Wyoming District Peer Review

Sweetwater County School District #1

Introduction:

The Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) conducted a virtual peer review visit, on March 29-30, 2021, in Sweetwater County School District #1. The visiting team included Autumn Tempany, Big Horn County School District #1, Andrea Gilbertson, Fremont County School District #24, Ryan Boettcher, Big Horn County School District #1, Stacey Peres, Carbon County School District #1, Christina Mills, Fremont County School District #24, Troy Zickefoose, Fremont County School District # 6, Chelsie Oaks, Wyoming Department of Education, Bill Pannell, Wyoming Department of Education, and Joel Dvorak, Team Lead. The team would like to thank the district for its hospitality during the visit.

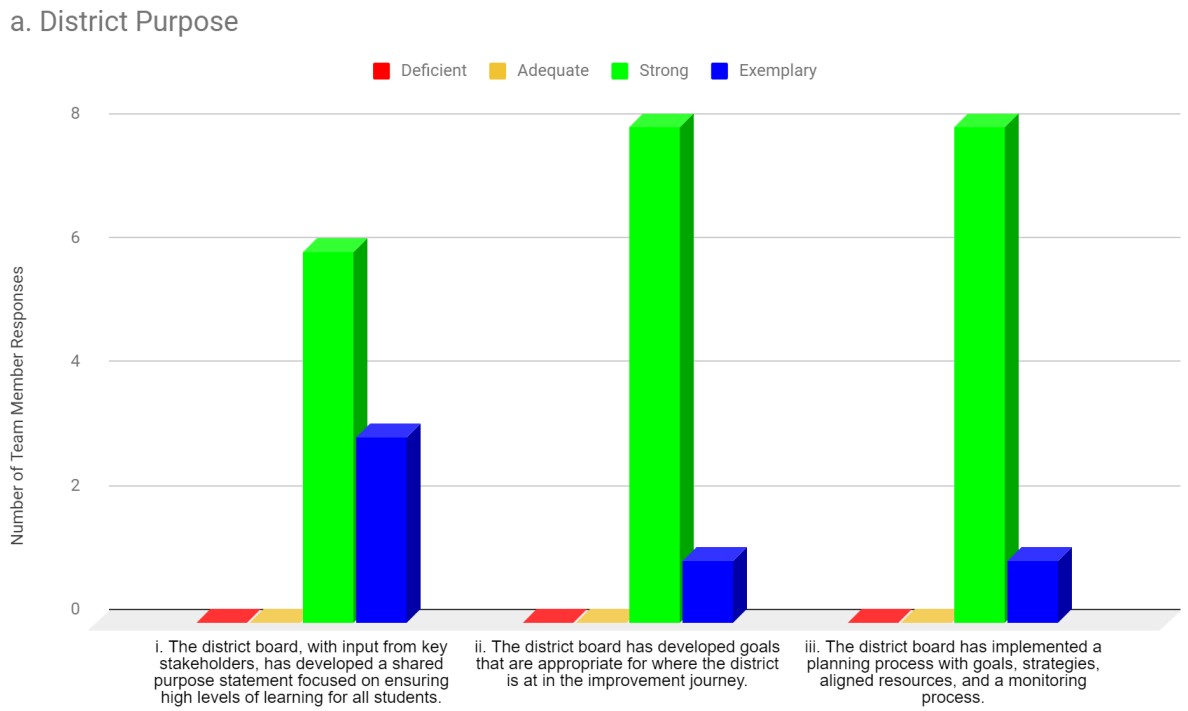
In Wyoming's Peer Review Accreditation Model, a team is selected, made up of professionals from Wyoming school districts, constituents from the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE), and a team lead that facilitates the visit. These professionals come from a variety of areas within an educational setting and serve as "equals" (Approaches to Accreditation, 2018) to those professionals directly reporting to the peer review team during their district's two-day visit. This model offers a "collegial" (Approaches to Accreditation, 2018) approach that closely examines annual accreditation criteria, artifacts of implemented processes, the district's assessment system, and input from the school district's stakeholders. Anticipated benefits from Wyoming's Peer Review Model is that it serves as a mechanism to help a school district with prioritizing, making informed decisions, and reflect on their own unique quality standards that have been identified in their strategic plan.

Approaches to Accreditation. (2018, February 8). Retrieved from http://accreditation.org/accreditation-resources/approaches-accreditation

A. GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

01. District Board

a. District Purpose

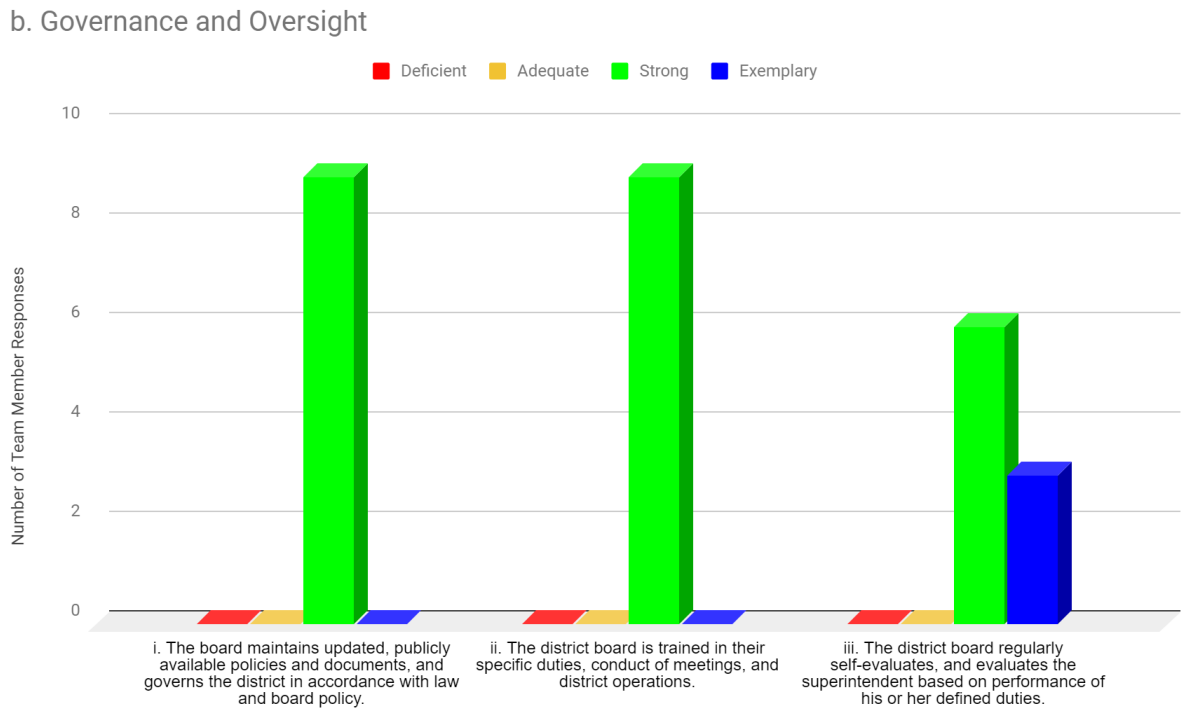


The presence and participation of board members during the visit was impressive and appreciated. They were articulate and obviously engaged in continuous improvement of themselves as a board. This process seems new to the trustees but is important work for growing and maintaining excellent governance of the district. The Leadership Governance Model promoted by the WSBA is used by the district as a structure for board leadership. The trustees are involved in a Board PLC to work on their function as a governing body. This is a best practice and helped earn exemplary scores in this area.

The strategic plan details the purpose and goals for the district and guides processes to achieve those goals. The goals are process goals with little clarity around the overall district priorities for increasing achievement (e.g., increasing graduation rates).

The level of community input from stakeholders in the form of participation on a multitude of task force teams is impressive. The cost savings, strategic planning, 4-day week, and smart start task forces are just a few examples. Broadcasting board meetings is also a best practice.

b. Governance and Oversight



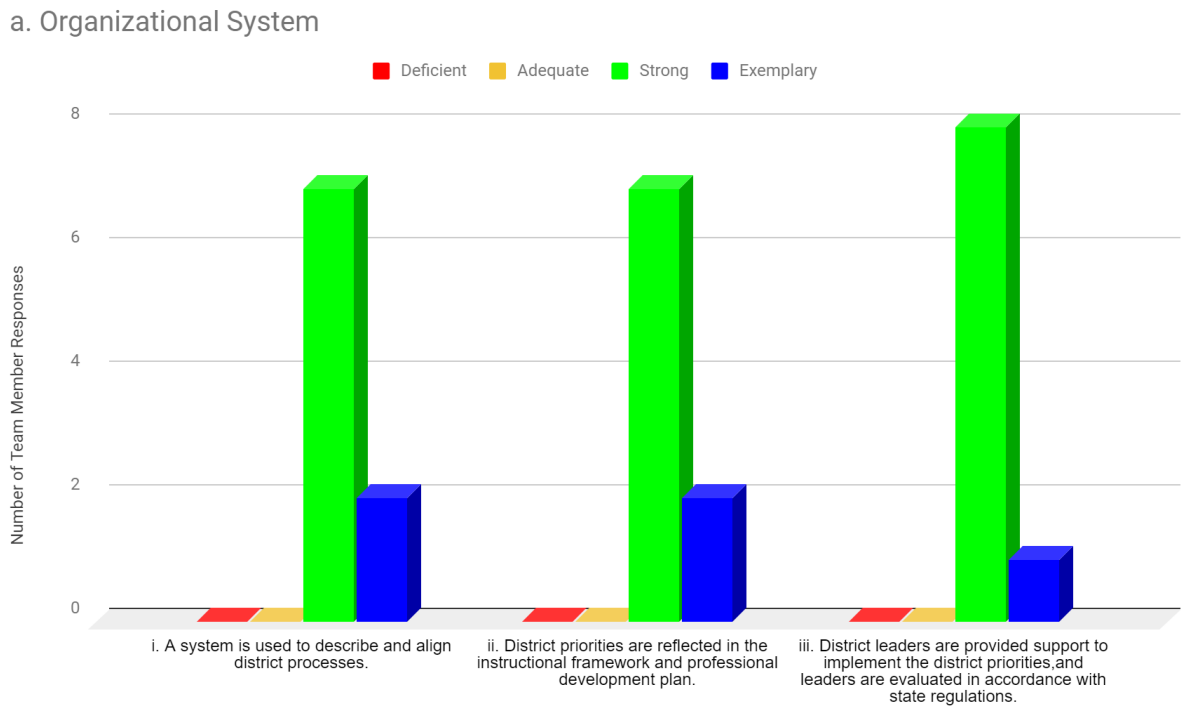
The district has a repository for policies that are publicly available to all stakeholders and a policy committee that meets monthly to review and revise district policies. Leadership Governance processes are in place for the board, including a process for self-evaluation of the board's performance which was added in 2020. The board self-evaluation process and an aligned superintendent evaluation process is a best practice. The board members are committed to their role as evidenced by many trustees obtaining additional certifications.

The district has a diverse Policy Committee made of staff, trustees, and administrative leaders that review and recommend policy to the Board. This is an active standing committee. Several Task Forces are in operation in the district. They include: Cost Savings, Strategic Planning, ReEntry Planning, and the 4-Day Student Week. A Collaboration Task Force also operates within the district. Getting input from staff and constituents seems to be a priority of the Board.

Individual board members are highly involved in statewide education work. The fact that most or all the board members were present for the entire day shows their commitment to the accreditation process and involvement in the district.

02. District Leadership

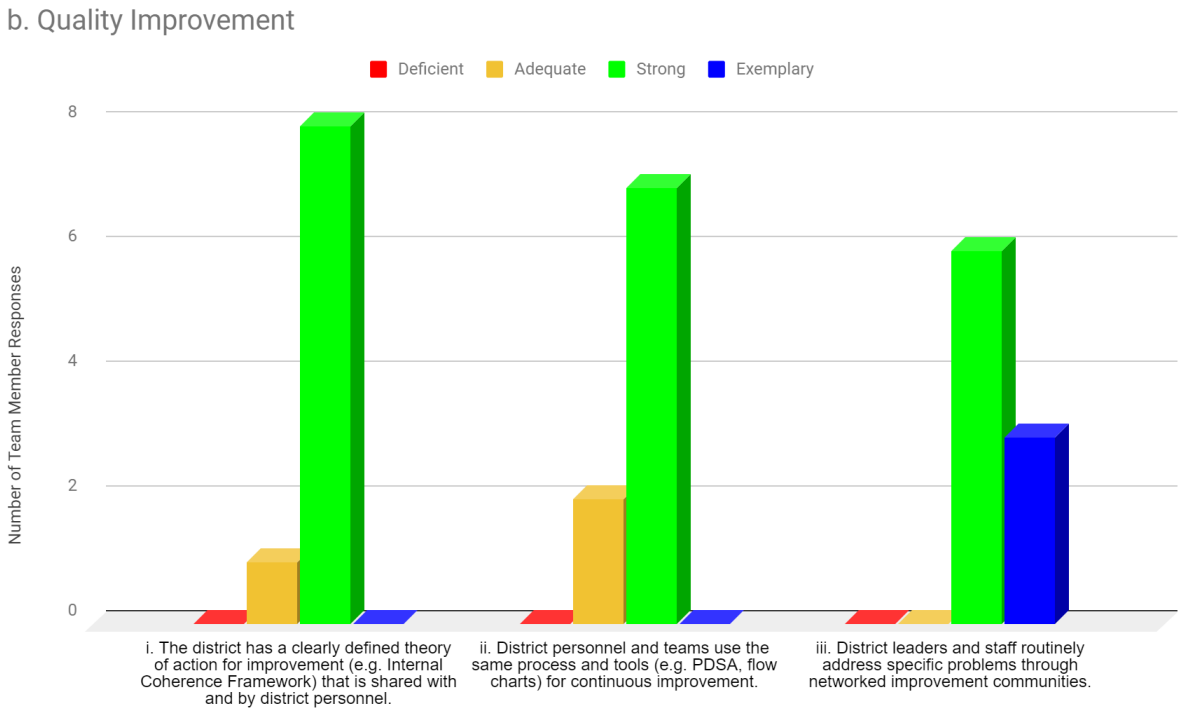
a. Organizational Leadership



There is strong organizational leadership within the district, with written processes and systems to guide the organization. The extent of the written processes is impressive. The materials prepared for the peer review do an excellent job of showcasing these processes. The instructional framework is well-defined and is clearly a continuous improvement process. The professional development plan incorporates an excellent use of current research. There is ample guidance and support from the district related to school improvement planning, but there was limited evidence presented that clarified a process of district follow-up for plan implementation.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are the foundational process that drives the instructional framework, professional development, and support for teachers as they implement the key strategies within the strategic plan. The Strategic Plan was built in a year-long process that involved input from key stakeholders in many forms including 17 special board meetings at schools, many public forums, and a year of work from nearly 100 individuals in its creation. The evaluation framework for administration/directors includes a clear process, including pre-post planning and goals for administrators that are aligned to the strategies within the strategic plan. These key strategies include but are not limited to PBIS, PLCs, and school safety.

b. Quality Improvement

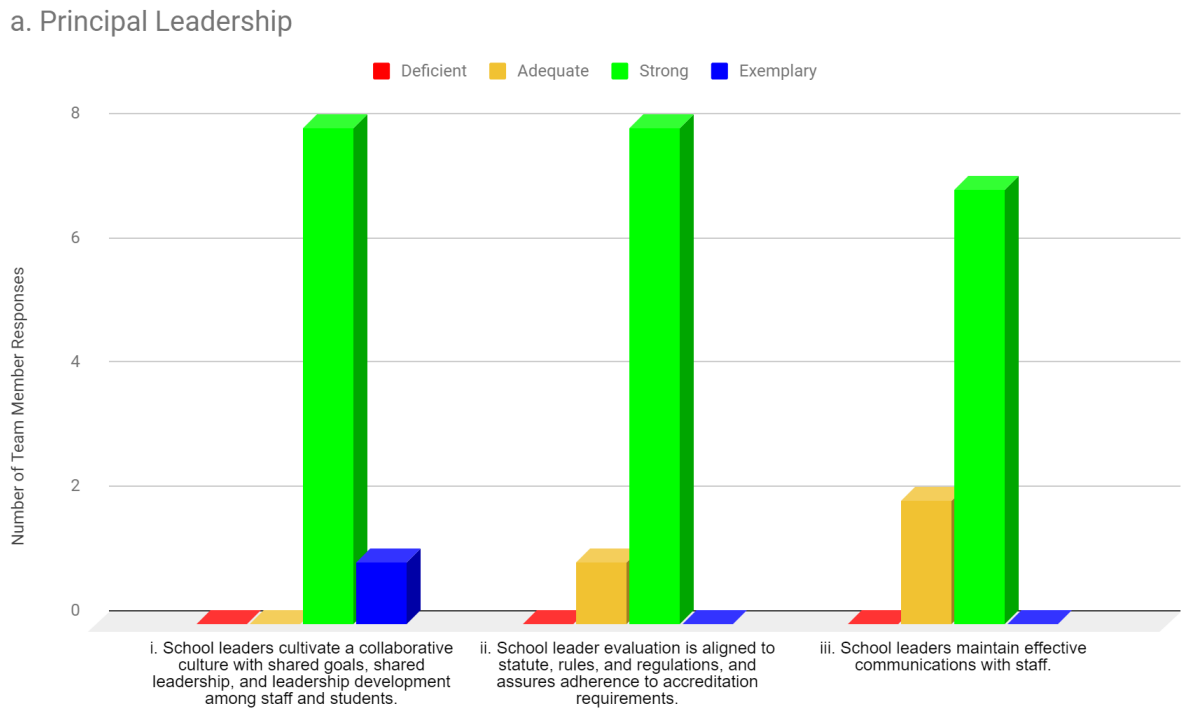


PLC's are the critical strategy for coherence and deployment of district improvement efforts both academically and behaviorally for students. Administrators meet every fall to develop their improvement plans, have them reviewed, and then go through the process to submit for final approval. Individual school plans act as the guide throughout the year to ensure improvement is taking place. The Community Curriculum Council oversees the curriculum adoption process and problem solves issues regarding curriculum resources and adoption.

Sweetwater CSD 1 use of task forces and participation in those task forces are exemplary. The team did not find an overall graphic or description of the improvement theory of action for the district, but it was included throughout the discussion. There were plenty of written district processes, and presumably, a PDSA cycle or similar approach is used to improve processes, but this wasn't discussed. As far as networked improvement communities, the district routinely brings together task forces to address specific needs and to devise plans to address specific issues. Examples provided were cost savings, a 4-day school week, and covid safe start. The leaders and staff at Sweetwater 1 are also highly involved in statewide education improvement efforts.

03. School Leadership

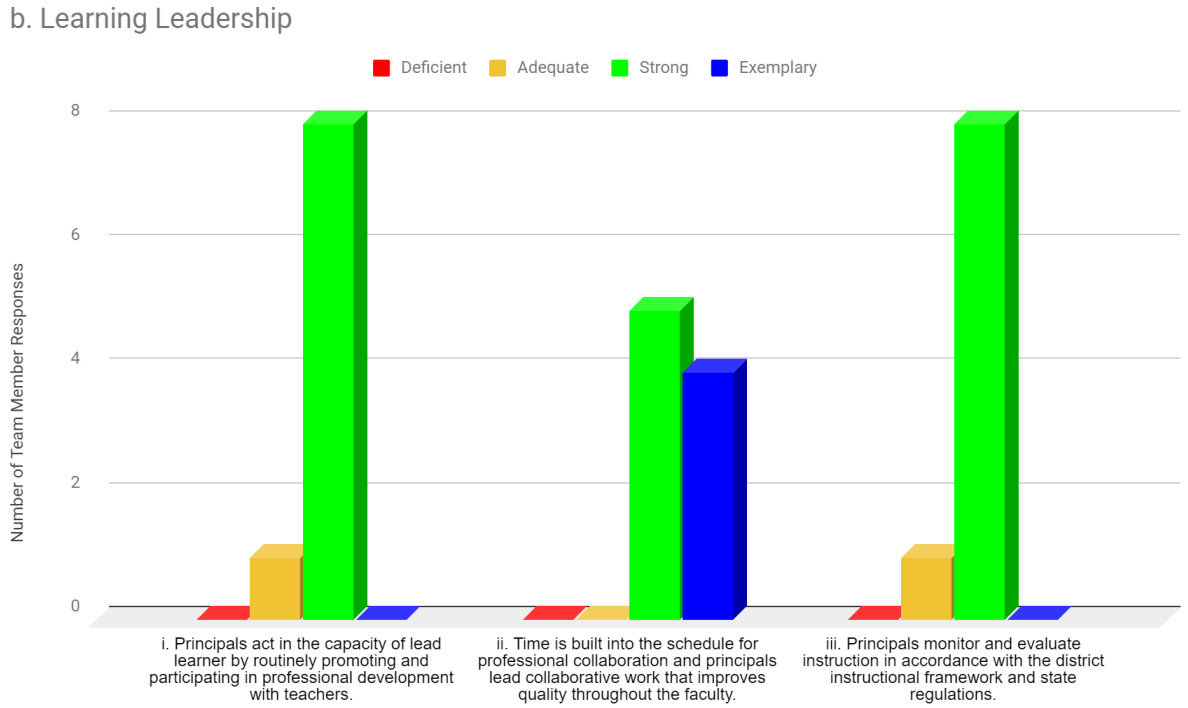
a. Principal Leadership



School leadership efforts are aligned to the strategic plan of the district. PLC's are the driving force behind the collaborative culture, shared goals, shared leadership, and leadership development within the district. They facilitate a collaborative culture with shared leadership and appear to be used systematically at all levels. The leader evaluation system meets the requirements of the statute.

School leaders have consistent communication with staff through newsletters, email, schoolwide calendars, Parent Square, and personal connections. Principals attend PLC team meetings, share weekly staff newsletters, share agendas/minutes for all meetings. PlanbookEdu facilitates communication with staff as principals can comment on lesson plans and teachers can give responses. Parent Square is used to share information from administration to staff, students, parents, and community as an all-encompassing communication forum for academics, activities, announcements, and athletics.

b. Learning Leadership

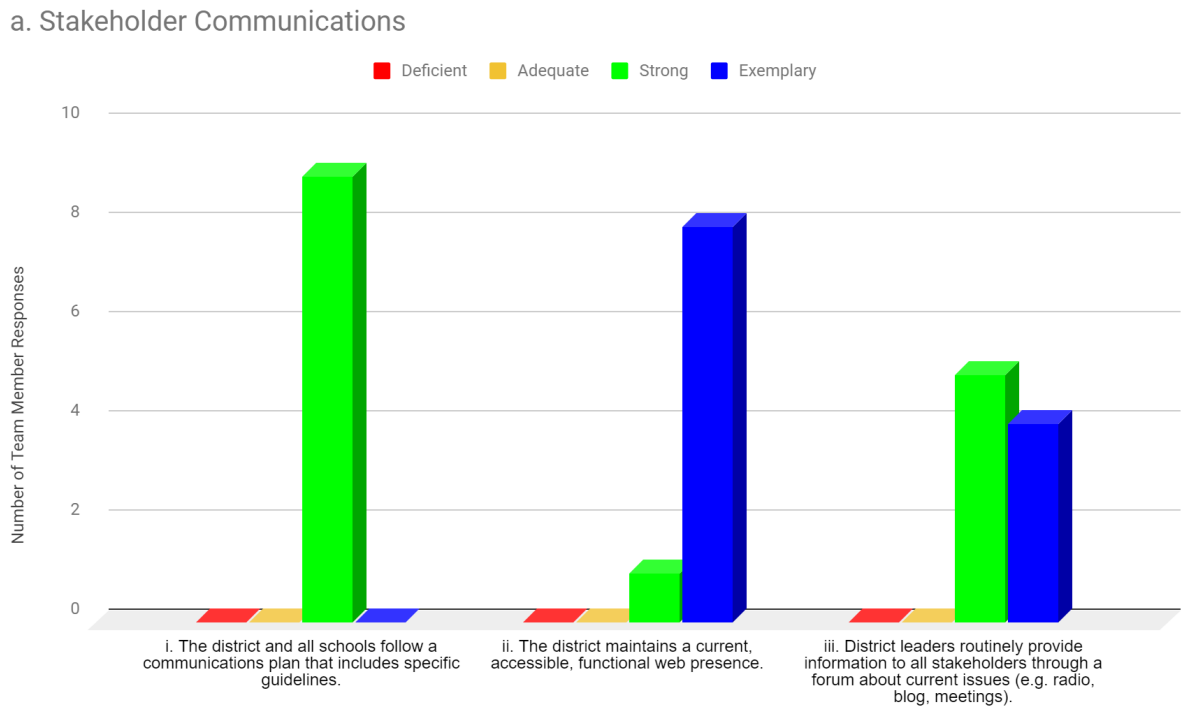


Principals value and attend PLC meetings for grade-level teams, vertical teams, and other non-academic teams. Through the 4-day week task force, it was determined a four-day student week calendar would be implemented for the 2021-22 school year. It was impressive that a district of this size could move to a 4-day school week calendar to assist with more time for PLCs. This is an exemplar example of how seriously this district and board are in supporting the implementation and fidelity of PLCs. This change will allow teachers to come in every other Friday for professional development and uninterrupted PLC time. This is an intentional shift to ensure teachers have appropriate time for collaborative work that improves the quality of outcomes for students. This has the potential to be a true game-changer for student outcomes in the district.

Teachers in all schools have participated in state PLC trainings - cohort #1, #2, and now #3. All schools are required, through the district plan, that PLCs take place at every building. Principals work hard to be at those PLCs to be a lead learner. Typically, the PLCs meet weekly for professional collaboration: K-6 schools have 100 minutes built into their daily schedule and middle schools have a block format to accommodate sustained PLC time during the day. The district is currently in the process of piloting the Wyoming SEES evaluation system for teachers.

04. Stakeholder Communications and Input

a. Stakeholder Communications

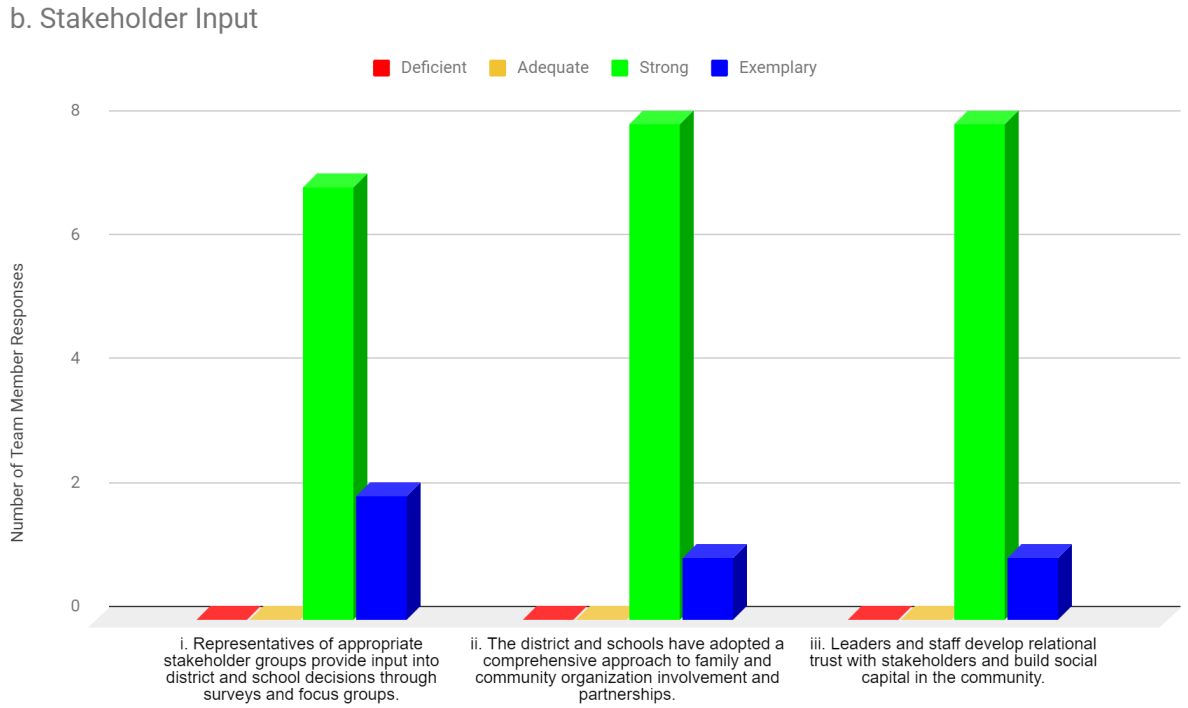


The district communication plan is well defined and documented through a flowchart; a succinct and efficient system has been created. This is a district strength. The functionality of the web page makes it informative and a good resource for all stakeholders. It is a best practice how the webpage includes teacher information along with links to the technology Rockstars pages. Communication to all stakeholders is consistently strong and Parent Square is an excellent tool.

District goals and priorities are driven by feedback from stakeholders. The district uses Parent Square, Facebook, District YouTube channel, newsletters, email, media outlets, and has forms available online for stakeholders to complete to share feedback to the district. Through the COVID pandemic, the feedback has been up to 1500 pieces of feedback per request.

The communications plan seems to define the expectations for communications, and the use of news releases ensures consistency in the information communicated. The website has volumes of information posted on the website, yet has very few accessibility errors as measured by the WAVE website accessibility diagnostic.

b. Stakeholder Input



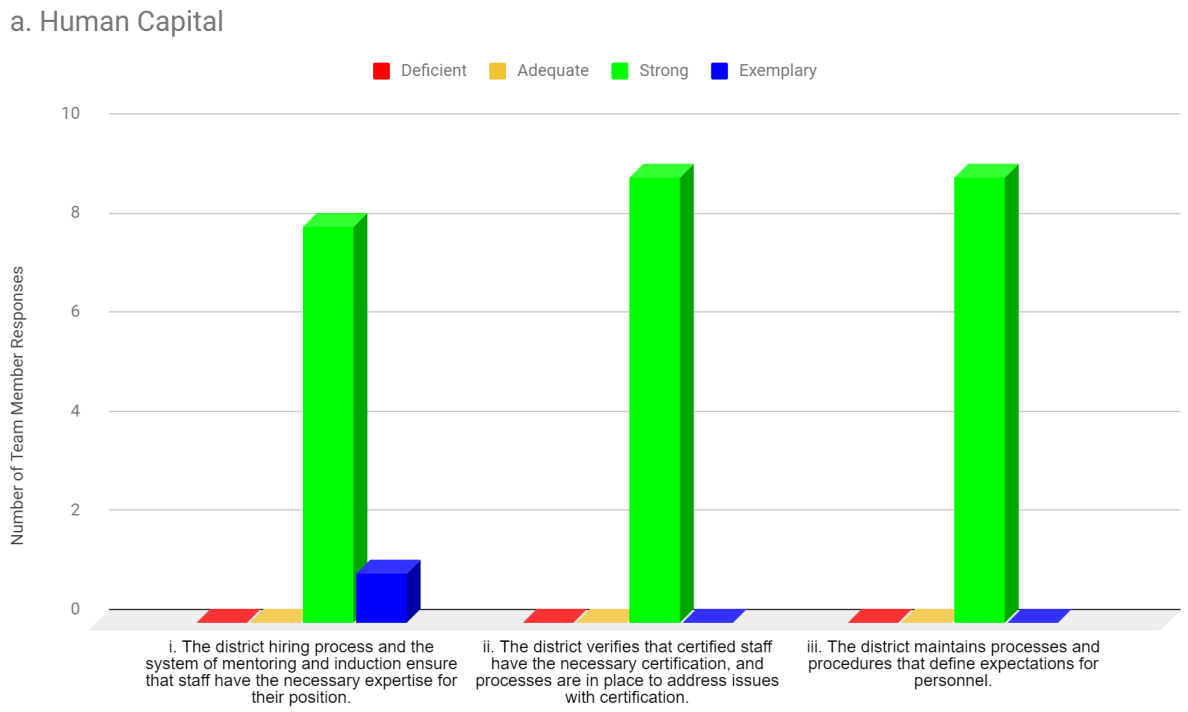
Stakeholder input is a strength in the district. The district has incorporated multiple Task Forces to gather stakeholder input and make recommendations to the school board in addition to the use of surveys. Two-way communication exists on Parent Square so parent questions can be answered in a timely manner. Recording of video messages from district staff to let the community "see" them virtually, especially during stressful times, is a best practice.

Social media accounts enable parents to communicate directly with the district. There are feedback forms that stakeholders can fill out to give specific input as needed. Also, secured documents can be sent through Parent Square such as report cards or SPED notifications. One of the driving forces for increased outreach to the community has been the CoVid 19 issue. The district's Smart Start Plan has been recognized by WDE as a model program for the schools in Wyoming as they work with their communities to open schools to onsite learning during the pandemic.

B. PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY

05. Employment and Certification

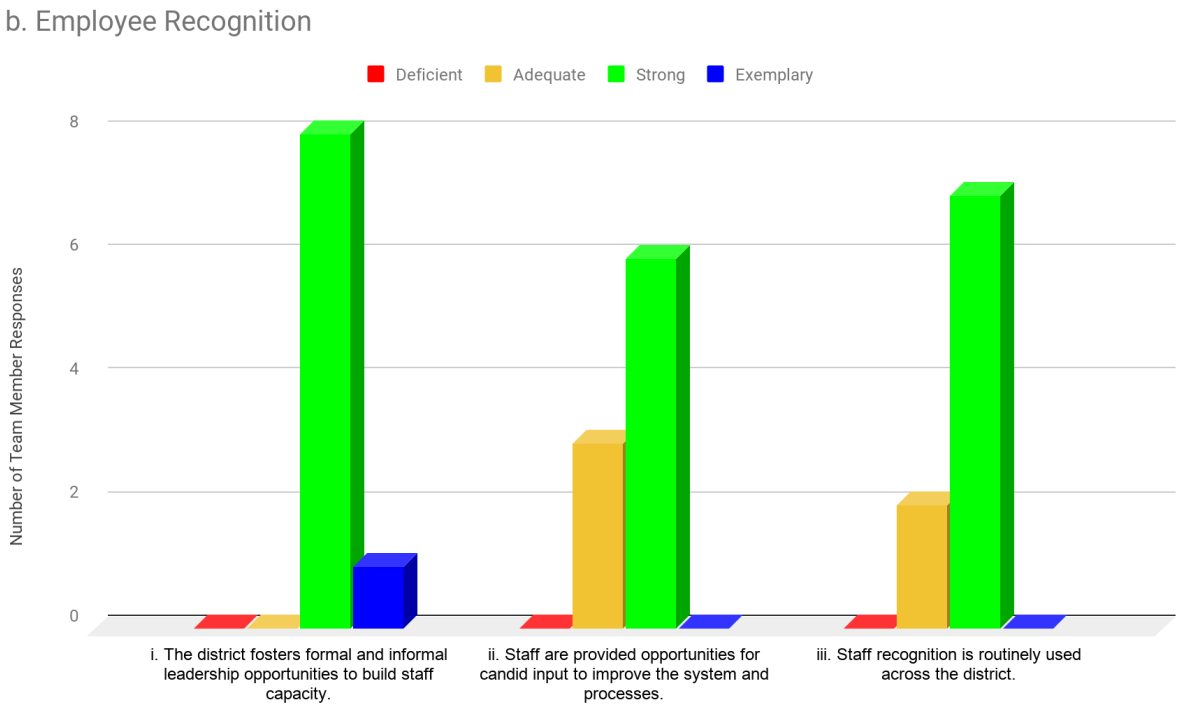
a. Human Capital



The district's human resource practices are strong. The personnel expectations are well-defined in policies available on the district website. There was limited discussion around the hiring process, but the Teacher Assistance Program (TAP) is a well-documented process for mentoring and induction that has been in place for an extended period of time. There are processes to verify certification and the district works with the Professional Teaching Standards Board (PTSB) to gain appropriate credentials for difficult to staff positions. The district uses long-term substitutes in emergency situations to staff hard-to-fill positions.

There is a well-documented and structured hiring process within the district. The interview team is diverse and the hiring process is structured to include teaching a short lesson. The district believes in growing staff member's skills and providing opportunities for leadership through PLCs and other leadership venues.

B. Employee Recognition

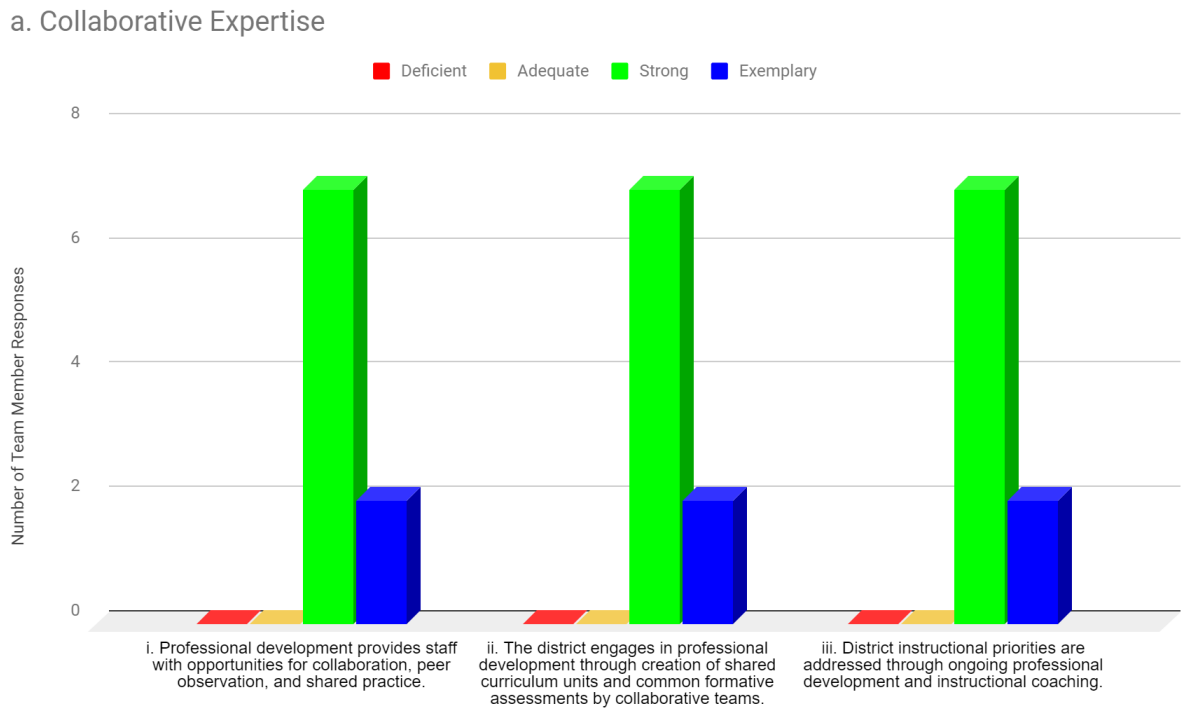


Formal structures from the district to recognize staff include staff members being recognized publicly for specific accomplishments by the trustees during monthly school board meetings. The district also recognizes staff annually through ceremonies for longevity and recognizes staff by providing leadership opportunities.

Each school has the autonomy to decide how staff will be recognized and therefore recognition seems more informal and specific to the building. Every week or two teachers are celebrated and recognized on Facebook for excellent use of PBIS strategies. There are also more informal strategies that are more building-specific, such as staff shout-outs from colleagues and congratulatory emails.

06. Professional Development

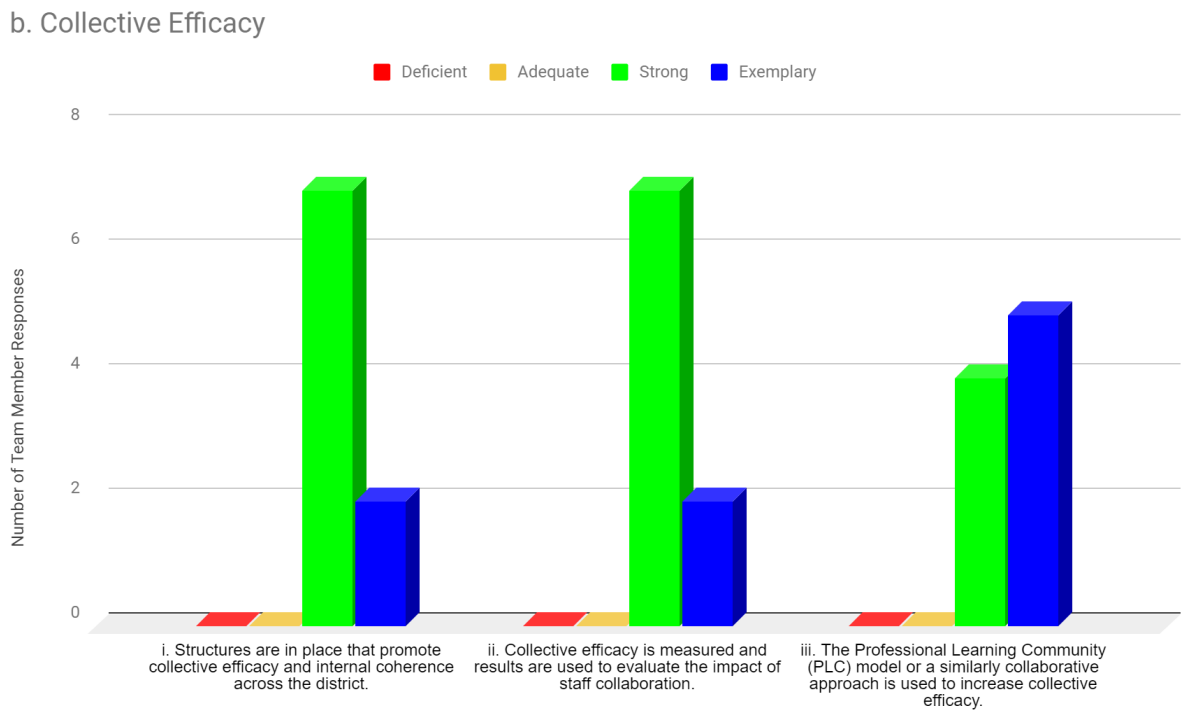
a. Collaborative Expertise



A thorough and documented professional development plan supports all the work in this area. The professional development plan outlines expectations, what types of training are provided, and the connection to the strategic plan. Training videos have been created by the tech department and teachers to showcase technology and support teaching. The district has provided national experts in the field to support key initiatives. All teachers are trained in new resources and any time teachers are struggling with curriculum, trainers come in to support a smooth transition.

This is an area of strength with well-implemented PLCs across the district. Collaborative teams develop curriculum and assessments, and district instructional priorities are addressed through professional development. The RTI model within the PLC framework appears to provide multiple opportunities for collaboration. The teacher academies address teacher needs and want via survey data allowing individuals an active role in their professional development. Many teachers spoke of feeling supported by their peers and in receiving meaningful professional development related to their own interests and needs. Due to the need for technology tools to support student learning during the pandemic, the district created the Technology Rockstars team. The team made videos to support teacher needs in technology.

b. Collective Efficacy



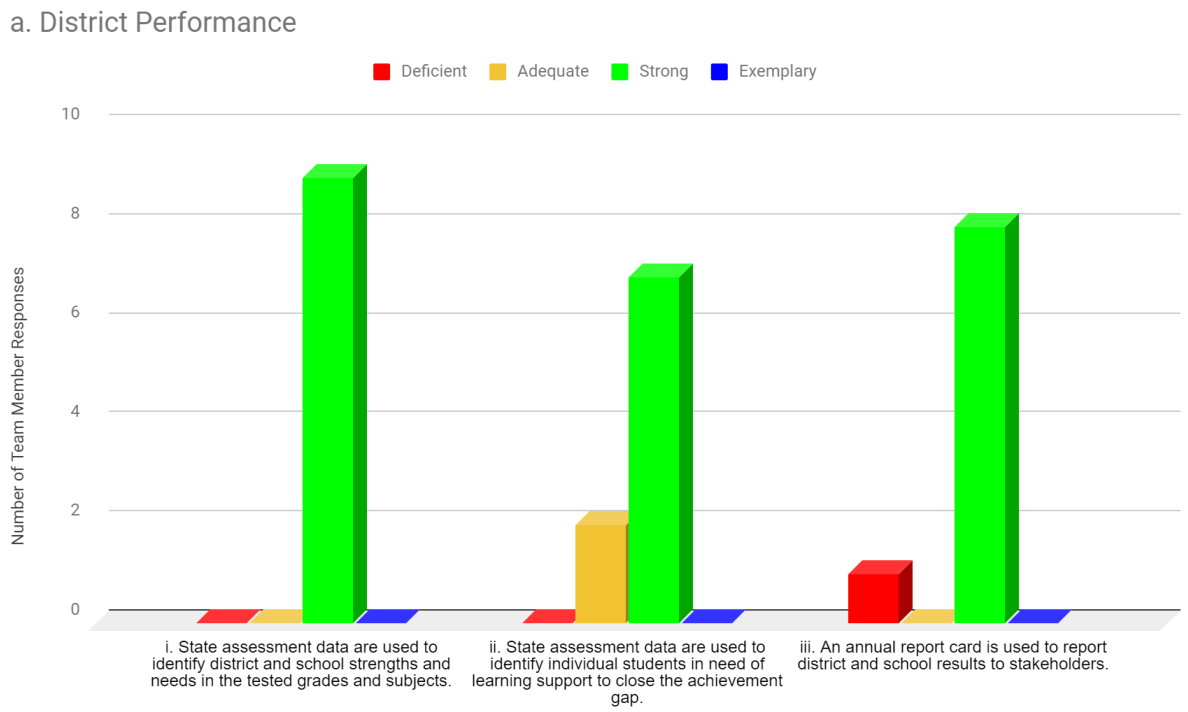
This area is a strength for the district for a couple of important reasons. First, collective efficacy is measured and tracked in the district. Collective efficacy is measured using the Collective Efficacy Scale and some of the enabling conditions are evaluated using PLC rubrics and surveys. Second, the district is deeply vested in the PLC process. Staff across the district work together in PLCs to promote collaboration to increase student achievement. The district's commitment to collaborative processes is highlighted by its move to an alternative 4-day student week calendar for next year. This heavy lift by the district is clear evidence in the belief that a truly collaborative culture is the key to student success.

The district may want to consider investigating a book from Jenni Donohoo titled "Collective Efficacy: How Educators' Beliefs Impact Student Learning" (2016) which links efficacy survey results to school improvement planning.

C. ACCOUNTABILITY AND IMPROVEMENT

07. State Assessment and Accountability

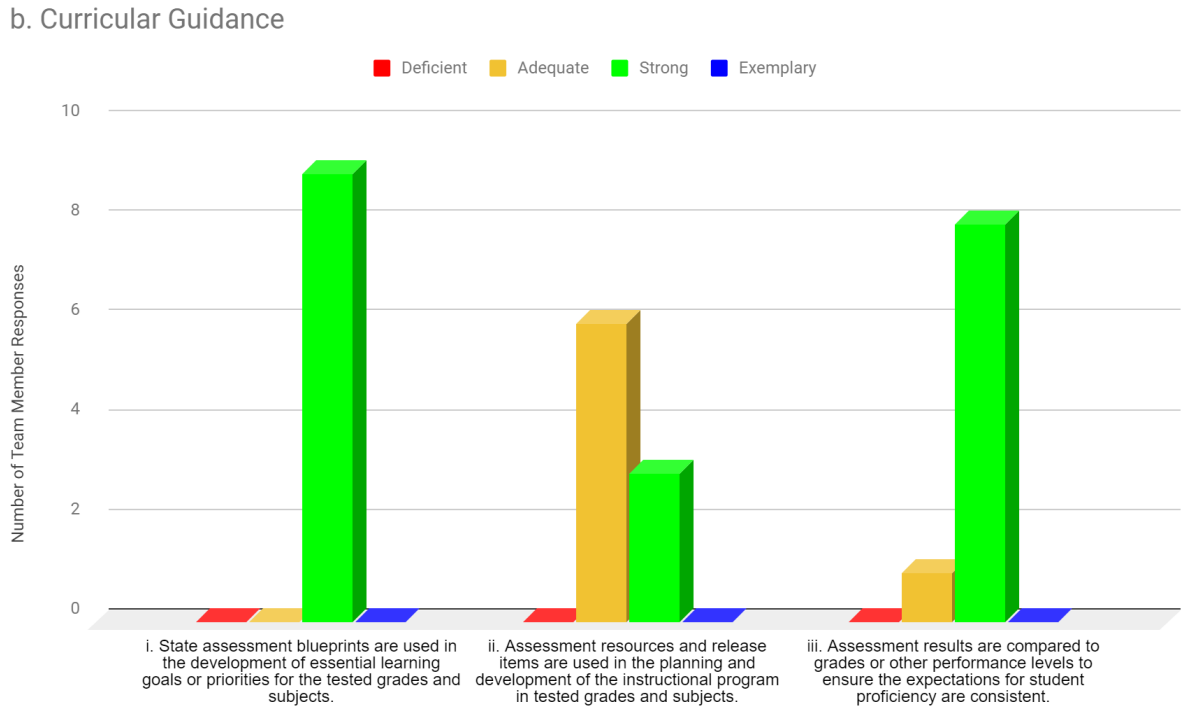
a. District Performance



There was substantial discussion during the presentations of the use of state assessment data in determining needs for school improvement planning. These discussions included how state assessment data are used, in conjunction with other data, to identify individual students or groups of students in need of intervention. The annual report card on the website provides information as to school and district performance for stakeholders.

School improvement plans exist for every building across the district. The plans are aligned to the district strategic plan and unique to that school with focus areas driven by individual school performance data. The district uses a consistent continuous improvement cycle -- data teams protocol, data process, and a master schedule that has collaborative times built into it. Through grants, there is also time outside of the regular workday for staff to continue to plan further. This process is evolving at each level of the district.

b. Curricular Guidance

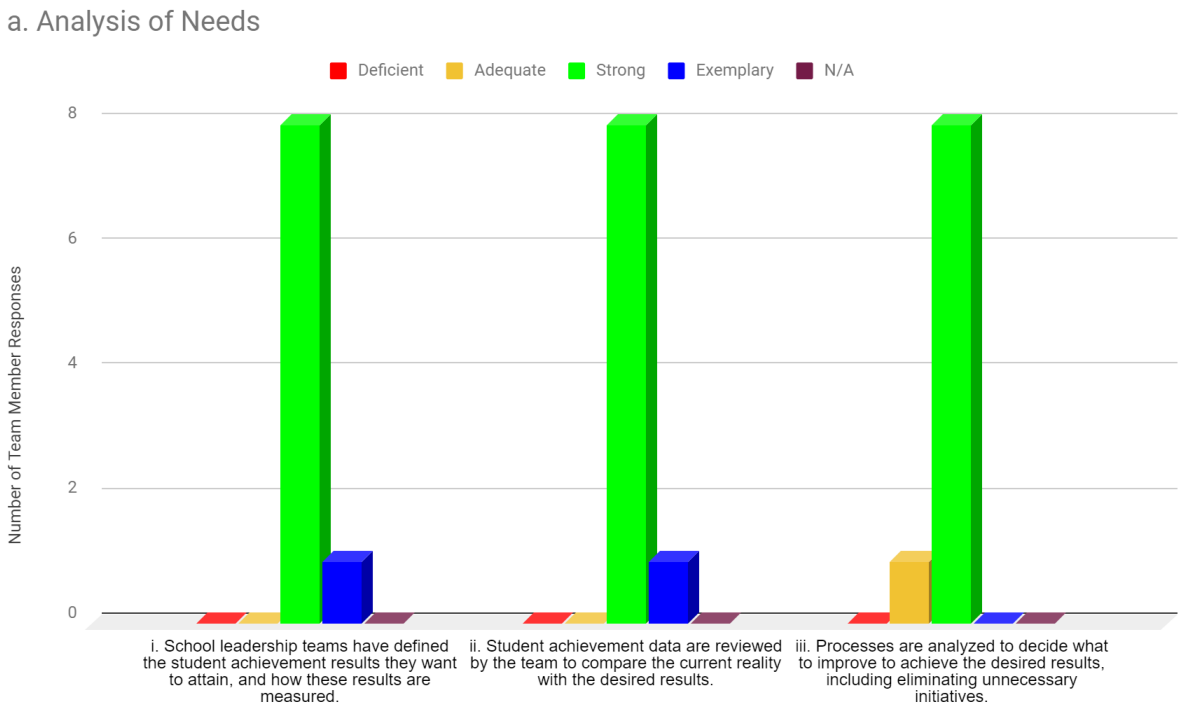


The district uses the Curriculum Leadership Institute to help focus curriculum in each content area. Clear protocols are in place for curriculum review and to build capacity in their district. They have subject area committees to review curriculum, discuss data, and drill down to student level understanding. District teams worked together to review standards, create maps, and find resources. Assessment blueprints are used to define which standards need additional focus and are evidenced on curriculum maps.

There was some discussion of the use of state assessment blueprints in the development of priority standards. The team did not find evidence of the use of release items or any other discussion as to where comparable assessment items come from for the district common assessments. There was not much discussion as to the correlation between grades or levels of performance as measured by the district assessment system and state assessment results.

08. School Improvement and Support

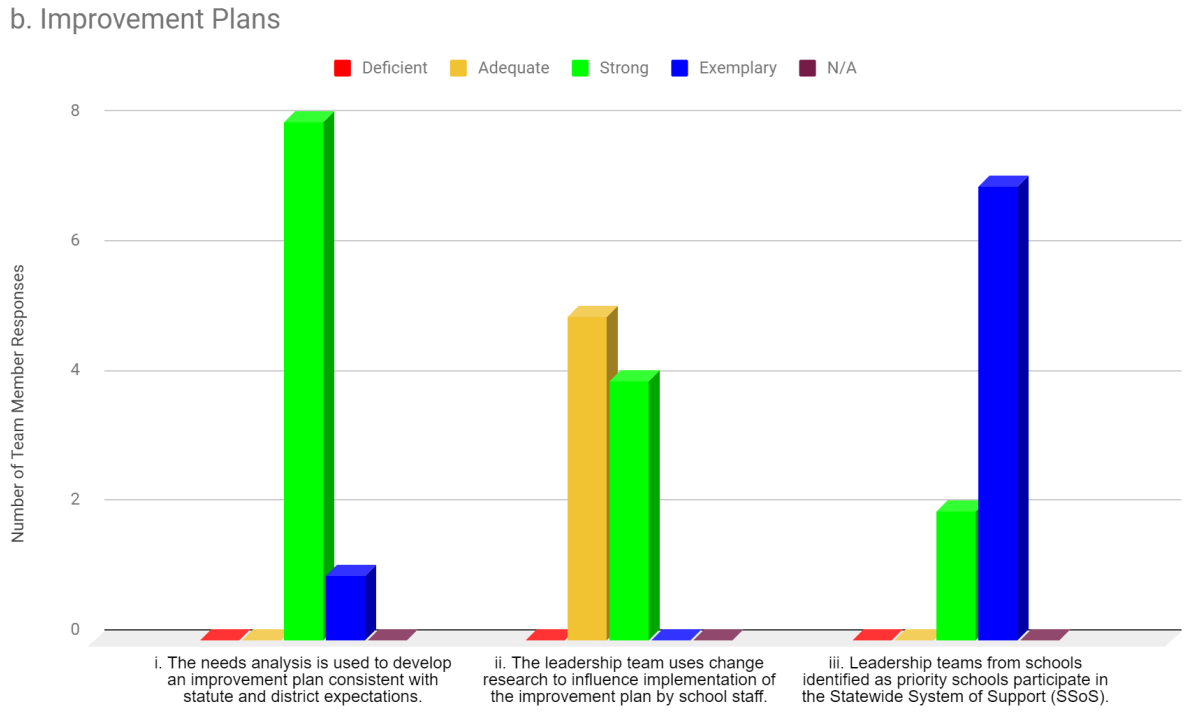
a. Analysis of Needs



The school improvement plan development process, including needs analysis, used by the district is impressive with adequate district support to ensure that all schools have quality improvement plans. As schools prepare to update school improvement plans a complete analysis of student data is performed. Equity, growth, and achievement data are disaggregated by the district after being pulled from the state and district assessments. Surveys are also given to elicit input from staff. Within the schools, PLCs are used as the systematic process to examine student data.

Each building has created its own school improvement plan that addresses the needs/goals of their building, including the achievement results they want to attain. These plans come to life in the schools during PLC meetings which occur during regular school time or professional development time in the district calendar. Staff in PLCs break down the data into differentiated student subgroups. The teams then compare the current reality with the desired results, creating SMART goals for students.

b. Improvement Plans



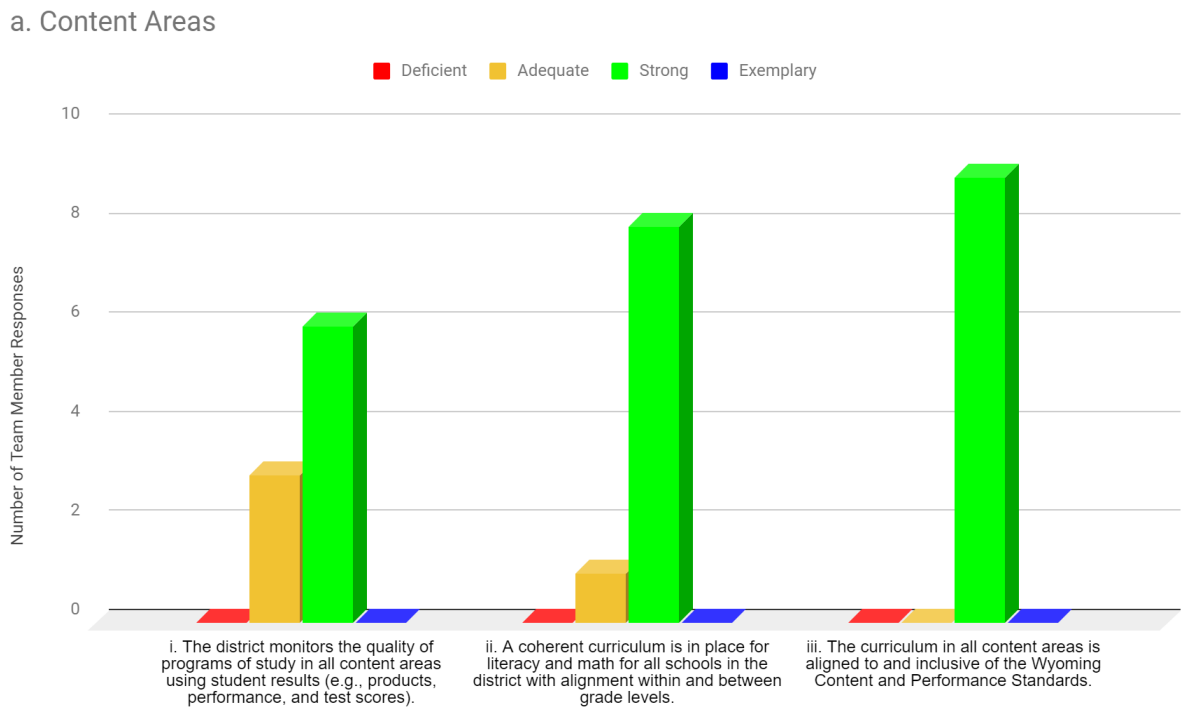
The district is to be commended on its active participation in the Statewide System of Support, hosting multiple trainings and events over the past few years, and systematically implementing the practices learned at these trainings. Using this support structure is a best practice and is reflected in the excellent processes the district is using in the development of its PLC structure.

School improvement planning occurs within the PLC framework in each school. All schools participate in a formal needs analysis per each school improvement plan that is aligned to the district strategic plan. However, specific goals and expectations are individualized to each school based on their specific student needs as determined by a strong data analysis and review process. The team found evidence of plans being implemented but did not hear evidence of the implementation process or the approach to monitoring the plans.

D. INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

09. Programs, Standards, and Curriculum

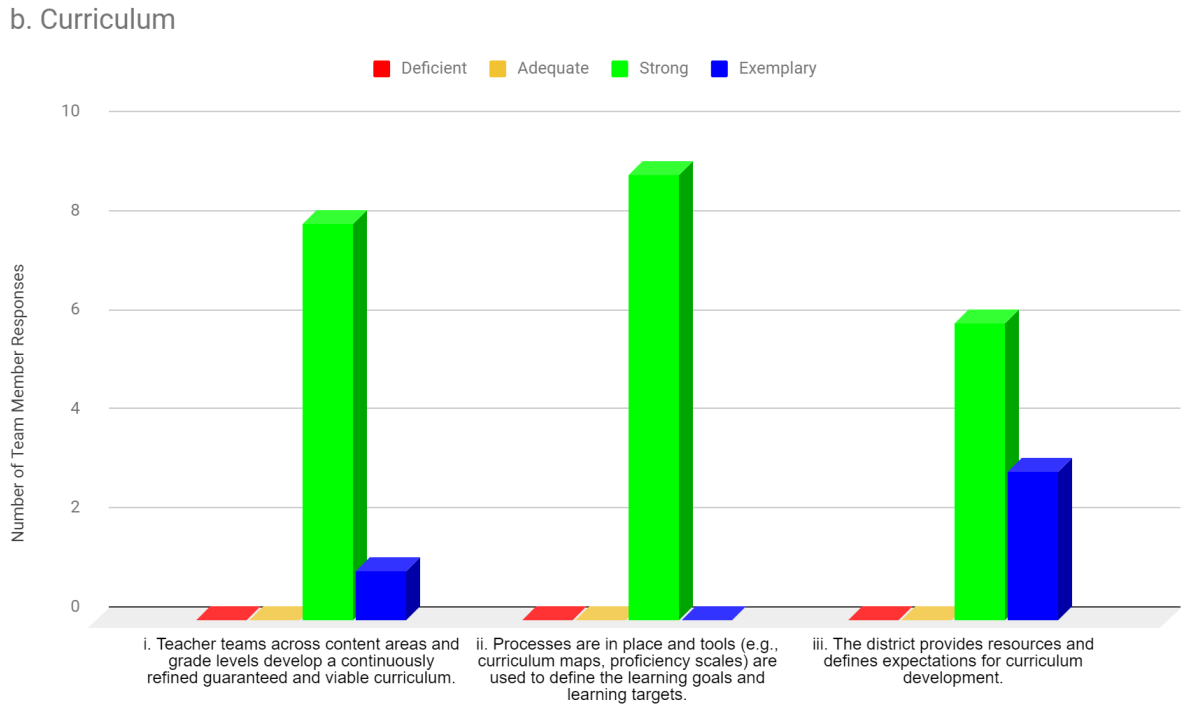
a. Content Areas



There are curriculum frameworks that reflect the expectations and alignment to standards for all content areas. The tested content areas have measures of program quality. There was limited discussion of the way program quality is determined in the non-tested content areas. The curriculum for math and literacy is well-defined. Curriculum maps and assessments are a collaborative effort at the grade and subject level across the district.

The district uses a Community Curriculum Council (CCC) and a subject area committee (SAC) to monitor the quality of the curriculum. SAC reviews the curriculum maps, learning targets, and assessments. Whereas the CCC serves as a guiding coalition for curriculum by reviewing the data and provides support and guidance. The CCC and SAC committees have broad representation from K-12 educators with 7-20 members on each. Through the use of CLI, processes are in place to help align curriculum to standards, support instruction, and provide assessments to inform improvement.

b. Curriculum

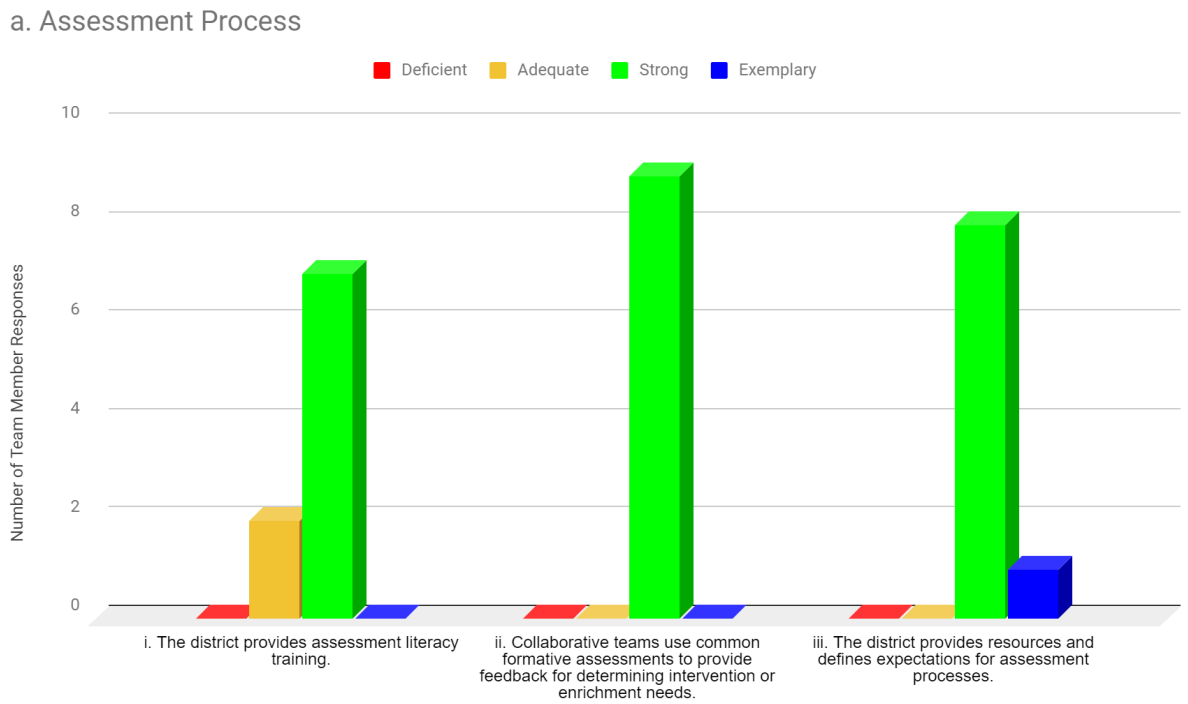


A clearly defined curriculum is a strength in the district. There is a guaranteed and viable curriculum developed for each content area, with curriculum maps maintained by the district. The discussion of proficiency scales indicated that they are new and seeing various levels of use across the district. The Curriculum Leadership Institute (CLI) process for curriculum development is well-defined and well-implemented. The same curriculum and the same overarching expectations are utilized across the district, with each building and each classroom implementing them individually. Curriculum maps and pacing guides were shared as was the process of PLCs to continuously refine teaching and learning.

Teachers meet in PLCs during the school day, where possible, along with SAC committee meetings to analyze curriculum as needed. The committees ensure that the curriculum is continuously refined and discussed based on current standards. Through the use of CLI, curriculum maps, pacing guides, and assessments are in place to help support teaching and learning. The district provides PD and additional days are set aside to support teachers in curriculum development.

10. District Assessment System

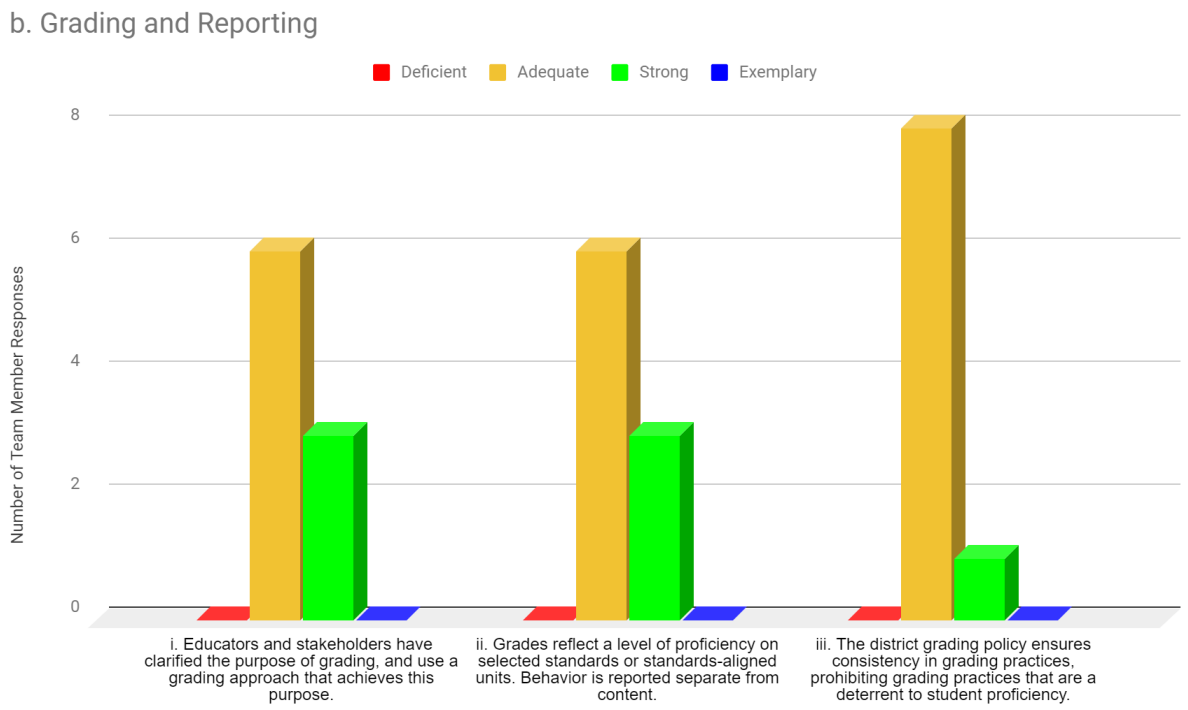
a. Assessment Process



There was evidence that staff attended assessment literacy training provided by Jan Hoegh and that there is assessment literacy derived from the work with CLI. The assessment system consists of classroom assessments, team developed short-cycle common assessments and district common assessments, as well as large-scale assessments. The results of the assessment system are used to determine interventions and enrichment. There is strong evidence that the district provides coherent guidance around assessment processes.

The SAC committee writes the common formative assessments and teachers implement and then brings back feedback to the SAC committee on any changes that need to take place. PLC collaborative process for creating/scoring classroom common assessments is evident. Content/Grade level teams collaborate on assessments and score together for inter-rater reliability. As the district moves to a 4-day student week calendar next year, they may want to focus assessment development in short cycle common unit-sized classroom common assessments that can be modified at the grade level PLC or school content level PLC to enhance teacher ownership in the CFAs.

b. Grading and Reporting

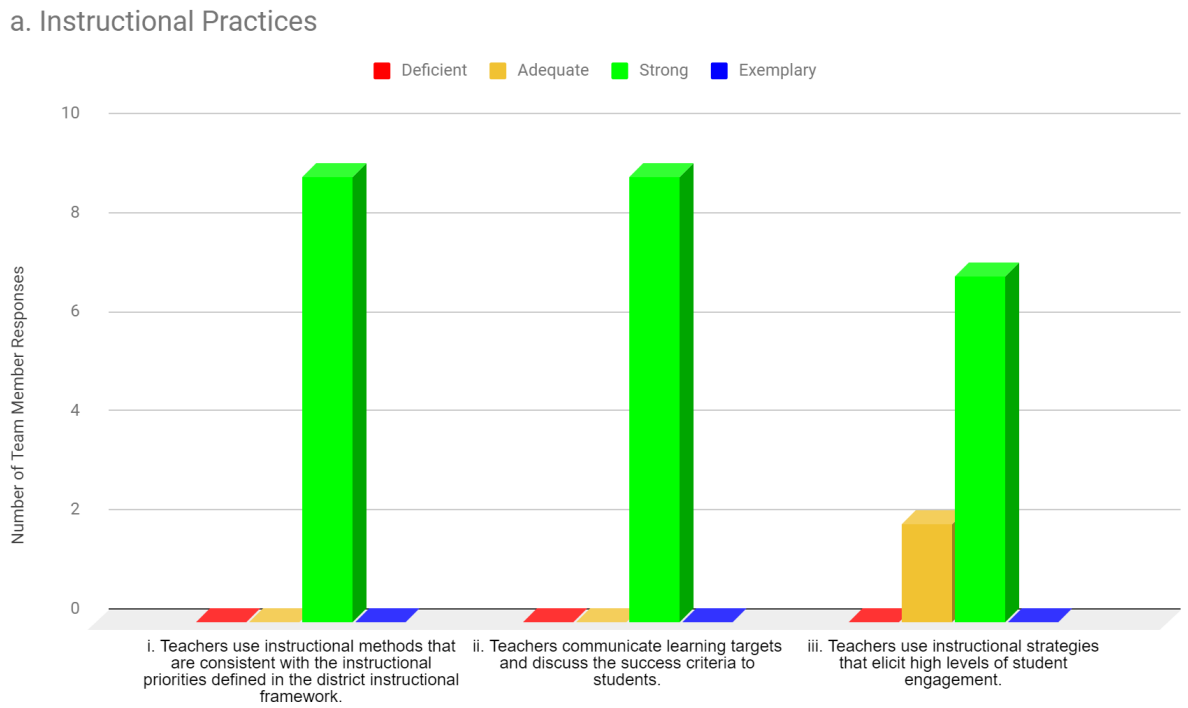


There seems to be agreement on a standards-referenced approach to grading at the elementary and some opportunities for improvement at the secondary level. The grades clearly reflect levels of performance on the standards at the elementary, but there was little evidence at the secondary which would lead peer review team members to question if there is consistency in grading practices at the secondary level. It was clear that the district discourages practices that are a deterrent to grading academics with other measures not connected to proficiency on standards.

A standards-based report card is in place for grades K-6. The elementary teachers spoke to standards-based grading and the use of rubrics and proficiency scales as well as the separation of behavior being separated from academic scoring. Common district assessments are utilized and interrater reliability processes occur at the elementary level. RTI groups switch based on students' needs, as assessed by the PLC team's data review.

11. Instructional Methods

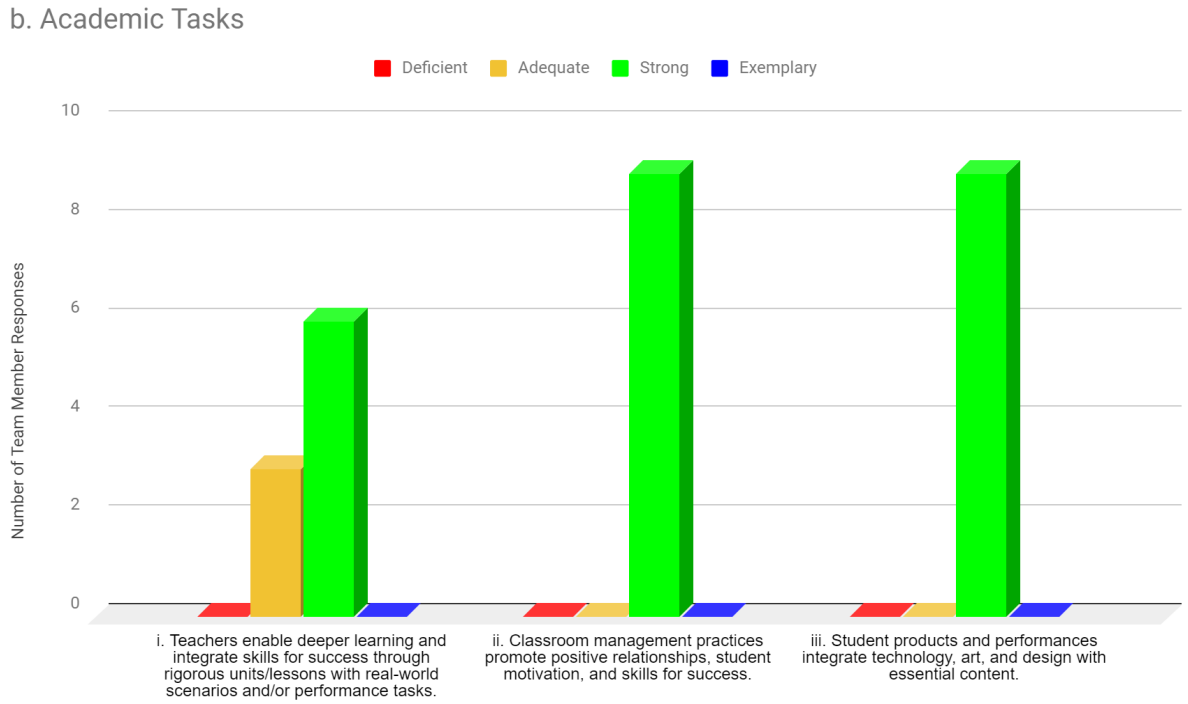
a. Instructional Practices



The district has a clear expectation regarding instructional practices. The team could observe lessons during the visit and found this helpful in finding evidence under this criterion. Strong, explicit instruction using various best practices is evident, such as checking for prior knowledge, checking for understanding, appropriate affirmation, and a gradual release of responsibility. Administrator input on lesson planning and an administrator checklist for walk-throughs were discussed. Teachers communicated learning targets to start the lesson and mentioned them throughout the lesson, providing great visual cues. Multiple instructional strategies were observed with teacher modeling, think-alouds, pair-share discussions, guided practice moving toward more independent practice.

The four PLC questions guide the instructional practices in the district. The teachers indicated that they use the instructional framework as a base and use success criteria so that students know expectations. It is an expectation in the district that lesson planning is done effectively. In lessons and lesson plans, teachers are expected to have success criteria, proficiency scales, and exit slips related to the learning target(s). High impact strategies and engagement is "looked for" during walkthroughs with positive and specific reinforcement.

b. Academic Tasks

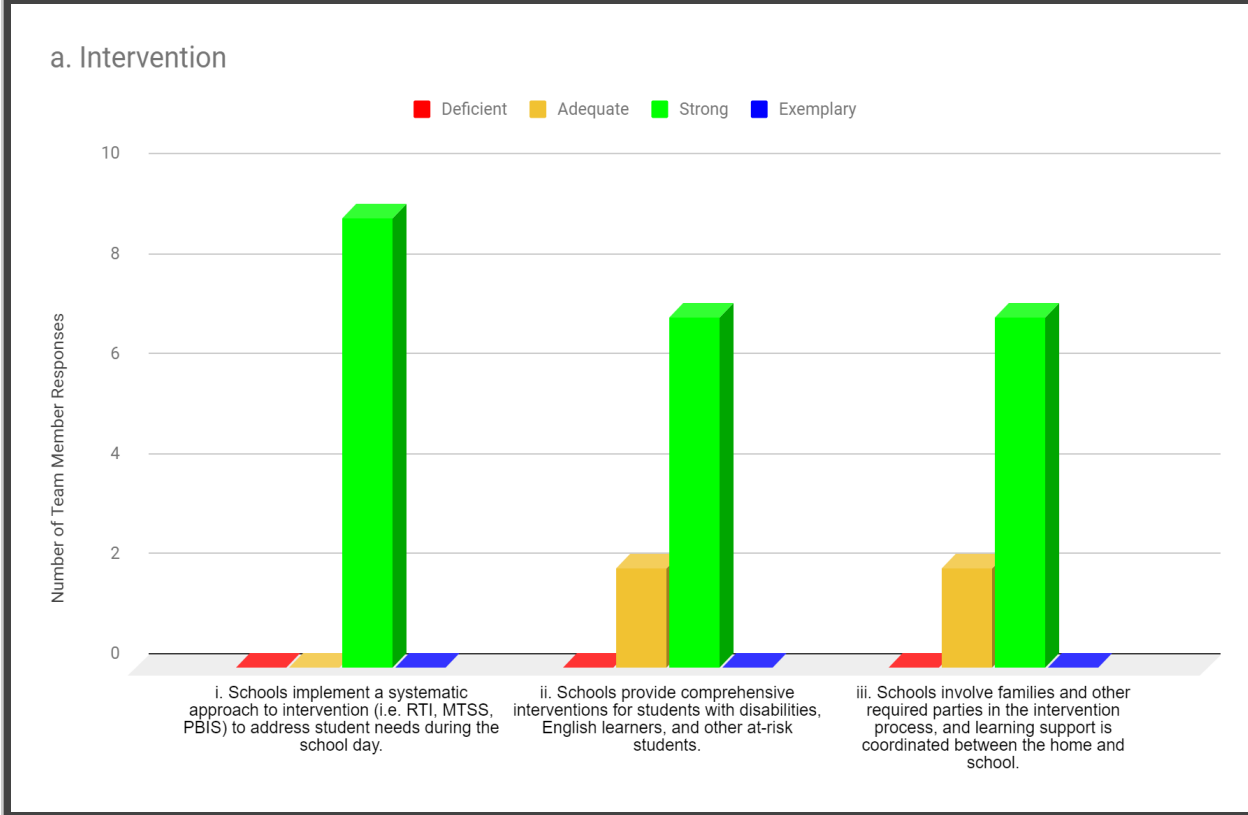


This criterion is difficult for the team to identify in a virtual visit because of the inability to see examples of student work. However, the indirect evidence indicates a high quality of instruction and relationship building in the classrooms. Positive relationships, building connections with students, and celebrating successes appear to be a foundation throughout the K-12 system. Teachers used a variety of affirmations and specific praise; positive rapport was evident in each of the observed classrooms. Interactions between teacher and student, and student to student were positive and encouraging. The classrooms observed have climates of kindness and caring.

Walkthroughs are used to identify high-impact strategies and check for rigor and real-world scenarios. Opportunities for community connections are evident. The integration of technology for instructional purposes has been accelerated by the pandemic and virtual learning that has taken place. Student and teacher technology skills have improved dramatically over the past two academic years. Technology is integrated into each classroom the team observed and is utilized to support essential content.

12. Learning Support

A

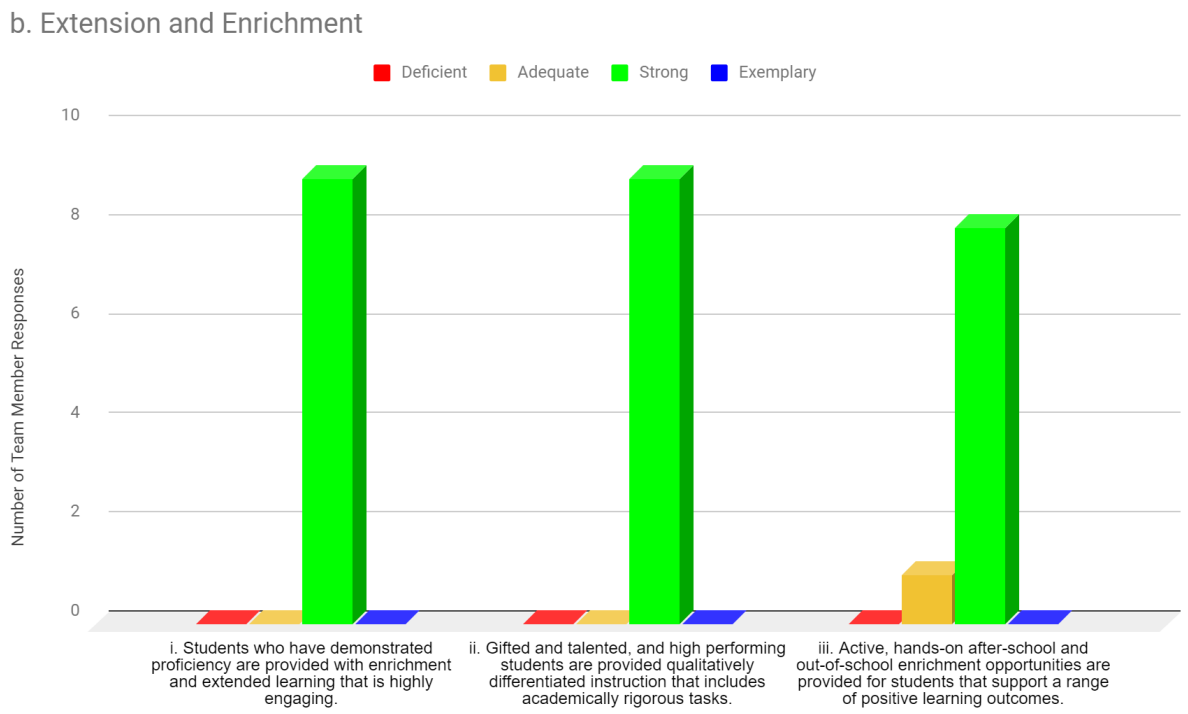


. Intervention

PBIS is built-in across all grade levels using the same framework, with early intervention. Dedicated time in the PLC process involves RTI discussions and parent involvement. Common formative assessments and a pacing guide help PLCs identify Tier I, II, & III groupings. Individuals not meeting growth targets are discussed and progress-monitoring is implemented with parental input. A block schedule is currently being implemented at the MS/HS level to provide 20-25 min. of Tier II Intervention with teacher's prep times aligned to allow flooding during the intervention block.

There is a built-in flex time at the elementary to support both struggling and advanced students. Students are progress monitored to ensure groupings are consistently based on students' needs as learners. Additional intervention time will be available for high school students next year with the 4-day student week calendar. Students at the upper levels have interventions built into their schedules. Students get additional courses to support core.

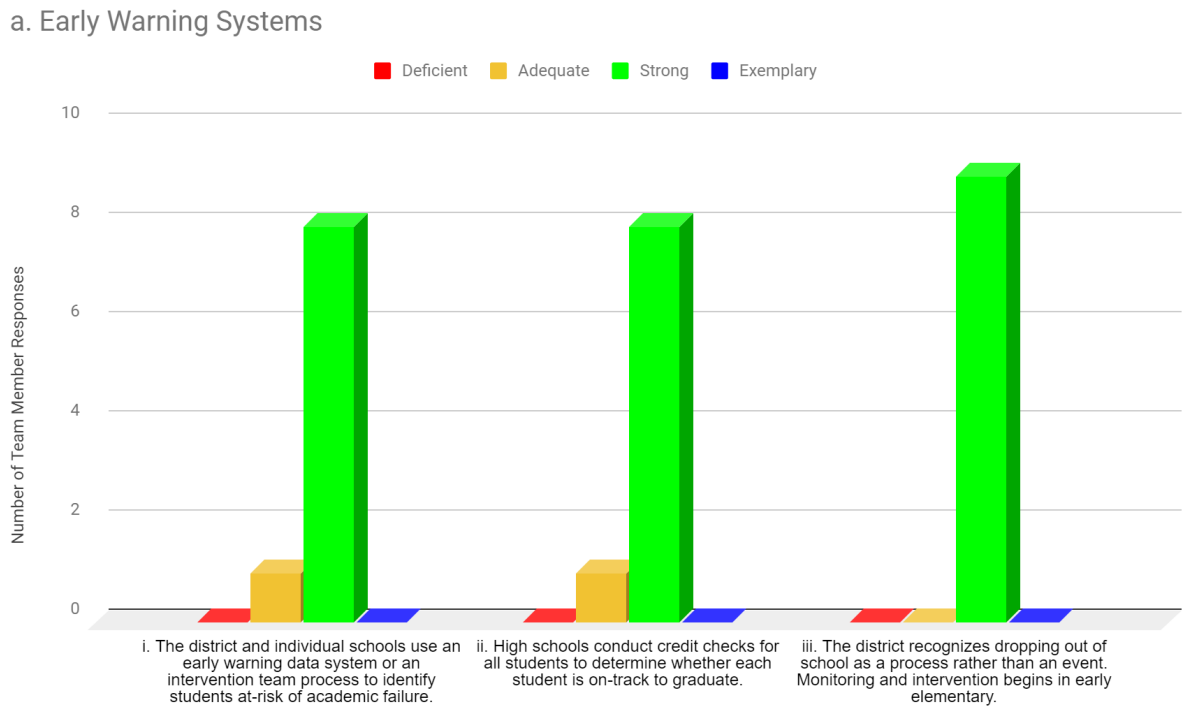
b. Extension and Enrichment



Extensions and enrichment is reflected in the gifted and talented program at the elementary schools. In addition, the middle school and high school students receive advanced coursework based on their ability to perform at higher levels. There is also differentiation of instruction training for teachers to help them meet the needs of all students within their regular classroom instruction. STEAM, STEM, Dual Enrollment, AP courses, and acceleration opportunities after school are all examples of extensions and enrichments provided by the district.

13. At-risk and Dropout Prevention

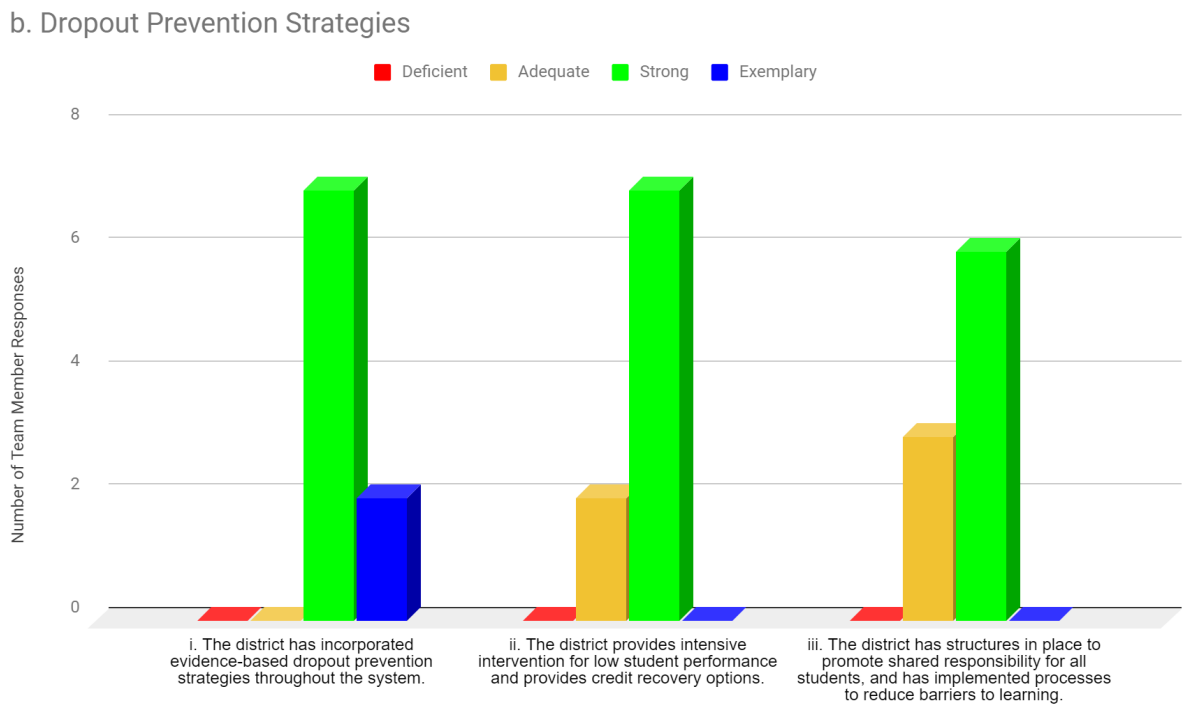
a. Early Warning Systems



The district focuses on several key strategies as a part of the early warning system. They include community outreach, PBIS, Social, Mental, and Emotional health strategies. In addition, a screener for suicidal tendencies to flag students who are considering self-harm is used across the district. Early intervention programs include Head Start and Tiger Tots as well as other early warning systems built within the PLC process to support early academic intervention. In addition, the district provides mentoring programs, extended day offerings, credit recovery, summer school, and other extracurricular activities for support such as peer tutoring.

At the secondary level, a graduation coach for at-risk students has been added. Separate diploma tracks, attendance policy changes, additional counselors, and an advocacy program have been recently added. All these programs and more are needed to overcome some of the challenges the district has faced to increase its graduation rate.

b. Dropout Prevention Strategies



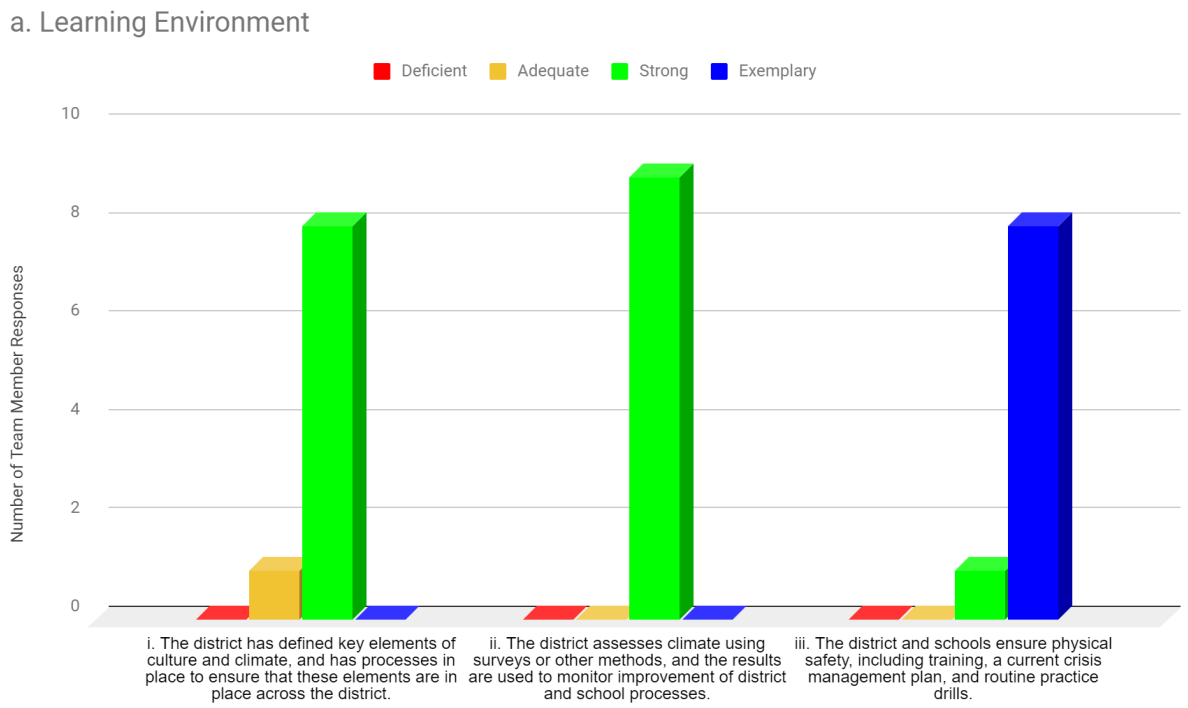
Credit recovery, summer school, and Friday school options are offered along with a Graduation Coach at the MS/HS level who works to connect with at-risk students. Attendance changes in individual student plans are considered as well as two different diploma tracks based on student academic and social needs. Counselors, administration, and the AMP team work together to identify students at-risk and to intervene early. Community connections are offered for job-shadowing in the high schools as well as additional local experts for activities/clubs/other interests, elementary through high school. The Advocacy Program was also discussed with teacher-student and peer-peer opportunities. Besides busing, it is unclear what processes the district has implemented to reduce barriers to learning such as kids who do not have necessary school supplies, clean clothes, and other fundamental needs.

Transition plans throughout the district operate at each level. Teachers spoke specifically to middle level to high school transition. Helping students transition into a new culture to prepare them for high school was considered a priority. The high school has started a Freshman Recovery Academy after school during the second semester for freshman students who need credit recovery for 1st semester classes.

E. CULTURE AND CLIMATE

14. School Culture, Climate and Safety

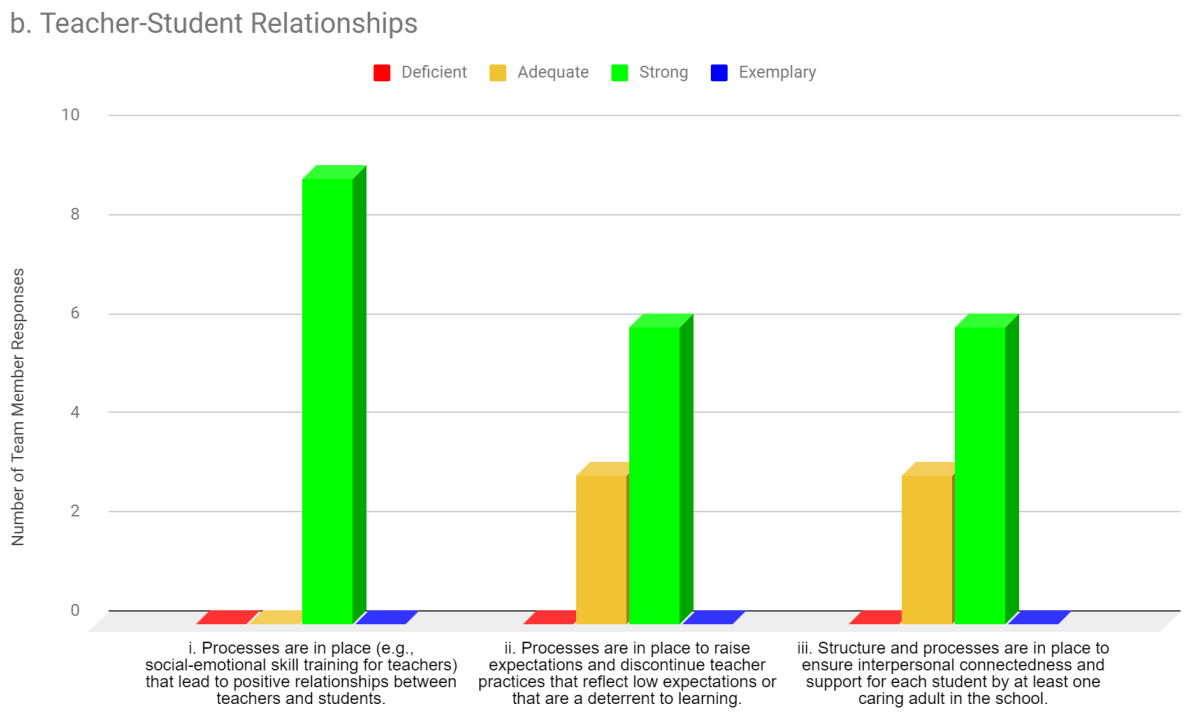
a. Learning Environment



The district has placed a strong focus on school safety. The district brought in John Michael Keys to work on safety protocols within the district and have moved to a standard-response protocol with the use of common language throughout the district. Monthly safety drills with community-wide involvement and reunification drills for students with their parents at another location are practiced. The district works closely with school resource officers, other community law enforcement, and emergency responders to coordinate safety efforts. These efforts are exemplary and should be shared across the state of Wyoming.

The district's Smart Start Re-Entry Plan has been recognized by the Wyoming Department of Education as an exemplar. Excellent work has been done on facility safety by modifying building vestibules, adopting keyless entry, and improving screening protocols for visitors

b. Teacher-Student Relationships

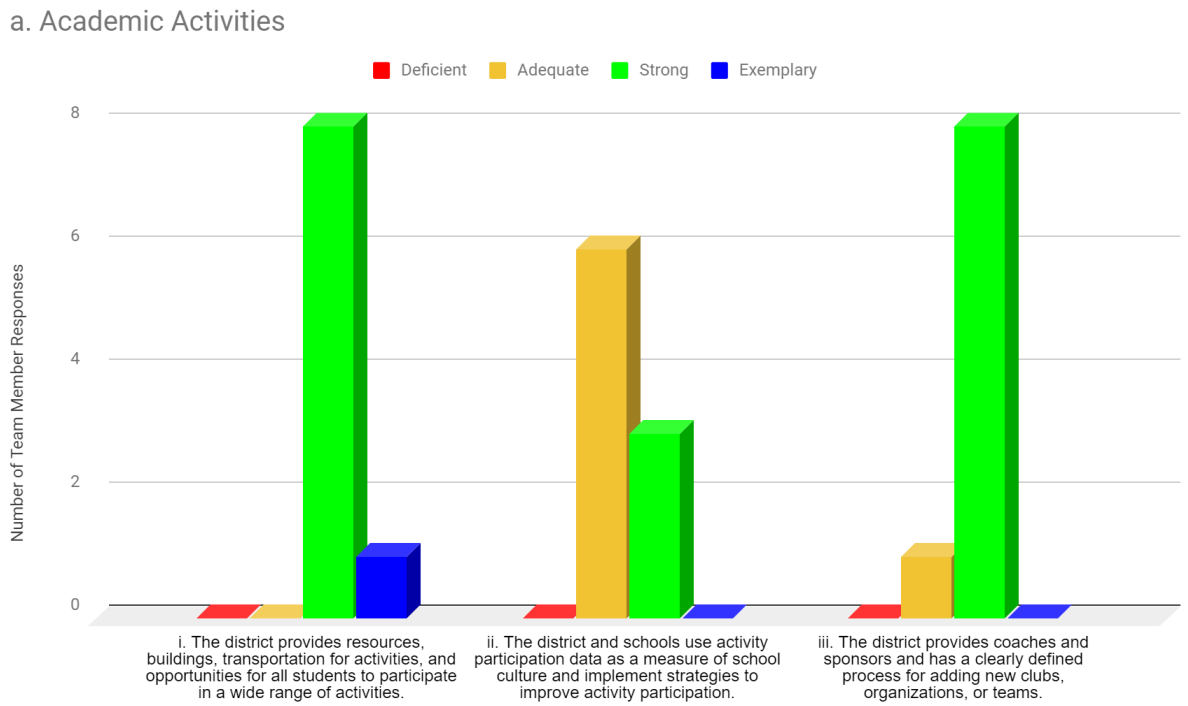


Social-emotional professional development for staff and students is part of the district strategic plan and is evidenced through professional development offerings that have taken place throughout the school year. These trainings have included: Second Step, Habitude, Suicide Prevention, Mindfulness, Growth Mindset, and Tier 1,2, and 3 Counseling. Surveys help to access and gauge the current climate and parents are included in many of the social/emotional initiatives that take place.

The PLC process of teaching and learning appears strong. Multiple procedures were mentioned to foster positive relationships between teachers and students including scheduling practices for 5th/6th grade transition and transition procedures for incoming 9th graders.

15. Student Activities

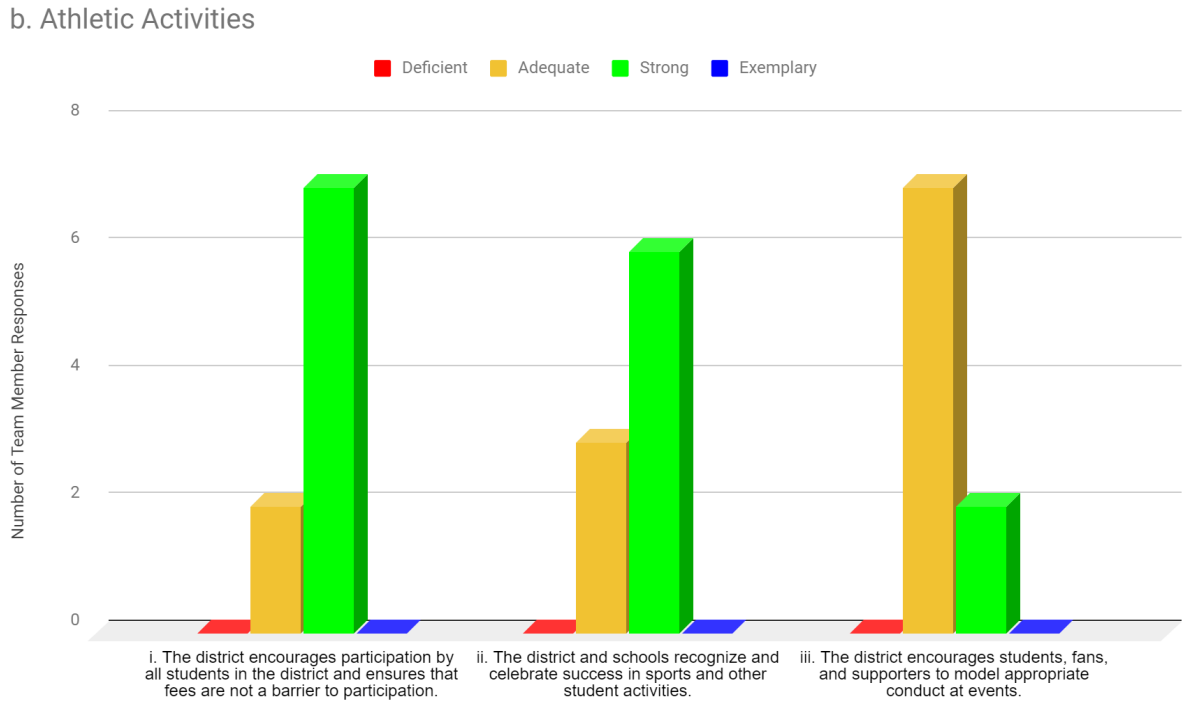
a. Academic Activities



Many clubs and extracurricular activities are offered at all levels throughout the district. Activity participation data was shared but the strategies to improve activity participation were unclear. A 32% participation rate has improved, however, does not seem strong. The district could consider continuing to encourage and measure the participation of students in academic activities as a goal to engage more students in school life.

The district provides transportation at no cost to the student to ensure opportunities for students to engage in academic activities without barriers. The robotic club is an example of connecting elementary and secondary students in common academic enrichment tasks. Coaches and sponsors are paid by the district as well as through grants as needed. Coaches and sponsors are provided based on a clearly defined process. Many academic activities are standards-based and support the work of teachers in the classroom.

b. Athletic Activities



Participation, communication, and support are the focus areas for activities. The district wants students to be actively engaged in as many activities as possible. The district uses the WHSAA end-of-season survey data to track enrollment in activities. Involvement in activities gives students a well-rounded educational experience that helps prepare them for life beyond high school. The eligibility process is very effective in helping students remain academically accountable which helps with graduation rates. Students are recognized and celebrated at banquets and Rock Springs Hall of Fame.

A Multi-Sport Model is promoted at the secondary schools for athletic participation. Participation in athletics has been increasing and is up to 32 % of the students involved in at least one activity at the high schools. The eligibility system is supportive of athletes' academic pursuits through study tables and accountability measures.