

# External Reviews of District Programs and Services

Informing the Progress of the  
Jefferson County Public Schools

Public Schools  
Reviews

Jefferson County  
Public Schools



**Shaping the Future**

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Intro



## Introduction

The leadership team of the Jefferson County Public School (JCPS) District is committed to self-assessment and continuous improvement. Our vision statement declares, “We won’t stop until every classroom provides challenging instruction tailored to each child, and each of our schools is noted for its excellence.” For many years, we have focused on using student assessment data to enable district-level and school-based employees to make better use of resources and to enhance student outcomes.

Taking that commitment to the next level, JCPS embarked in 2008-09 upon a series of external reviews, all conducted with the stated purpose of helping us improve our operations and outcomes. While these reviews examined very different and distinct components of the school district, the resultant findings and recommendations portray a district that is stepping boldly into the future, even as it upholds the community’s traditional values.

This document serves to summarize the major findings of these studies, identify the key recommendations, and share the implications in terms of broad policy issues. We anticipate that the content of these studies will serve to guide and inform specific aspects of our work for the next few years. As always, we welcome the community’s feedback on this summary report and on the degree to which you believe we are providing a high-quality public education for all students.

## Description of Program Reviews

As outlined below, the JCPS District underwent four major external reviews during 2008-09.

### **Literacy Program Review—October 2008**

As we prepared to launch the second phase of the **Every 1 Reads** initiative, **Every 1 Reads More**, we decided to bring some leading national reading experts into the district to review our elementary literacy program and offer their recommendations for improvement. We contracted with a stellar team of three people—from the University of California at Berkeley College of Education, from the National Writing Project, and from a large school district—to conduct this initial review. The team visited 12 schools, observed instruction in 39 classrooms, interviewed 40 teachers, and met with district curriculum specialists.

### **District Audit—December 2008**

Two of the 133 schools in JCPS did not achieve, over a four-year period, a state-specified level of progress on the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) assessments. Accordingly, the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) was required to conduct a District Audit. A 33-member team of current and retired educators from school districts throughout the state spent six days interviewing staff, board members, and community groups. They also visited 20 schools and conducted more than 250 classroom walkthroughs. The audit focused on the services we provide to our lowest-performing schools, particularly in the areas of academic performance, organizational efficiency, and learning environment.

### **Greater Louisville Education Project—January 2009**

With the financial support of eight local foundations, JCPS and the Jefferson County Public Education Foundation (JCPEF) commissioned Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

And even when I'm very rich, I know that pretty soon what I'll have  
is... has taken.  
I know because I used to be rich. Last Sunday.



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(McREL—a nonprofit education and research organization based in Denver) to conduct the Greater Louisville Education Project (GLEP) in order to guide the school district’s future reform efforts. McREL’s review focused on five areas: preparing students for college/careers/civic engagement, curricular reform, the district/community safety net for children, the district’s competitiveness among cities Louisville compares itself to in the Greater Louisville Project, and funding adequacy. The research team conducted extensive literature reviews; interviewed district administrators and community partners; surveyed principals, counselors, and teachers; reviewed district documentation, teacher lesson plans, and student outcome results; and collected and analyzed demographic, school quality, and student learning outcome data from peer districts.

### **Special Education Review—February 2009**

A five-member team from the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative (part of the Education Development Center, Inc., in Newton, Mass.) reviewed our Exceptional Child Education (ECE) data and programs. We engaged the services of the Collaborative in order to obtain external feedback on how we can best improve the quality of our programs, with an emphasis on assessment, service delivery, and minority representation. The team interviewed more than 100 staff and administrators throughout the district over a three-day period.

## **Findings**

Each of the external review groups addressed different aspects of the district’s programs and services. Nevertheless, there was considerable overlap in their findings. The following are the most relevant findings as reported by each review team.

### **Literacy**

The literacy team found both strengths and weaknesses in the elementary literacy program. Team members indicated that JCPS has a strong and balanced literacy system but that it could be improved by addressing several weaknesses. Their recommendations revolve around fostering literacy practices that increase the integration of content-area reading into the reading blocks; strengthening vocabulary; using writing effectively to enhance reading; developing a writing curriculum for the Primary grades; emphasizing a deeper level of students’ reading comprehension; and providing professional development (PD) for principals, teachers, and other instructional staff that supports the formation of learning communities. The literacy team’s report will help the district’s literacy coaches work with teachers and frame the improvement efforts designed as part of **Every 1 Reads More**.

### **District Audit**

The KDE Audit Team lauded the district’s communitywide promulgation of its vision, plus its expansion of business and community partnerships that enhance the curriculum. Other commendations touched upon the district’s commitment to diversity and a caring environment, its collaboration with parents to promote student opportunities, and a planning process that leads to clear goals and standards for evaluating the district’s work. The audit team found, however, a low level of academic rigor at some schools, recommending that at one school the School-Based Decision Making (SBDM) Council be dissolved and that at another school the SBDM processes be significantly strengthened. The audit team also found that the contract with the Jefferson County Teachers Association (JCTA) inhibits some reform measures that are needed to improve student performance. Therefore, the team urged the leaders of the JCTA to resolve their differences with

the administration and to work more collaboratively. The audit team did commend the district for taking steps to promote school-level accountability by piloting a PD initiative that is linked to student performance. Common to all of the audited schools were recommendations to collaboratively develop a vision and mission to drive the work of the school, foster the belief that all students can learn at high levels, develop and implement systems for monitoring and evaluating instructional practices, and ensure timely interventions for struggling students.

The KDE Audit Team cited two patterns they had discerned. First, in some schools, while most students do have access to a common and rigorous academic core, specific groups of students (e.g., students with disabilities, those enrolled in band and chorus) miss out on classes because of scheduling difficulties. At these same schools, some students who might benefit from more rigorous courses are allowed to enroll in less challenging classes. In the second pattern, the team discovered that in a few schools the level of academic challenge is generally low across all student groups and students are not being exposed to rigorous expectations. The KDE Audit Team recommended that the district increase the degree of challenge and instructional rigor in all classrooms in all schools. Instructional strategies should be rigorous, relevant, and research-based (e.g., hands-on, applied, real-world, cooperative learning practices).

### **Greater Louisville Education Project**

The McREL Team cited several strengths of the JCPS District, including its highly qualified teaching staff, students' access to computers, a high graduation rate in comparison with peer districts, strong community partnerships that are supported by a unique and innovative data management system, and articulation agreements with institutions of higher education. The strength of the district is evident in student accomplishments, such as a 72 percent graduation rate in 2006—higher than that of many other comparable urban districts and also higher than the 60 percent national average reported for all urban districts. Of the graduates in JCPS, 64 percent go on to higher education. This is the third-highest rate of college-bound graduates among the eight peer districts that were studied for this indicator.

Although McREL found that JCPS has a highly qualified teaching staff, many of these teachers are still relatively inexperienced and are faced with high pupil-teacher ratios compared with peer districts. Furthermore, some of the staffing provisions in the current contract with JCTA, such as transfer and seniority rules, may delay or impede district reform efforts or may present barriers to the creation of strong and stable instructional teams. This finding in relation to the teacher contract mirrored one of the findings by the KDE Audit Team. Both KDE and McREL advised the district to find ways to place the most effective teachers in the most challenged schools.

As also noted in the KDE audit, McREL found that another challenge facing JCPS is a lack of access to a rigorous curriculum for all students. Students who are exposed to courses with high rigor are more likely to graduate from college, yet the current course enrollments place low-income and minority students in JCPS at the greatest risk for not entering college. Minority and low-income students are disproportionately underrepresented in Advanced Placement courses, advanced mathematics and science courses, and college articulation agreement courses.

McREL also found that the Kentucky SBDM governing structure conflicts with effective leadership models that rely on consistency and coherence for high-performing urban districts. The current SBDM structure grants councils the power to choose the school principal and staff and the power

to choose curricula and instructional policies. Assigning these important responsibilities to the SBDM Councils creates an incoherent district of separate initiatives and fails to hold the councils accountable for school effectiveness.

McREL found that JCPS commonly partners with many cross-agency and multidisciplinary organizations to provide a safety net for students and families in need, yet there are several areas that need to be strengthened. Due in part to the economic recession, the safety net for children has diminished in the past few years. The number of children in poverty has grown as the funding for support programs has been reduced. JCPS serves a diverse student population with a multitude of support needs. More than 25 percent of Jefferson County's children live in poverty. From 2000 to 2006, in comparison with its peer districts, JCPS experienced the highest growth in the number of children under the age of 5 living in poverty. The Greater Louisville community has seen an increase in home foreclosures in the last ten years. Given that student mobility is closely linked with lower academic performance, more training and resources are needed for families regarding financial planning and housing information.

According to McREL, JCPS students are not receiving the mental and physical health coverage their families are eligible for from the state, nor do they have access to a sufficient number of service providers. In fact, the JCPS district has only 11 health-services personnel available to the entire student population—or 1 nurse for every 8,908 students. Increased funding by local and state governments is needed to provide adequate services in the areas of physical and mental health and early intervention. There is also a need in the community for increased youth programming, given the positive correlation between participation in after-school activities and academic achievement. To streamline the delivery of these support services, JCPS should invest in expanding its integrated data management system for early identification of students who are at risk for dropping out of school and those students who are most in need of services.

McREL was asked to analyze the district's allocations/expenditures as compared with the other 14 cities to which JCPS was compared in the GLEP. The analysis shows that JCPS focused more funding on instruction and instructional support than the other districts. The district is highly efficient in transportation and maintenance. JCPS Central Office expenditures are low in comparison to the other districts, but JCPS local school administration expenditures are one of the highest among all the districts studied. This latter finding may result from the number of clerical positions in most JCPS schools because the data indicate that our principal and assistant principal salaries are comparable to or below those of other districts.

The final area examined by the McREL report was that of funding adequacy. McREL found that Kentucky's current Support Education Excellence in Kentucky (SEEK) formula provides only three-quarters of the amount estimated to be adequate for meeting the district's performance goals. By way of comparison, the current revenues received by JCPS for K–12 students are more than \$1,000 per pupil less than the average of its 14 peer districts. McREL noted that currently the state funds only half-day kindergarten, leaving the onus on the district to supplement resources for full-day services. Providing a high-quality, full-day preschool for economically disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds would cost an additional \$51 million. This finding of fiscal inadequacy is particularly relevant given the recommendations of the four external reviews for additional programming and services to address the needs of the community's children.



Recommend

## Special Education

In their review of the district's ECE Program, the Collaborative Team commended JCPS for developing and implementing policies and procedures that support a student-centered district and that foster caring school communities. This finding paralleled that of the KDE audit report. The Collaborative Team found that the district provides many specific interventions that target underachieving students, families in need, and students who require more individualized support. At the same time, the review confirmed the district's own finding that there is an overrepresentation of minority students in selected ECE Programs.

The Collaborative Team also found that approximately half of the students referred by local schools for special education assessment are eventually assessed and then deemed ineligible for placement. These findings point to the need for more targeted PD in the area of differentiated instruction and more support for new teachers who find themselves overwhelmed by the array and complexity of student needs. The Collaborative Team commended the district for initiating a Response to Intervention effort that may significantly reduce the excessive number of referrals that are found ineligible for placement.

The Collaborative Team also commended JCPS for its variety of high-quality instructional programs and support services. The review team did point out, however, that students with disabilities sometimes find that their access to specific magnet/choice schools—particularly traditional schools—is limited. There is also some lack of consistency among schools in program implementation, which in turn may lead to instructional gaps and overlaps for a mobile population.

The Collaborative Team identified Kentucky's SBDM structure as a major impediment to the district's ability to systemically adopt coherent programs, policies, and interventions. The team believes that the authority vested in SBDM Councils sometimes thwarts the efforts of district leaders to bring about change and to improve student outcomes in a strategic manner. These findings are consistent with the McREL report as well. Noting that district leaders express a sense of urgency to respond to the needs of its increasingly diverse student population and their families, the team cited evidence of a focused commitment at the district level to tackling many of the seemingly intractable challenges confronting most urban educational systems.

## Key Recommendations

The four studies conducted last year engendered several hundred pages of findings. The following are the key recommendations that emerged from the reviews, with the sources cited in parentheses.

- **Literacy**—Refine the literacy program by strengthening content-area reading and by placing a greater emphasis on writing. (Literacy)
- **Rigor**—Increase the challenge level of all coursework for all students, with a particular emphasis on low-income and minority students. (District Audit, GLEP)
- **Funding**—Seek additional sources of revenue or ways to increase existing resources at both the state and federal levels, with an emphasis on legislative advocacy for the most vulnerable students, including those at the preschool level. (GLEP)
- **Nurses**—Place more nurses in the most challenged schools. (GLEP)
- **Dropout Prevention**—Refine methods of identifying at an early age those students who are most at risk of dropping out of high school, and apply effective interventions. (GLEP, Special Education)



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- **School Climate**—Continue to nurture the evolution of a caring school culture at all locations. (Literacy, District Audit, Special Education)
- **Professional Development**—Expand opportunities for staff to learn about and apply such strategies as differentiated instruction and Response to Intervention. (Literacy, District Audit, Special Education)
- **ECE Program**—Provide ECE students greater access to traditional schools and increased integration into magnet program classes. (Special Education)
- **Equity**—Continue to support school diversity and the equitable provision of resources. (District Audit, GLEP, Special Education)
- **Class Size**—Continue to reduce pupil-teacher ratios. (GLEP)
- **Family Support**—Coordinate efforts across the community in order to increase support for families, remove barriers to education, and increase after-school programming for students. (District Audit, GLEP)
- **Teacher Contract**—Work with JCTA leadership to explore contractual alternatives that will enhance student outcomes. (District Audit, GLEP)
- **SBDM**—Work to align SBDM policies and practices with the district's vision, and advocate for SBDMs to assume an advisory role, particularly with regard to the selection of principals. (GLEP, Special Education)

## Conclusion

The Jefferson County Board of Education (JCBE) and the district administration have carefully studied all four of the reports as submitted by the external review teams. Having considered all of the recommendations, we find that we agree with some and disagree with others. This outcome is to be expected. Given that we are not responsible for the content of the reports, it is understandable that not all of the statements therein are reflective of the JCBE's or the administration's viewpoints. Nevertheless, the reports do provide a foundation for debate and forward progress.

The district has developed a set of goals and strategies that encompass some of the recommendations and that address the findings in the four review documents. JCPS has already begun working to implement these strategies. However, it should be noted that some of the reviewers' recommendations, such as for more school-based nurses and a lower pupil-teacher ratio, are dependent upon additional state and federal funding. Others, such as increased family health resources and after-school programs for children in poverty, will require a community-based response. The recommendations from these four studies will inform the district's work for the next several years, including in the area of legislative advocacy, where collaboration between the district and the community will be vital to the attainment of mutual goals.

Even as the district prepares to act upon some of the recommendations in these four external reviews, we are looking ahead to one additional study. JCPS has contracted with the Council of the Great City Schools to conduct a management audit. The focus of this review will be an examination of the district's administrative staffing levels. We anticipate that this study will be completed by the end of 2009.

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