

Overall Findings:

Common Practices and Procedures across Schools

Introduction

After 10 days of onsite visits to participating schools, noteworthy commonalities surfaced across the schools. Policies, practices, and procedures of effective schools identified in prior studies and literature were also present and prevalent in the schools participating in the current study. How they established and implemented effective practices and procedures were also common across the schools.

Onsite visits of each school were conducted within two days. This study, although comprehensive and rigorous in nature, captured a limited snapshot of the plethora and depth of activities that occur during a school year. Therefore, it is acknowledged that many more policies, procedures, and practices are likely contributing to the success of the schools than those observed within two days. Nonetheless, during the course of the study, the following trends were compelling across the five schools.

Common Factors across All Five Schools

Relationships are Valued - **Culture and Climate, Leadership**¹

Belief that strong, positive relationships are a vital part of academic success appeared to be a pillar across the five schools. Strong rapport, mutual respect and trust were evident among school leaders, staff, families, and students. School leaders and personnel interviewed reported building and maintaining such effective professional relationships by getting to know each other and connecting on a personal level. The staff at most of the schools discussed planning and attending fun or social events together to build friendships.

The practice of establishing rapport by investing in personal relationships was also applied to the families and students of the schools. Each year, the principal and staff of each school invest time and effort to learn about and get to know the students in the school, focusing on the whole child, including his/her family, culture, strengths, challenges, and prior year's performance data. The expectation to treat others with respect is clearly articulated by school leaders and modeled in the interactions with staff members, students, and families. Trust and respect were evident in conversations with and actions toward each other among those being interviewed and observed.

The hiring strategies of the principals undoubtedly contribute to the relationship-oriented environment in the schools. All five principals have mastered the art of hiring and retaining staff that are a good fit for the school based on teaching and learning philosophies (e.g., belief in being life-long learners), care for **all** students, and work ethics that resemble their own. During interviews they look for characteristics and traits that will

¹ In this report, the red font following the title of a subsection denotes the Standard from the Colorado Standards and Indicators for Continuous Improvement that is represented in this component.

Common Factors across Schools

- Relationships are Valued
- Time is Invested and Protected
- Performance Monitoring is Purposeful, Frequent, and Effectively Used
- Decisions are Student-Centered
- Expectations are Set High, Made Explicit, Frequently Expressed, and Consistently Applied
- Learning is Purposefully and Meaningfully Structured
- Staff intentionally uses common language for consistent messaging
- Capitalizing on Available Resources
- Continuous Improvement



complement the existing teams and ensure that incoming staff have strong role models. They capitalize on the strengths of staff by ensuring placement and assignments are a good fit for each individual. They provide the support needed for those individuals to succeed in their roles. They acknowledge and celebrate successes and barriers that have been overcome after employment. The principals spoke of the importance of retaining only personnel who share the same level of passion for students and education as the rest of the team. With so much emphasis on the team approach and relationships, a natural attrition also appears to have evolved in each of the schools as individuals whose teaching philosophies did not align with the others in the school self-selected to leave.

All five of the principals at the participating schools model and foster a culture of multidirectional trust. Principals trust coaches, teachers and families and empower them to collaborate as a team to do what is best for each student. To the extent possible, they seek out input of individuals most likely to be impacted by decisions. They explicitly and candidly discuss why decisions are made and how the decisions made are going to impact student achievement. The research and data used in decision-making are clearly, candidly, and frequently discussed. As a result, the staff trusts the school leaders to make decisions that are in the best interest of the school and students.

The level of trust between school leaders and staff is exemplified by a teacher who reported deliberately self-selecting as her performance evaluation a lesson based on the school's new math program, in which she did not feel fully confident. When asked why she chose to have her formal observation in an area that she had not yet mastered, the teacher explained that she trusted her principal to help improve her instruction in the new math program and that she valued and welcomed the guidance. She said that the principal was very encouraging, provided her with candid feedback on how to improve her practice, but still gave her an "effective" rating, explaining that it takes time and continued practice to master a new program. In this evaluation process, the honest feedback that the teacher received had a greater impact on her than the rating. She felt supported and it strengthened her belief that her principal wants what is best for her.

School leaders treat the school staff as professionals and genuinely value and respect the work and contributions of each staff member. In all five schools, school leaders articulated and emphasized the importance and value of each staff member and how much they trust each one to do his/her job. Teachers reported numerous ways in which school leaders showed their appreciation for staff, including treating teachers to lunch after a hard week, bringing in a latte cart for all to enjoy or putting rewards such as Starbucks gift cards in the teachers' mailboxes to celebrate positive outcomes, and busing all teachers and students to the I-MAX theater after TCAP assessments were complete. At one school, a teacher told interviewers of an incident where an angry parent was yelling at her. Her principal had been in her classroom so frequently and knew her work so well that the principal was able to diffuse the situation by explaining the teacher's intent and practices in the classroom to the parent without hesitation or delay. Having a principal who was knowledgeable enough of her teaching practices and philosophy to present a case on her behalf (without having to ask) made the teacher feel protected, supported, and valued.

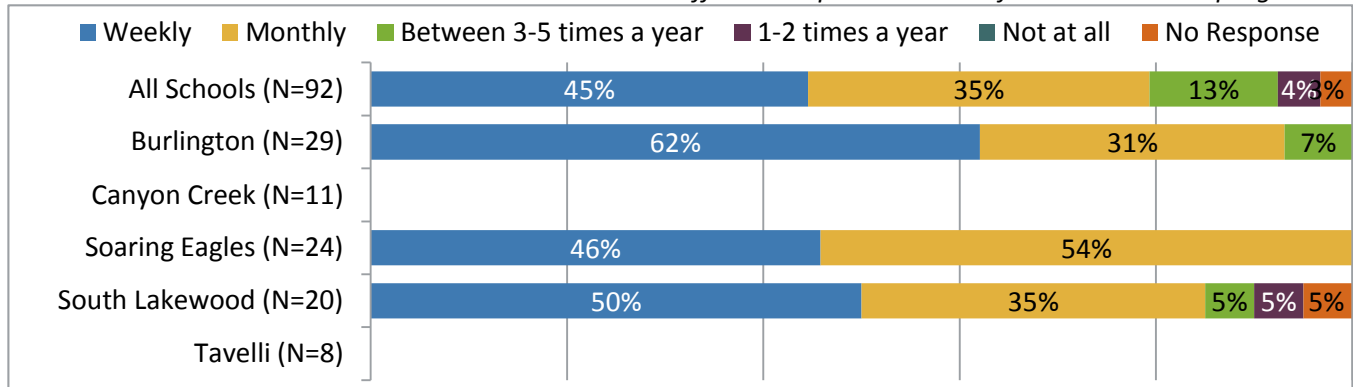
Respectful treatment, tone, and demeanor were prevalent in the meetings observed during the onsite visits. Even in the couple of instances wherein disagreements were observed at meetings, the respectful manner in which staff members spoke to each other was noteworthy. Due to the frequent and candid manner in which feedback is provided (explained in more detail later in this report), coupled with the expectations for respectful treatment of each other, school staff members appear to be receptive to feedback, even from colleagues. For example, during a staff meeting observation, it was noted that a team member had misunderstood the principal's instructions to the team. Her teammates supportively and without judgment helped her get caught up with the rest of the group



by guiding her through the activity and providing clarification of the instructions. Her success appeared to be important to her teammates and it was obvious that they wanted her to do well on the task. She seemed receptive to and appreciative of their feedback and help.

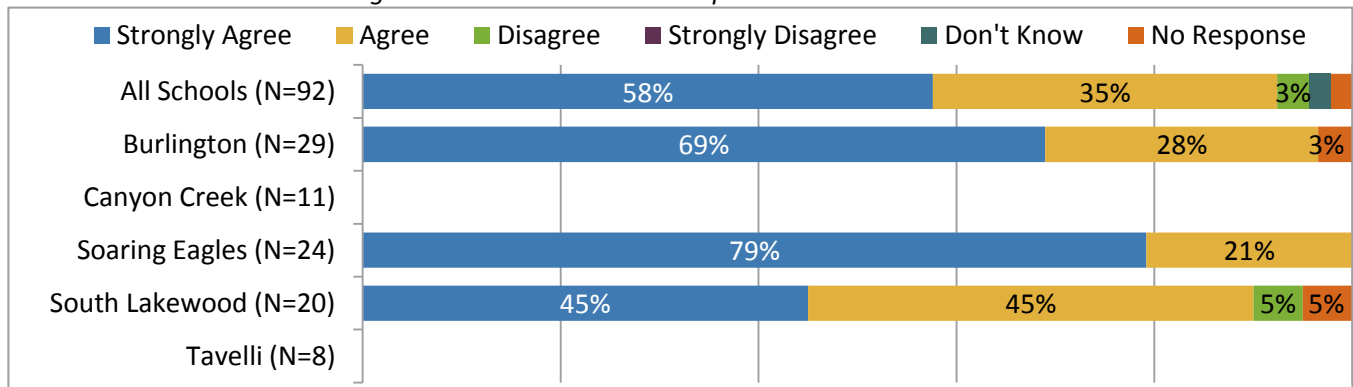
All five principals exude compassion and caring for every person in their buildings. Families and staff emphasized the visibility and accessibility of each principal. In interviews, staff members stressed the “open door” policy of the principals and how welcome they feel to approach the principals with questions, issues, and concerns. Students spoke of the commonplaceness of seeing the principals multiple times per day. Principals casually visit classrooms for informal observations (even for a few minutes) several times per week. More formal classroom monitoring and evaluation are conducted several times per year. This is supported by the Personnel Survey (combined across schools) wherein over 45% of the respondents indicated that school leaders monitor the classroom weekly and another 35% reported monthly monitoring (see Graph 1).

*Graph 1. Frequency of Classroom Visits (Personnel Survey, Item 36):
School administrators visit all classrooms to monitor the effective implementation of the instructional programs.*



All school staff, including teachers, paraprofessionals, coaches, and specialists, are viewed and treated as leaders, which is illustrated by the survey results wherein 93% of the respondents agreed that teachers are encouraged to take leadership roles (see Graph 2). Across the five schools, teachers and staff are expected to behave as leaders, regardless of position, title, rank or tenure. Teachers’ effort in this regard and dedication to helping others are regularly acknowledged and validated by principals.

*Graph 2. Distributed Leadership (Personnel Survey, Item 13):
School administrators encourage teachers to take leadership roles in the school.*





The importance placed on relationships within these schools appears to have elevated the commitment of the staff and results in a sense of loyalty. Many teachers reported feeling a strong bond to their school and the school's leaders. Many staff members and students indicated a desire to work hard to succeed in order to "not let the principal down." Students reported a desire to not disappoint their teachers or their principal.

Because the staff, students, and families feel respected, trusted, and valued, they remain at the school, creating stability within the schools. Consistency in leadership and stability in staff result in consistency in mission and focus. It is critical to stay the course when making systems changes and to see second order change throughout the entire process.

Time is Invested and Protected - Leadership

All five principals recognize that it takes time to build the relationships, skill level, and infrastructure needed for success, especially when implementing systems changes. They invest and protect time wisely, particularly instructional time, time to understand and use data, and time to co-plan and collaborate. Teachers expressed that being given this time and having it be protected from other requirements made them feel respected, appreciated, and empowered to use the allotted time for planning and collaboration.

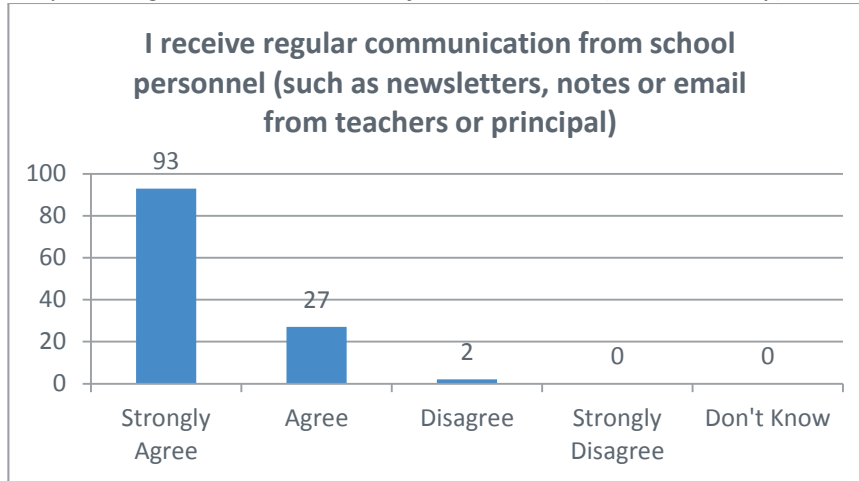
Principals discussed the need to be strategic in the selection and maintenance of initiatives that are most likely to produce increases in student achievement. They recognize and know the difference between the initiatives and practices that can produce quick wins and those that require more time. They strive for a balance between the two so that the staff can experience successes while diligently working towards the longer-term and more challenging goals. Principals are very selective of any new initiatives to be implemented and only add new initiatives that are very likely to lead to desired results. They use data to determine which initiatives are producing desired results. They strategically minimize or eliminate the least effective initiatives to increase time available for the practices that are leading to increased achievement. By not overcommitting or maintaining ineffective initiatives and practices, principals ensure that instructional and planning times are focused. This protection and wise investment of time further builds feelings of respect, value and trust among staff.

Two of the studied schools were performing poorly² when the current principals first arrived at the schools. School leaders at these two schools posit that it takes three to five years to implement reform and systems changes that result in increased student achievement. Not only is it critical to protect instructional time on an ongoing basis, it is also imperative to allow time for implementing change (the years that it takes to implement systems change). The principals at these schools were very knowledgeable about the time it would take to implement new initiatives and patiently gave their staff the needed time to master implementation.

At each of the schools, the first two to four weeks of the school year (and sometimes before the school year begins) are devoted to establishing rapport among key stakeholders (school leadership, teachers, families, and students). Regular and consistent communication is delivered in multiple modalities. Over 98% of the parents surveyed indicated that they receive regular communication from school personnel (see Graph 3). In interviews, parents discussed the availability and accessibility of school personnel, especially teachers and principals, and how parents are provided with many opportunities to meet with school personnel, call or email with questions.

² Both schools were identified as not making Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Act for several consecutive years and were therefore identified as "Schools on Improvement."

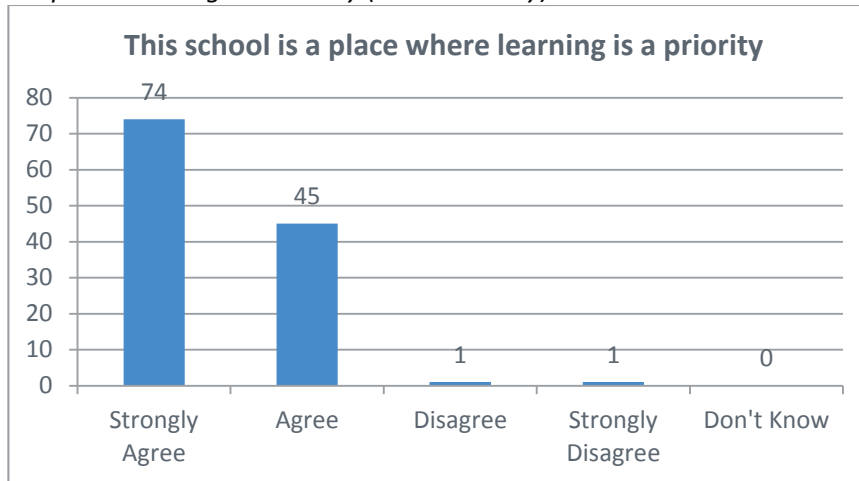
Graph 3. Regular Communication from the School (Parent Survey)



School days and classroom time are structured to give students the most attention and contact with teachers. The traditional bell-to-bell instruction to a whole classroom was seldom observed in the classrooms visited. In all five schools, data was used on a regular basis to group students based on skill level. The classrooms were structured such that students had time with their teacher to learn or re-learn a lesson, time to practice on their own, time to work with another adult, and time to test what they had learned. An increased number of adults in the classroom helped ensure that students were engaged in and participating in learning (additional information about these practices is provided in the section called “Learning is Purposefully and Meaningfully Structured”).

Over 97% of the families surveyed reported that learning was a clear priority at the schools (see Graph 4) and classroom observations confirmed that classroom time is effectively used for learning purposes. Classrooms observed also had structures in place to maximize instructional time, including routines and behavioral expectations that were clearly understood by students. Student behaviors and participation in classroom activities were very striking across all five schools. Students observed were engaged in learning tasks and were rarely observed off task. Teachers reported spending the beginning weeks of the school year developing norms for classroom time, and reviewing the expectations for classroom behavior. Teachers that were observed exhibited exceptional classroom management practices and styles. They were mindful of all students, even those students working in small groups with other adults or on their own. During the hours of observation time, few disciplinary issues were noted. When there were misbehaviors, the teachers swiftly and briefly reminded students of the behavioral expectations and redirected the students to the tasks at hand. Students returned to the assigned work in 100% of the observations after only one reminder from the teacher.

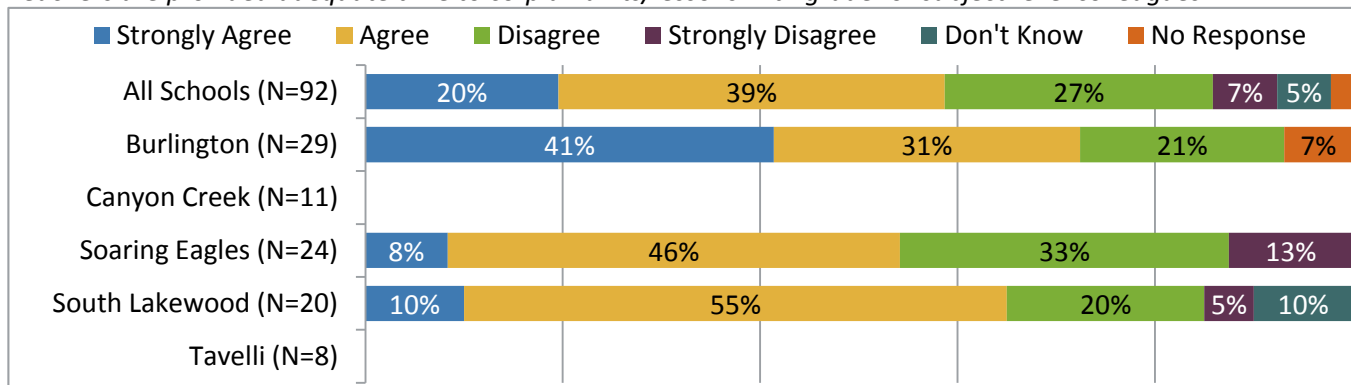
Graph 4. Learning is a Priority (Parent Survey)



Onsite observations of collaboration and planning meetings were conducted, which included opportunities for staff to analyze data, share instructional practices, and identify and plan interventions. Staff meetings that were observed included time for collaboration and communication between teams and included general education, special education, and EL teachers/coaches. Although individuals interviewed reported that team collaboration meetings occurred approximately every six weeks in most schools (some more frequently), only 59% of the staff responding to the personnel survey reported having adequate time for planning with grade and subject level colleagues (see Graph 5).

Graph 5. Adequate Time to Co-Plan (Personnel Survey, Item 10):

Teachers are provided adequate time to co-plan units/lessons with grade- or subject-level colleagues.



Performance Monitoring is Purposeful, Frequent, and Effectively Used - Assessment of and for Learning

The performance of every individual within the school building is frequently monitored and data is used to improve outcomes for students and teachers. Actions, initiatives, and planning are based on needs identified as part of the monitoring process.

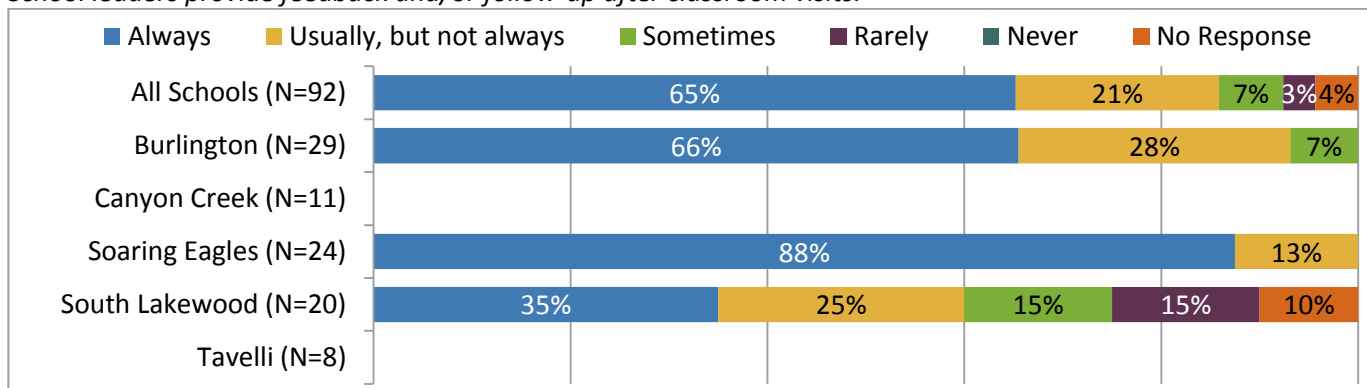


Performance Monitoring of Staff

Formal and informal evaluation and feedback processes are well-established within the schools. Although formal evaluation processes were in place, the most striking aspect of evaluation across the schools was the regularity, frequency, and intent of the informal evaluations. All five principals rely on the informal evaluation to regularly monitor and provide feedback without the consequences of the formal feedback – the intent and emphasis are on improving each person’s performance (not on rating it) so that by the time of the formal evaluation, effective practices are in place. Culture was such that teachers welcomed feedback and saw the feedback/relationship with their supervisor as an asset for their development.

Principals and coaches provide candid and frequent formal and informal feedback to their staff, including positive and constructive feedback. Constructive feedback is immediately followed with support to emphasize that the intent of the feedback is to improve the quality of individual’s work rather than to evaluate or criticize. When school leaders identify an area in need of improvement, they discuss that need in a matter of fact and non-judgmental tone. Conversations about areas of need are always followed with how school leaders can support the individual in addressing that need. Suggestions for improvement strategies are provided. But more importantly, school leaders request and take into consideration the individual’s ideas for self-improvement and staff is trusted to identify areas of need and request support when needed. Because the intent of feedback is to help the individual grow, it is provided with respect and caring and often is provided after classroom visits. Approximately 65% of Personnel Survey respondents reported that school leaders provide feedback and/or follow-up after classroom visits (see Graph 6).

Graph 6. Feedback after Classroom Visits (Personnel Survey, Item 37a): School leaders provide feedback and/or follow-up after classroom visits.



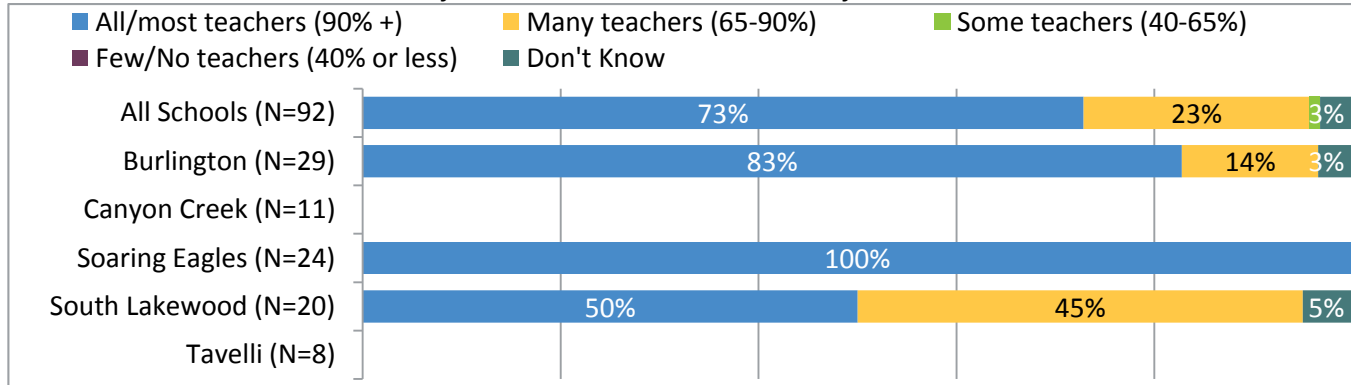
Teachers expressed a feeling of being supported as they grow in their teaching practice. One teacher explained that when she was fairly new to the school, the principals observed that she was struggling with classroom management. The teacher was impressed that the principals did not just tell her what to do differently, but rather came in and modeled how to manage her students while teaching her content. This modeling was followed by another observation, followed by more modeling, followed by more observing, co-teaching and a gradual release of responsibility.

Performance Monitoring of Students

Although there did not appear to be a common assessment that was used across schools for progress monitoring, the processes in place for monitoring student performance were remarkably similar. All five schools frequently and regularly use progress monitoring data to group students based on skill and knowledge level. All schools had

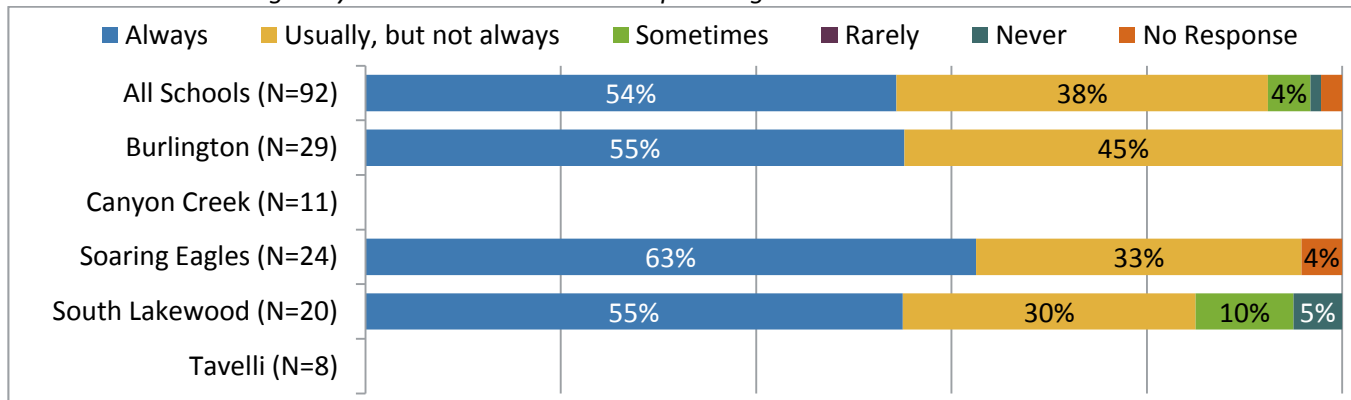
regularly scheduled meetings to discuss and use the data to inform student grouping and instructional practices. Over 96% of respondents to the Personnel Survey indicate that using data to inform instruction is commonplace, with 73% indicating that all or most (more than 90%) of teachers use data to inform instruction (see Graph 7a).

*Graph 7a. Using Data to Inform Instruction (Personnel Survey, Item 23):
Teachers in this school use data to inform their instruction. This is true for...*

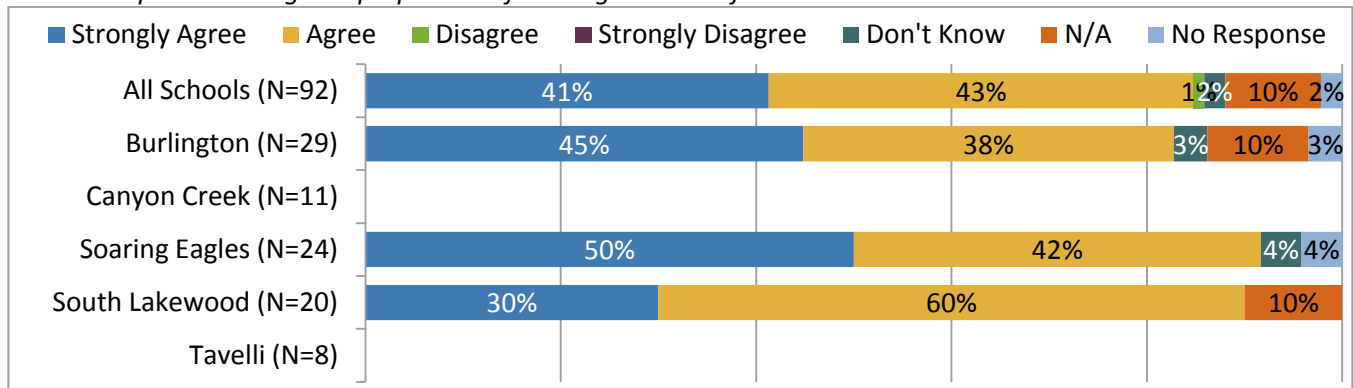


Personnel Survey results also indicate that instructional teams rely on assessment results for planning purposes (92% agree; see Graph 7b) and staff feel adequately prepared and trained for using data to inform their instruction (84% agree, see Graph 7c).

*Graph 7b. Using Data to Inform Instruction (Personnel Survey, Item 24):
Instructional teams regularly use assessment results in planning.*

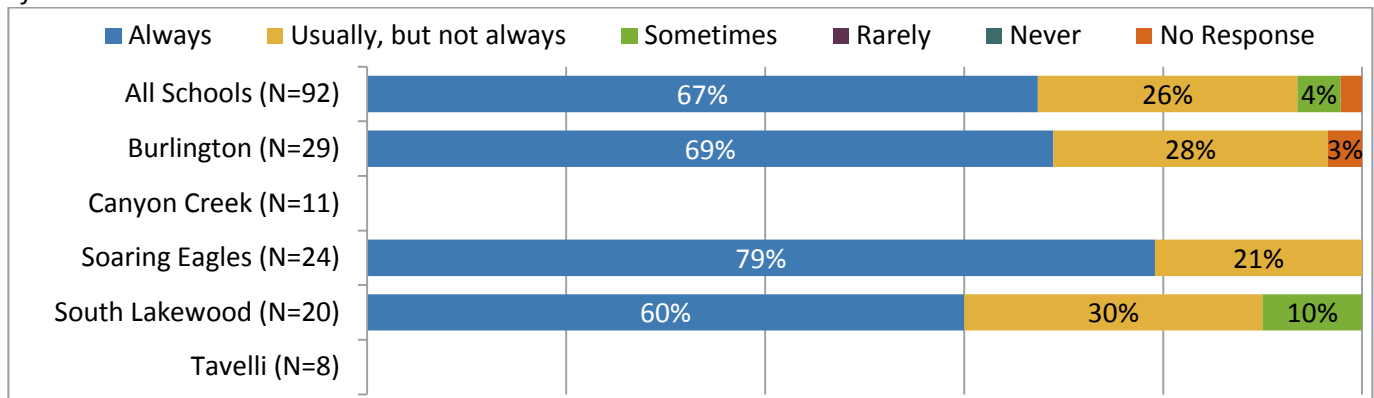


*Graph 7c. Using Data to Inform Instruction (Personnel Survey, Item 25):
I have adequate training and preparation for using data to inform instruction.*



Over 93% of respondents to the Personnel Survey indicate that evaluations take into account instruction and its impact, or lack thereof, on students (see Graph 8).

*Graph 8. Evaluating Instruction (Personnel Survey, Item 35):
Monitoring and evaluation occur on an ongoing bases to see how specific instruction is impacting the achievement of all students*



Decisions are Student-Centered - Leadership, Culture and Climate

Above All Else, Kids Come First

The prevailing philosophy at all five schools appeared to be “access to all standards for all students.” District personnel interviewed echoed the districtwide expectations that all students have access to all standards. Decisions pertaining to many components, such as scheduling, staffing, and allocating resources, were clearly based on ensuring that all students have access to all standards and core content. Although districts of the schools in the study provide the support and resources needed for abiding by this philosophy, the decisions made at the school-level appeared to be data-driven and designed to meet the needs of the students within that school. Making decisions that are in the students’ best interest is feasible because school leaders and staff know each child in the school, not only by name, but also know their data, skills, abilities, academic history, and culture.

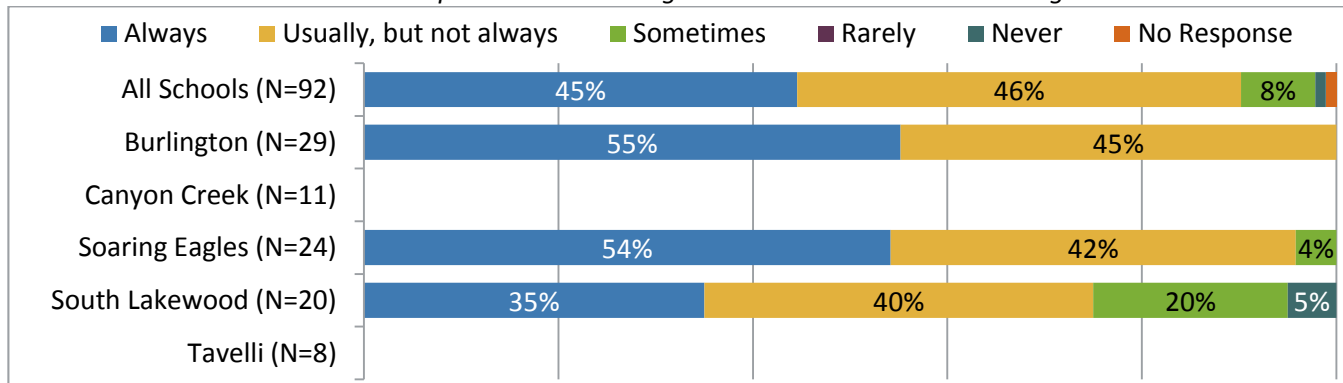
Scheduling decisions are made so that all students receive core content instruction. Push-in interventions are used and extra supports are provided as needed based on data at a time that would not interfere with core

content instruction. For example, at South Lakewood, teachers provide before or after school tutoring to students who will benefit from the additional small group or one-on-one support.

All of the schools structured their classrooms to increase the attention that students receive. Classrooms are structured in a workshop type model with small groups rotating through stations. There is a concerted effort to increase the number of adults within each classroom so that as often as possible each small group has an adult assigned to it. In all five schools, classrooms observed had co-teachers, student teachers, push-in interventionists, parent volunteers, or instructional paraprofessionals working with small groups in the rotation (in most instances multiple adults were observed in the same classroom). Several of the schools use flooding models that include all staff. They rely upon community volunteers, including community members with no children of their own at the school and partners from nearby colleges or universities to increase the number of adults working with students. For example, Soaring Eagles utilizes college interns as student teachers, who often end up joining the staff after graduation, allowing the development and continuation of relationships as interns evolve into permanent staff members. Several of the schools had hired parent volunteers as paraprofessionals as those parents had strengthened their instructional skills.

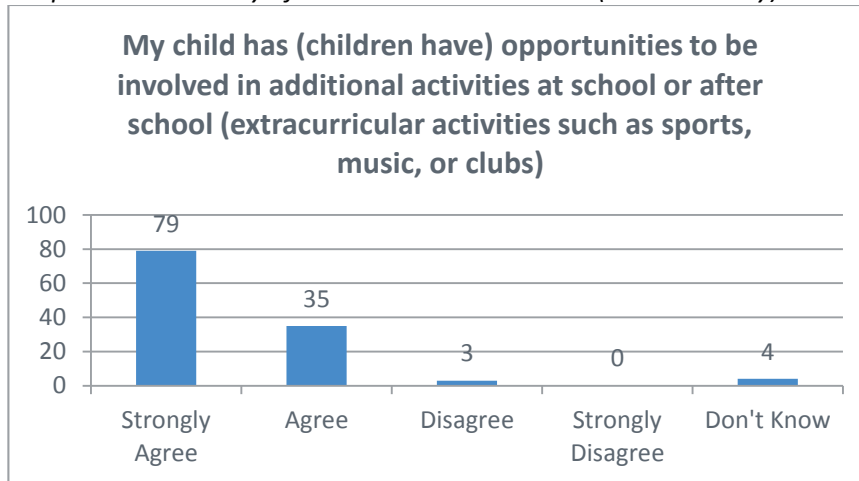
Student placement decisions are based on the prior year’s data and the recommendation of teachers from earlier grades. Purposeful conversations take place about each child’s identified strengths and challenges. Instructional and programmatic decisions are focused on what will help meet the child’s needs most effectively and efficiently, whether it is which classes they are offered, how they are grouped within a class, or the after school programming they are offered. Over 90% of respondents to the Personnel Survey agreed that teachers usually, if not always, deliver lessons that draw upon students’ backgrounds and contextual knowledge (see Graph 9).

*Graph 9. Lessons Focus on Students’ Needs (Personnel Survey, Item 22):
Teachers deliver lessons that draw upon students’ backgrounds and contextual knowledge.*



Before and after school activities are selected and implemented to engage and enrich student experiences at the school. The types of before and after school programs observed included Chess Club that utilizes parent volunteers, homework and tutoring clubs that include mentoring by older students within the school, and an Art Club with the school’s art teacher providing art activities before school. South Lakewood and Tavelli are strong examples of these types of outside the school day enrichment programs. Burlington has an after school program designed to increase interest of historically underrepresented students in science and math (see Burlington’s summary report for details). According to the Parent Survey, over 93% (N = 114 out of 122) of parents acknowledge the availability of additional activities to their children (see Graph 10).

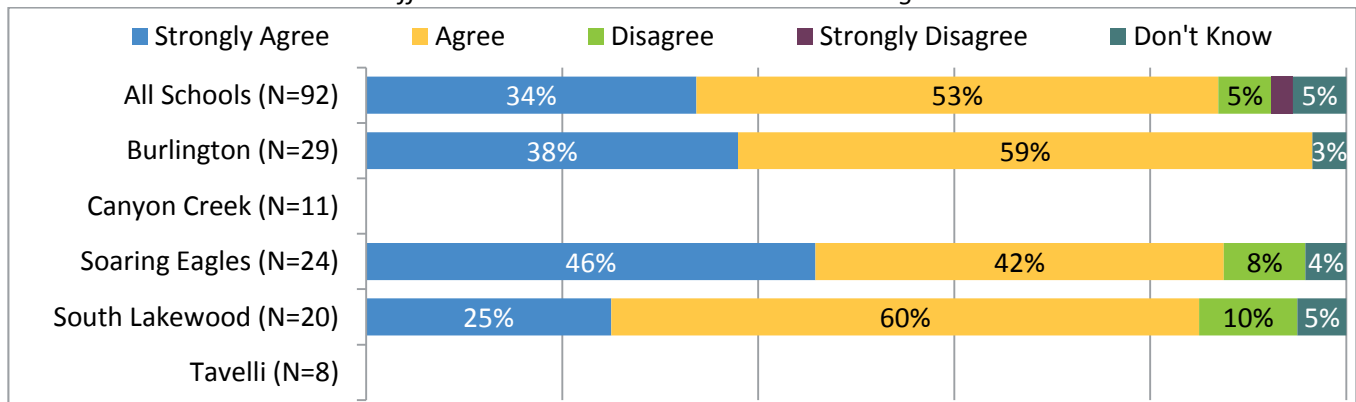
Graph 10. Availability of Extracurricular Activities (Parent Survey)



Sharing Decisions

Staff reported being involved in decision-making as often as possible, providing examples such as selecting professional development and giving input on resource allocation. Principals explained that they include staff in decision-making when possible and practical to do so. However, as is often the case, school leaders have to make some decisions that are top-down. In those instances, these principals communicate the decisions as quickly as possible, always providing the reasons for the decision and its relevance to student achievement. The candid and direct communication about decisions allows the staff to feel involved in decision-making. This is supported by the Personnel Survey, wherein 87% of respondents agreed that school leaders ensure that staff is included in decision-making (see Graph 11).

Graph 11. Distributed Decision Making (Personnel Survey, Item 12): School leaders ensure that all staff members are included in decision making.



Tough Decisions

All principals candidly discussed the need to sometimes make tough decisions, including eliminating initiatives or staff, or reallocating resources. Focusing on what is best for students made those decisions more feasible. All five principals spoke emphatically about the non-negotiable nature of decisions that are made in the best interest of students. Even when making difficult decisions, because principals and staff trust each other and reasons for

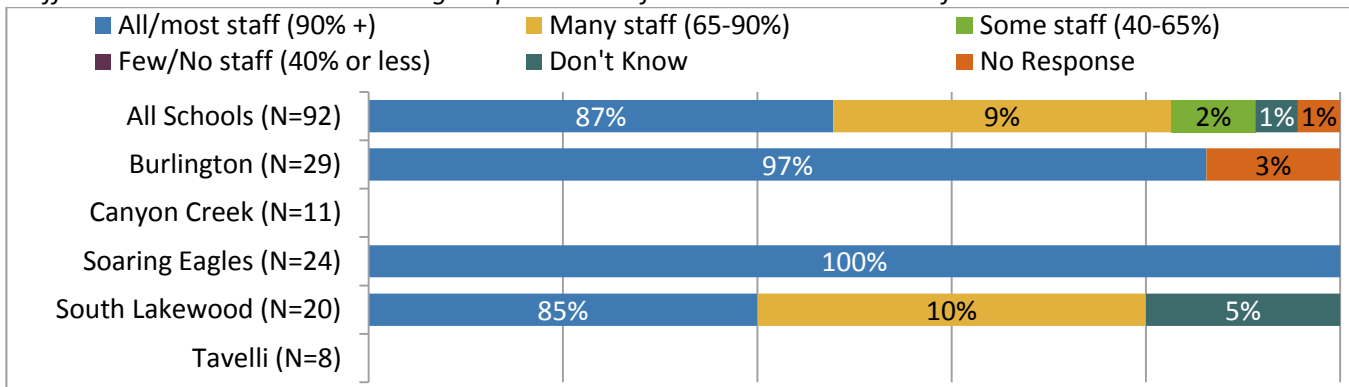
decisions are explicitly communicated, those not involved in the decision are able to trust that the decisions were made in the best interest of students and therefore support the decisions made.

Expectations are Set High, Made Explicit, Frequently Expressed, and Consistently Applied - Leadership, Culture and Climate

The schools' primary objective is to improve the academic achievement of students, which was a common pillar and non-negotiable noted across the schools. High expectations are set for **all** stakeholders, including students, families, teachers, staff, and leaders. These expectations are explicitly and frequently communicated until everyone knows and can articulate the expectations. Personnel Survey results clearly demonstrate a standard of high expectations of the students (see Graph 12). During the onsite visits, numerous students were observed reminding each other of expectations without any prompting from the adults in the room.

Graph 12. High Expectations of all students (Personnel Survey, Item 16):

Staff members in this school have high expectations of all students. This is true for...

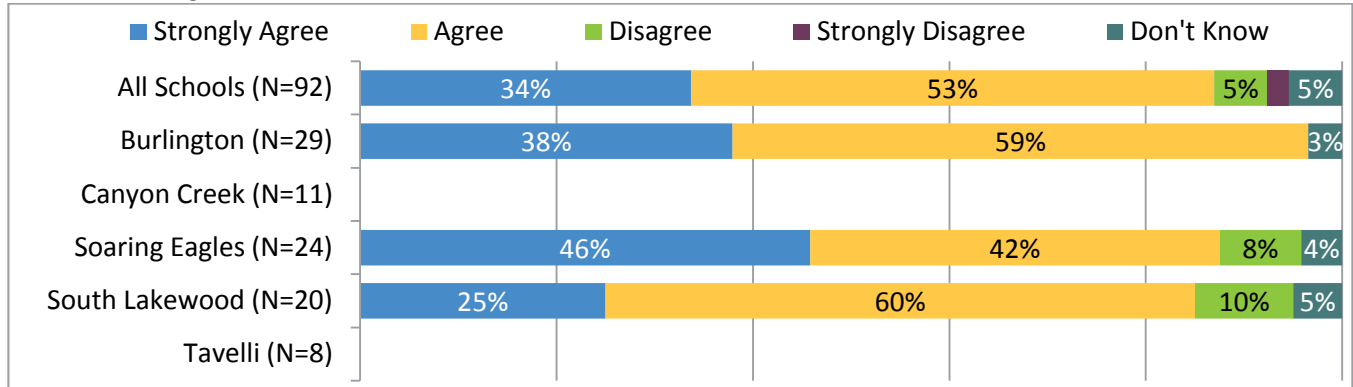


Behavioral expectations are prominently displayed throughout the school and consistently implemented across classrooms. Teachers explained that in earlier grades, the first couple of weeks of each school year are devoted to establishing classroom routines and reviewing expectations. Because they are consistent across grades, returning students are already aware of the classroom routines and expectations and help teach new students. Teachers of higher grades reported having to devote very little time to getting students settled into routines. School onsite visits were conducted in October and November and by that time of the school year, routines and classroom structures were well-established and observed across classes, grades, and non-classroom environments (e.g., lunchroom, library, hallways).

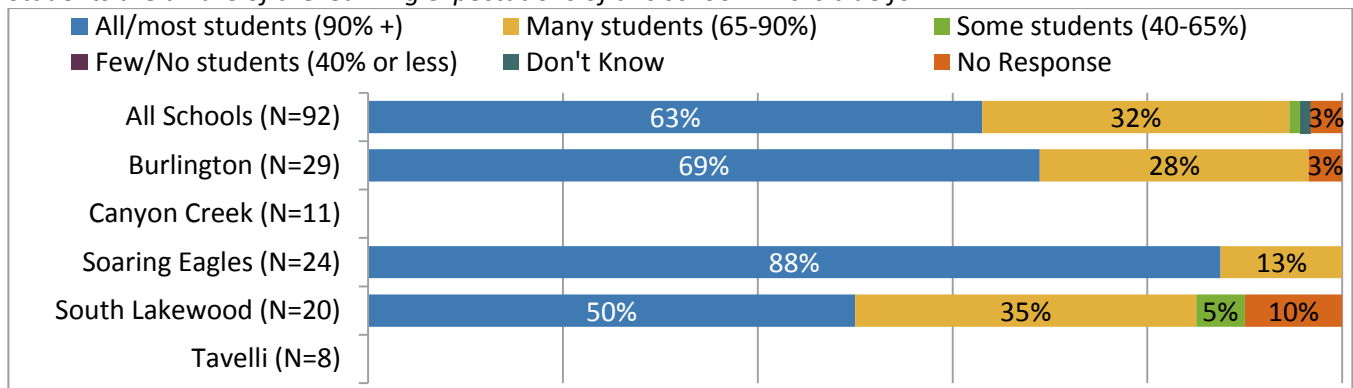
Personnel and Parent Survey responses supported the observations made during onsite visits: everyone clearly knows and understands the expectations and helps hold each other accountable for meeting those expectations. For example, 87% of respondents to the Personnel Survey stated that parents and community members are involved in creating a culture of high expectations and most of the students are aware of those expectations (see Graphs 13 & 14). Parents echoed this in the Parent Survey with over 92% (N = 113 out of 122) of respondents indicating that teachers have high expectations of students (see Graph 15).



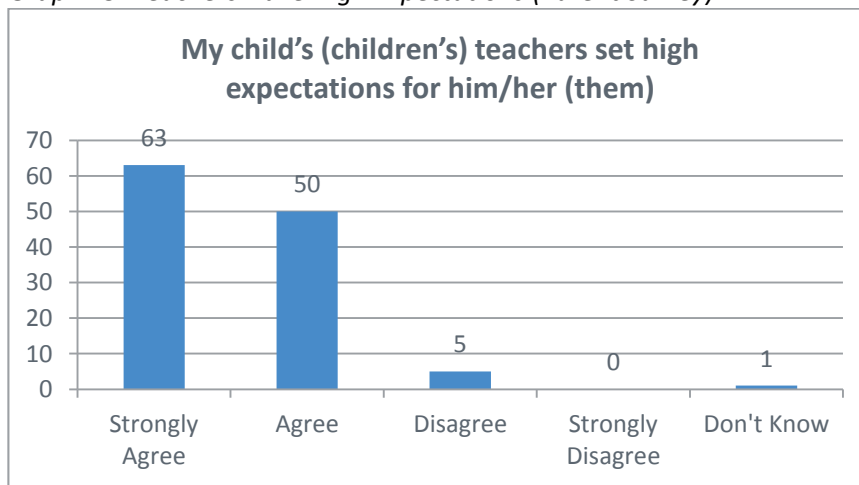
Graph 13. Community Involved in Expectations (Personnel Survey, Item 29):
The school includes parents/guardians and community members in creating a culture of high expectations for student learning.



Graph 14. Students Know What's Expected (Personnel Survey, Item 31):
Students are aware of the learning expectations of this school. This is true for...



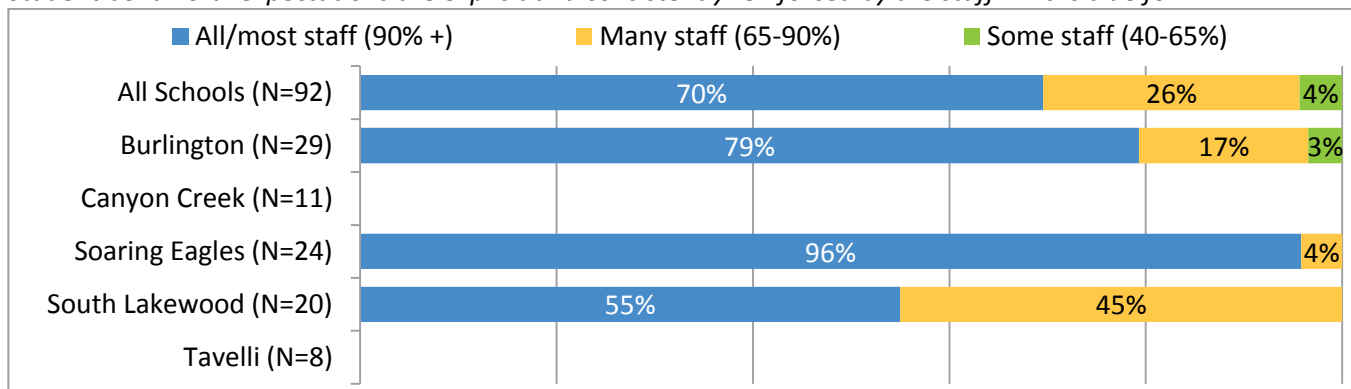
Graph 15. Teachers Have High Expectations (Parent Survey)



All teachers follow the same behavioral rules/regulations, similar classroom expectations and consequences. All students are also held to those expectations. This is echoed by the Personnel Survey in which over 96% of

respondents indicate that many, if not most or all, staff consistently reinforce behavioral expectations (see Graph 16). Schools focus on maintaining a consistent structure throughout the building, whether it is in the classroom, lunchroom, or playground. As a result, classroom disruptions are limited, and little time needs to be spent on classroom management.

Graph 16. Students' Behavioral Expectations (Personnel Survey, Item 20): Student behavioral expectations are explicit and consistently reinforced by the staff. This is true for...



Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) Schools

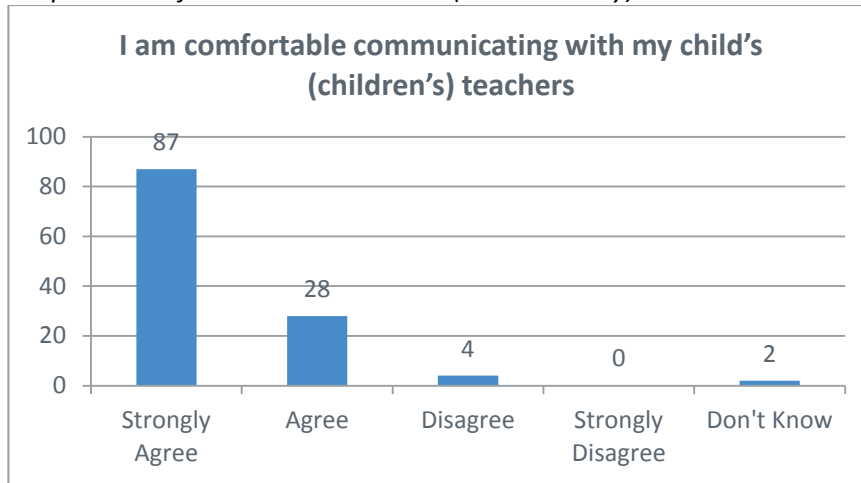
All five schools have adopted the PBIS model. School-wide expectations and procedures were posted and consistently used throughout all areas throughout the school by a large percentage of staff. The use of positive reinforcements was fully integrated into the student culture of the school.

Communication with Families about Student Expectations

Communication with families is initiated as soon as possible regarding academic and behavioral expectations. From the very first Parent Teacher Conferences (PTC) at the beginning of each year, conversations are focused on the end of year goals for each student and what that student should strive for during the year. School personnel reported sharing data about individual students with parents at conferences, as well as discussing expectations for student performance and engaging parents in planning how to support students to meet those expectations. Parents are given the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback on those expectations.

Requesting input from families and being treated as partners in the discussion makes the families feel welcome and comfortable about communicating with the school. Almost 95% of respondents to the Parent, Family, and Community Survey stated that they are comfortable communicating with their child's or children's teachers (see Graph 17). Although the parents interviewed echoed the sentiment of comfort with school personnel, including teachers and principals, they were not able to articulate the specific student expectations or goals for their students. They did however express a deep trust that the school personnel are doing what is best for students and will notify them if their child/children are not meeting expectations. When asked what contributed to this trust, parents reported often being asked for input on what is best for their students, being invited to provide information about students' strengths and challenges, and being consulted on the needs of the students. Parents perceived and expressed the sense that the school personnel do what is best for the students because they take the time to get to know the students and their families.

Graph 17. Comfortable with Teachers (Parent Survey)



Meeting Expectations Starts with Self-Accountability

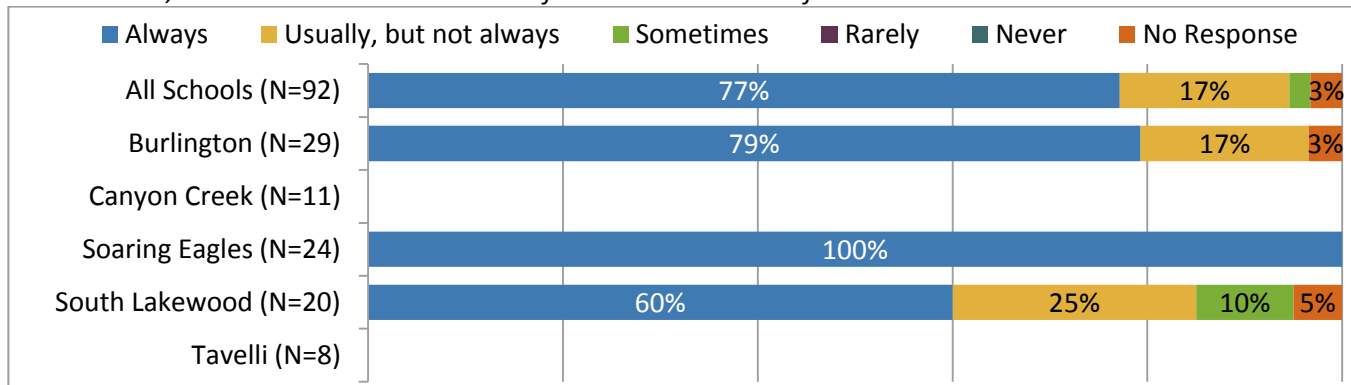
Each person holds him/herself accountable first, then each other. High expectations start with principals' expectations of themselves. Principals only ask staff to do things that they are also willing to do themselves. Teachers indicated that the principals do not ask of them what they do not willingly do themselves first (e.g., take responsibility for and be held accountable for the school's data, treat everyone with respect, come in early, stay late). Staff holds themselves to the same high standards that the principals set for themselves.

Meeting Expectations Also Includes Shared Responsibility

Principals, teachers, and paraprofessionals expressed a sense of shared responsibility for student outcomes. All adults in the building not only hold themselves accountable, they also hold each other accountable but in a very positive and supportive manner. Therefore, when support is offered, it is with the intent to help each other succeed. They share responsibility for knowing and using data to determine what is working and what needs improvement for the whole school, not just each person's assigned students. Over 77% of Personnel Survey respondents indicate that teachers are held accountable the achievement of **all** students (see Graph 18).

Graph 18. Teachers are Held Accountable for Student Achievement (Personnel Survey, Item 38):

At this school, teachers are held accountable for the achievement of all students.



Teachers are expected to know and implement the standards, not just superficially post them on the wall. They provide support to each other in learning, knowing, and implementing the expectations and standards. Classroom



observations include determining whether the standards are implemented. If it is noted that someone is not meeting expectations during informal classroom observations, feedback is provided on the areas that need improvement, immediately followed with support (“here is what needs to be improved. Now, how can I support you in order to be able to meet expectations?” – it was surprising how often terms similar to these were used across the schools and the individuals being interviewed). Rarely is an improvement area noted without follow up supports offered, which reinforces the sense of shared responsibility.

The belief that “we are all in this together” is prevalent in the schools. Teachers frequently share information, ideas, and work products with each other. If one teacher knows of an effective practice, he will share it with the others in the school, sometimes formally in staff meetings or on a shared electronic platform, but more often informally in team meetings or planning times. Many of the teachers interviewed provided examples of how colleagues had supported them by sharing a resource, strategy, or tool.

Across all five schools, teachers not only knew their own data, they also knew and understood the schools’ data, including that of their teammates. They often share and analyze data together, use that data to set common goals, and support each other in meeting those goals together. Challenges and successes are perceived to belong to the whole team. As a team, the school celebrates successes and problem-solves to find solutions to challenges. Neither is done in isolation.

Meeting Expectations Results in Autonomy

A top-down gradual transference of autonomy appears to be awarded to those whose performance monitoring and evaluation data indicate they are meeting expectations. District personnel interviewed indicated that the districts award schools more autonomy if they are meeting the district’s expectations and have high student achievement. Principals indicated that the more each teacher and student in the school is observed as meeting expectations the more autonomy they are awarded.

Teachers interviewed indicated that as long as they are teaching to standards and meeting expectations, they have autonomy and control on how to do so. They are given freedom to try new things, take risks, and make decisions about their instruction, as long as the data continues to show positive trends. When strategies or decisions made are not supported by data, modeling and feedback is used to redirect towards improvement. In other words, autonomy in practice does not result in reduction of observations or feedback. Even the more effective teachers with the greatest amount of autonomy still receive frequent visits from school leaders and feedback encouraging the effective practices be continued.

At all five schools, teachers are respected for their expertise in the classroom. Their knowledge of the students and what students need are part of the formula used to provide services to them. The principals of these schools describe their role as the supporters of the classroom experts and as being responsible for removing the barriers for teachers so that they can exceed expectations.

Learning is Purposefully and Meaningfully Structured - Standards and Instructional Planning

Learning Environment

Learning environments are structured to minimize distractions and instill pride in the school. The schools visited were remarkably clean, organized, and aesthetically pleasing. Student work is artfully displayed in hallways. Student work is only sparsely and strategically displayed in classrooms, in favor of clean and uncluttered

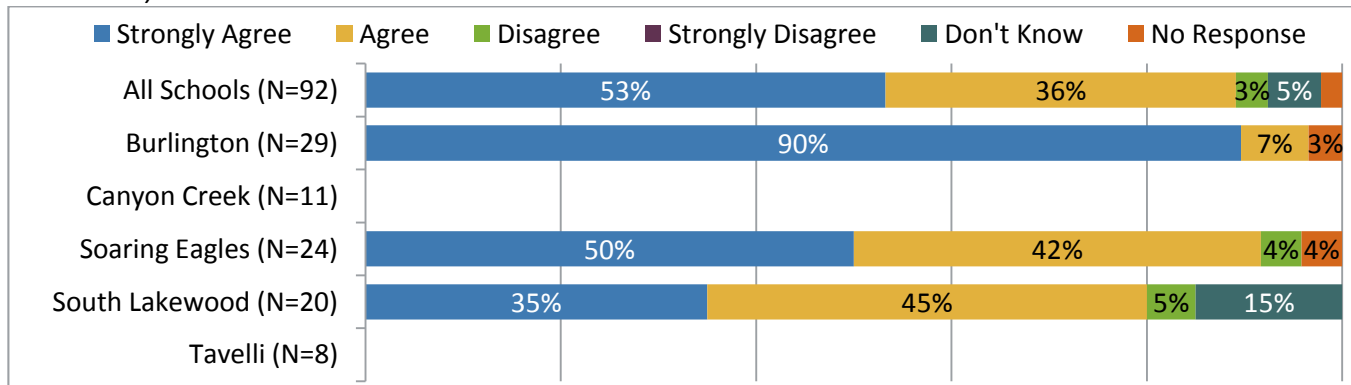
workspaces. Learning tools are often posted in classrooms in lieu of student work. All interviewees (including principals, teachers, staff, and students) expressed a sense of pride in their school.

Formative assessment data is used to group students into small groups based on skill levels and content knowledge. These groups are very fluid and over the course of the year students enter and exit groups based on performance on ongoing assessments. This model for instruction was consistent across grade levels and content areas in each of the five schools, which made it easier for students to feel comfortable in all grades/classes and lessened anxiety around transitions between classes and grades. For example, the Daily 5 practices were observed in several of the classrooms across schools. By the time students reach higher grades, they are very familiar with these practices and routines and need little supervision or guidance to stay on task.

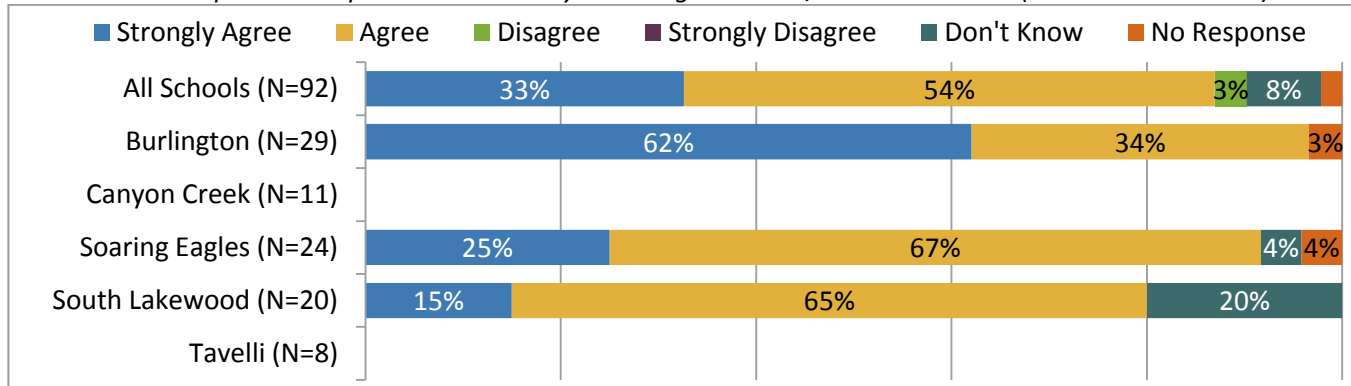
Horizontal and Vertical Alignment

Meeting times are reserved for and devoted to vertical and horizontal alignment. Grade-level teams work together to ensure alignment in their instruction so when students are transitioned from one group to the next (which sometimes results in grouping with students from other classes), all students are receiving the appropriate content at the appropriate time of year. Collaborating on vertical alignment across grades establishes an understanding that students from earlier grades have gained the knowledge and skills necessary for success in this grade. Teachers explained that when they collaborate on vertical alignment, it enhances their knowledge of expectations in other grades, which allows them to better tailor lessons for incoming students and develop lessons that prepare students for the next grade. Personnel Survey respondents agreed that curricula promote horizontal (89% agree) and vertical articulation (87% agree) (see Graphs 19a and b).

*Graph 19a. Curricula Promote Horizontal Articulation (Personnel Survey, Item 9a):
Our curricula are planned to promote continuity: Within grade levels and/or content areas (horizontal articulation).*



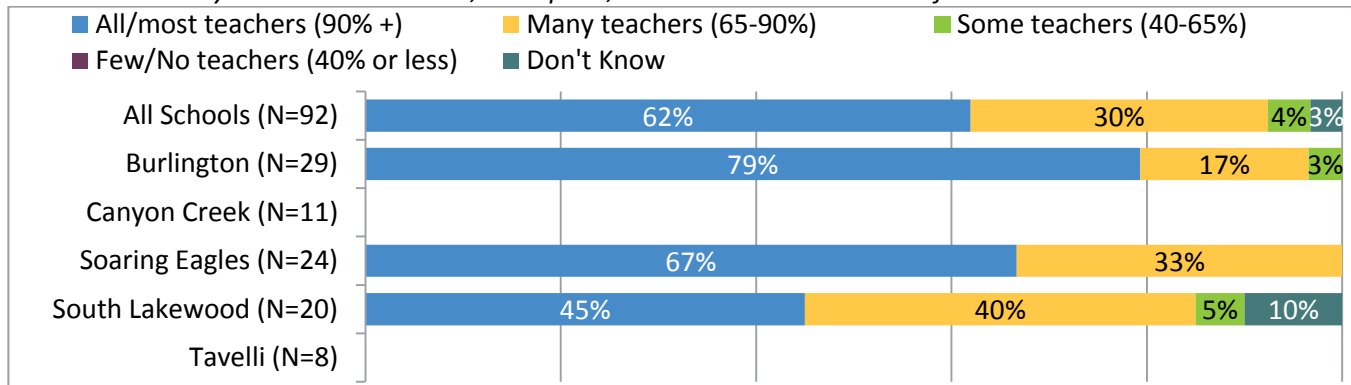
*Graph 19b. Curricula Promote Vertical Articulation (Personnel Survey, Item 9b):
Our curricula are planned to promote continuity: Across grades and/or content areas (vertical articulation).*



Staff intentionally Uses Common Language for Consistent Messaging - Leadership, Culture and Climate

Everyone interviewed and observed at the schools used similar and aligned vocabulary. Signs around the schools and the common language used exemplified their teaching and learning philosophies. For example, an item from the Personnel Survey supports this with over 92% of respondents indicating that many, if not most or all, teachers use common exemplars (see Graph 20).

*Graph 20. Teachers Use Common Rubrics, Exemplars and Checklists (Personnel Survey, Item 21):
Teachers routinely use common rubrics, exemplars, and checklists. This is true for...*



Our Family or Our Community

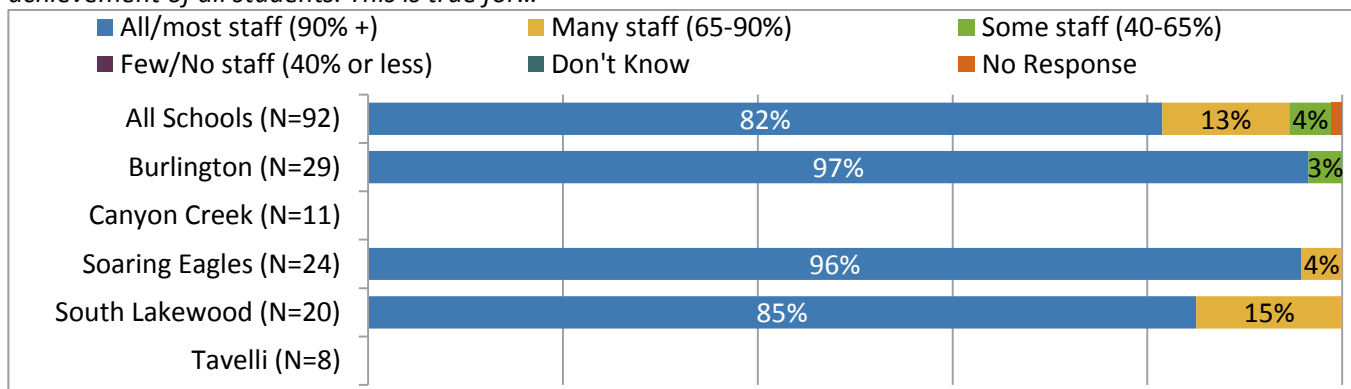
The use of collective terminology across all five schools was remarkable: “our students,” “our family,” “our building.” Referring to the schools as “our family” or “our community” was commonly heard in interviews and focus groups. A sense of pride was detected when interviewees, particularly parents, talked about the school family or community. Interviewees gave credit for the success of the school to other stakeholders (e.g., teachers attributed the success of the school to the principals, families, students, and staff; parents attributed the success to the hard work of teachers and school leaders; principals boasted of the hardworking staff, including teachers, interventionists, paraprofessionals, and other specialists). Many interviewees stated that their colleagues are like family in that they care and support each other in spite of challenges, mishaps, or differences; they encourage and build up each other’s strengths.

Our Students

Phrases such as “our students” and “our data” were frequently heard in interviews and focus groups. There was a strong sense of shared accountability among all staff for their student’s achievement and well-being at each school. In the hallways, teachers were observed greeting students from other classes and grades by name. Paraprofessionals and staff also know the students and care about their success in school. Instructional teams, including interventionists and paraprofessionals, meet regularly to discuss their students. The Personnel Survey demonstrates that 82% of respondents believe all or most of the staff at these schools have a shared sense of responsibility for improving the achievement of all students (see Graph 21).

The use of the phrase “our students” contributes to the shared responsibility and accountability for all students in the school. Adults in the building emphasized a passion and belief that they educate all of the students in the school and that they can only do so through collaboration and teamwork. No one is expected to make an impact on his/her own.

Graph 21: Staff Members Share Responsibility (Personnel Survey, Item 17): Staff members in this school have a shared sense of responsibility and commitment for improving student achievement of all students. This is true for...



In observations of meetings where data was being analyzed and used, it was difficult to ascertain which educator in the room was the teacher of the particular student being discussed. Information and suggestions were provided by all meeting attendees. Everyone seemed to have a vested interest in the data and how well the student is performing. The discussions were always about the needs of each student as evidenced by the data and the strategy to be used to help meet his/her needs.

When asked what contributes to this sense of collective ownership and responsibility that permeates the school, most responded that it is the contagious passion and belief that all students can thrive and that “we are in this together.” The successes **and** the failures of each student in the school belong to everyone in the school, including the students and families. Many directly credited the principals for having a strong mission and vision for the whole school.

Capitalizing on Available Resources - Leadership, Best First Instruction, Culture and Climate

Another strength noted across all five schools was the ability to be aware of, capitalize on, and take full advantage of available resources. In all five schools, school leaders were very familiar with the expertise available within and outside the school and made connections with those experts. For example, districts of all five schools appear to



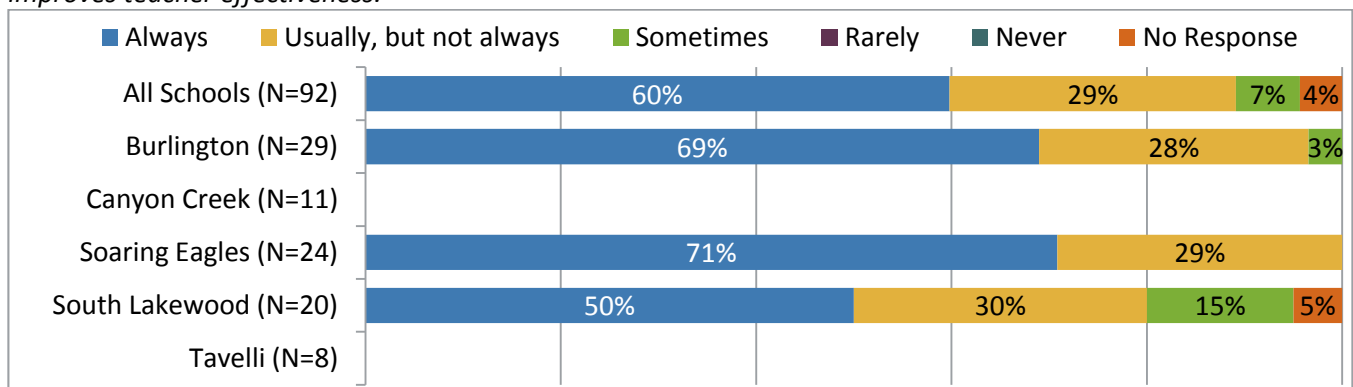
have conducted much of the heavy lifting of transitioning to the new standards. The districts have created tools and resources (e.g., curriculum maps) and make them available to all schools within the district. However, the leaders, teachers, and staff at these schools appear to know those resources very well and know how to customize the available tools to fit their needs.

They also utilize experts appropriately to minimize work when possible. There is not a philosophy that everyone can be an expert in all things. They find and rely on experts to help guide their work. They rely on the experts to provide the needed strategy or practice. For example, many teachers intimated that they rely on the special education specialists for resources and guidance on how to develop lesson plans that best meet the needs of their students with disabilities. In other words, they acknowledge the special education specialist’s expertise and her ability to bolster their instructional practices, as opposed to seeing her responsible for serving the students with disabilities while they teach the other students. This reliance on specialists’ expertise was noted in data and planning meetings that were observed. Specialists in these schools are consultants and collaborative partners in instruction.

Many of the professional learning opportunities occur within the school and are job-embedded. Resources are devoted to bringing in professional learning opportunities that can benefit the whole school and be implemented together. If resources are used to send one or a few people to a training, it is expected that they train others at the school when they return. Professional development that appears to be a “one-time shot” is avoided. All five principals will entertain requests from the staff for specific PD, however, it is expected that when professional learning is paid for by school resources, it has to be needed by the individual(s) requesting the PD and used when the training has been received. It is up to the individual making the request to make the connection to school goals and how the training will be used to benefit students. All professional learning opportunities attended by personnel are revisited and evaluated to ensure that strategies and practices learned from the training are being implemented.

About 89% of respondents to the Personnel Survey indicated that professional learning meets identified objectives and helps improve teacher effectiveness (see Graph 22) and that those learning opportunities are aligned monitored and evaluated to ensure that that objectives are being met through the learning opportunities provided.

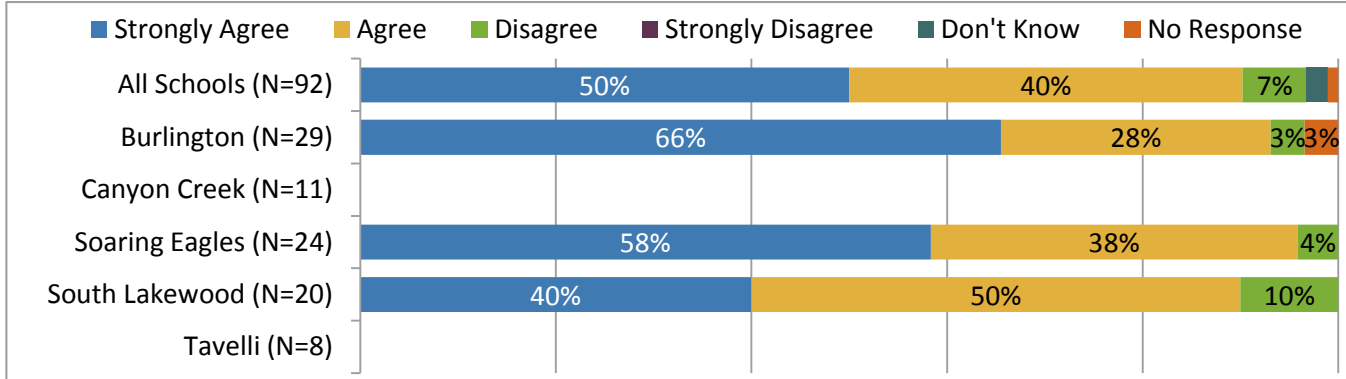
Graph 22. Monitoring of Professional Learning Activities (Personnel Survey, Item 39): Professional learning is selected, monitored, and evaluated to ensure it supports the identified objectives and improves teacher effectiveness.



Over 90% of respondents to the personnel survey indicated that well-formulated professional learning opportunities are available (see Graph 23).

Graph 23. Consistent, High Quality Professional Learning (Personnel Survey, Item 14):

This school consistently provides staff with high-quality professional learning based on the needs of the students and adults within the school.



Staff meetings are also used as professional learning opportunities. District and school experts are invited to provide training on an ongoing basis. Even the informal and formal evaluation processes are designed to function as job-embedded, ongoing professional learning. Educators in several of the schools conduct observations of each other, including using video recordings, to learn from each other. Several of the principals make recommendations on whom to observe to learn or improve on a specific strategy or practice as part of their feedback to a teacher that might be struggling in that area.

Continuous Improvement

Although these schools all have much to celebrate (and they do celebrate their successes), they are very pragmatic and matter of fact about the areas that need improvement. “We have work remaining to do” was a common message heard across the schools. None appeared complacent with their progress. Interestingly, all five schools have directed their attention to writing goals set for this year, while continuing to implement the practices that had resulted in their math and reading successes over the past few years.

The ability to strategically prioritize and focus on one or two initiatives at a time is a strength of these schools and the schools’ leaders. Those selected initiatives are implemented with fidelity and monitored to ensure that they are meeting the needs they were selected to meet. As previously stated, the personnel at these schools work collaboratively to continuously improve their practices as a whole school. They use data to identify their own challenges and find ways to work together to overcome those. They conduct book studies together and incorporate learning into their daily activities and meetings.

Some Resources Commonly Used Across Schools

Although resources used varied across the five schools, the following were mentioned by more than one school:

Adaptive Schools

The Seven Norms of Collaboration (teachers at one school gave credit to this PD for positively changing their school’s culture)

Lucy Caulkins (Writing Resource)



Bloom's Depth of Knowledge; Cognitive Rigor
Daily 5 (2 Sisters)

Other Reports and Next Steps of this Study

This report summarizes the factors that were commonly noted across all five schools. A separate report on each school dives deeper into the exemplary and unique practices that also contribute to that school's success.

As a next step to this study, CDE will develop opportunities for lower performing schools to implement some of the common factors and strategies. An evaluation will be conducted to determine if low performing schools can improve student outcomes using the practices and strategies used by the high achieving schools.



Where can I learn more?

For information about the study, contact Nazanin Mohajeri-Nelson

- Mohajeri-nelson_n@cde.state.co.us
- (303) 866-6205

For information about the High Fliers Network, contact Lynn Bamberry

- Bamberry_l@cde.state.co.us
- (303) 866-6813

Report Authors

- Nazanin Mohajeri-Nelson
- Lynn Bamberry
- Wendy Dunaway
- Ellen Hunter
- Jeff Klein
- Courtney Kuntz
- Tina Negley
- Robin Singer
- Rebekah Ottenbreit
- Eric Young

The Colorado Department of Education
1560 Broadway, Suite 1450, Denver, CO 80202 • 303-866-6205