stakeholders. As well, it is important to keep in mind that the report compares Gaston Middle School with schools that NCUST has awarded, where every demographic group outperforms state averages. This high bar is likely to suggest areas of improvement that would not be specified in more typical audit reviews. If there are questions regarding any of the findings or recommendations, we encourage school leaders to contact the equity audit team leader. NCUST is happy to engage in conversations about the report with the school principal, with the school's leadership team, or with the school's faculty.

Secondly, we acknowledge that stakeholders may disagree with the findings and/or recommendations in this report. Where there are disagreements concerning important issues, school personnel may wish to consider identifying and implementing strategies for acquiring additional objective information about issues of concern. The equity audit team leader would be happy to help suggest ways that school personnel can collect additional information to influence their understanding of important issues discussed in this report.

The report includes many recommendations. It is important for stakeholders to review and prioritize these recommendations. Stakeholders should consider which recommendations are most likely to yield important improvements for Gaston Middle School students. We encourage schools to limit the focus to three or four important recommendations.

When high-priority recommendations are identified, we encourage attention to each of the steps specified. It is particularly important for school personnel to determine how they will monitor their progress toward implementation.

Finally, it is important for everyone involved to commit to pursuing high-priority recommendations with a spirit of teamwork and support. It will be important for stakeholders to remind each other that the reason for each improvement effort is grounded in their common interest in seeing all demographic groups of students at Gaston Middle School excel. As well, it will be important for all stakeholders to understand their roles in implementing each improvement effort and to feel that they have abundant support designed to ensure their success. It will be especially important to identify and celebrate both small and large successes. As well, it will be important to determine how stakeholders will support each other constructively through setbacks and disappointments. This report highlights that Gaston Middle School has many important strengths. By deliberately pursuing a few high-priority recommendations, we are confident that Gaston Middle School will develop many more strengths that elevate learning outcomes for all groups of students.