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School Quality Review

Summary Report

Spring 2017

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose

In October 2016, 42 Milwaukee public schools were identified as “Fails to Meet Expectations” on the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) report card. In February 2017, Dr. Driver agreed to conduct a broad perspective school-review process. Twenty-one (21) schools were reviewed in the spring of 2017, with the remainder to be reviewed during the fall of 2017.

The purpose of the School Quality Review (SQR) process was to reflect on school performance, engage in dialogue to identify strengths and opportunities, and determine what interventions, if any, are best suited for the school. The process was led by the Office of Innovation and is aligned with the MPS Framework for Teaching, Learning and Leading. The process was benchmarked with other urban districts and included guidance and input from the Office of School Administration, Chief Academic Office and Chief Operations Office. The Milwaukee Teachers’ Education Association (MTEA) also offered guidance towards the process and provided feedback.

Process

The spring School Quality Review started February 6, 2017 and ended March 9, 2017. The 21 schools reviewed were:

- Bradley Technology and Trade High School
- Carson Elementary School
- Clemens Elementary School
- Elm Creative Arts School
- Emerson Elementary School
- James Madison High School
- King Elementary School
- LaFollette School
- Lancaster Elementary School
- Lincoln Center for the Arts
- Marshall High School
- Metcalfe Elementary School
- North Division High School
- Obama School of Career and Technical Education
- Pulaski High School
- Roosevelt Middle School of the Arts
- Sherman Multicultural Arts School
- South Division High School
- Vincent High School
- Washington High School of Information and Technology
- Wisconsin Conservatory of Lifelong Learning

The process collected data from a number of sources. Schools engaged in a self-study while regional teams engaged in a similar study of the school. A school visit from an observation review team provided an opportunity for classroom observations and focus-group conversations with parents, teachers, students, and community partners. Facilities provided a summary of needs and aspirations for each school. Extant data on academics, behavior, and staffing was also part of the data-collection process.

The observation review team consisted of district staff, including Regional Superintendents, Office of Academics Leaders, The Office of Human Resources, The Office of Finance, and The Office of Innovation and its Research and Evaluation staff. Representatives from MTEA were part of the observation team, and a parent and/or community member were optional. The principal and school leadership team had an opportunity to participate as well, engaging with members of the review team at various points throughout the day. Prior to the observation day, teams reviewed the school self-study and regional studies and extant data to prepare for the visit.

Analysis

For each school, staff from the MPS Division of Research and Evaluation analyzed the school self-study, regional team school study, focus-group responses, classroom observational data, and facilities reports according to two frameworks.

The substantive framework for the School Quality Reviews grouped data in six areas:

1. Achievement
2. Curriculum
3. Teaching and Instruction
4. Leadership and Management
5. Learning Environment
6. Partnerships with Parent/Guardians and the Community

Using these six areas school teams, regional teams, focus-group participants, and school observation teams identified Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Resources (SOAR).

All draft reports were reviewed by researchers from the Milwaukee Education Research Alliance (MERA) at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Schools were provided an opportunity to review and comment on their draft report before it was finalized.

The intention of this Summary Report is to provide a high-level overview of findings, illuminating commonalities and differences according to the SQR framework. As such, this Summary Report additionally includes the findings from the school observation team reflection that occurred on March 31, 2017. Ultimately, the intention of this work is to inform suggestions to meet the needs of the lowest-performing schools in the MPS district.

EXTANT DATA

The data highlighted in this summary are intended to provide insights into conditions at schools involved in the SQR process, rather than an exhaustive accounting of school data. More details can be found in each school's SQR report.

Student Demographics

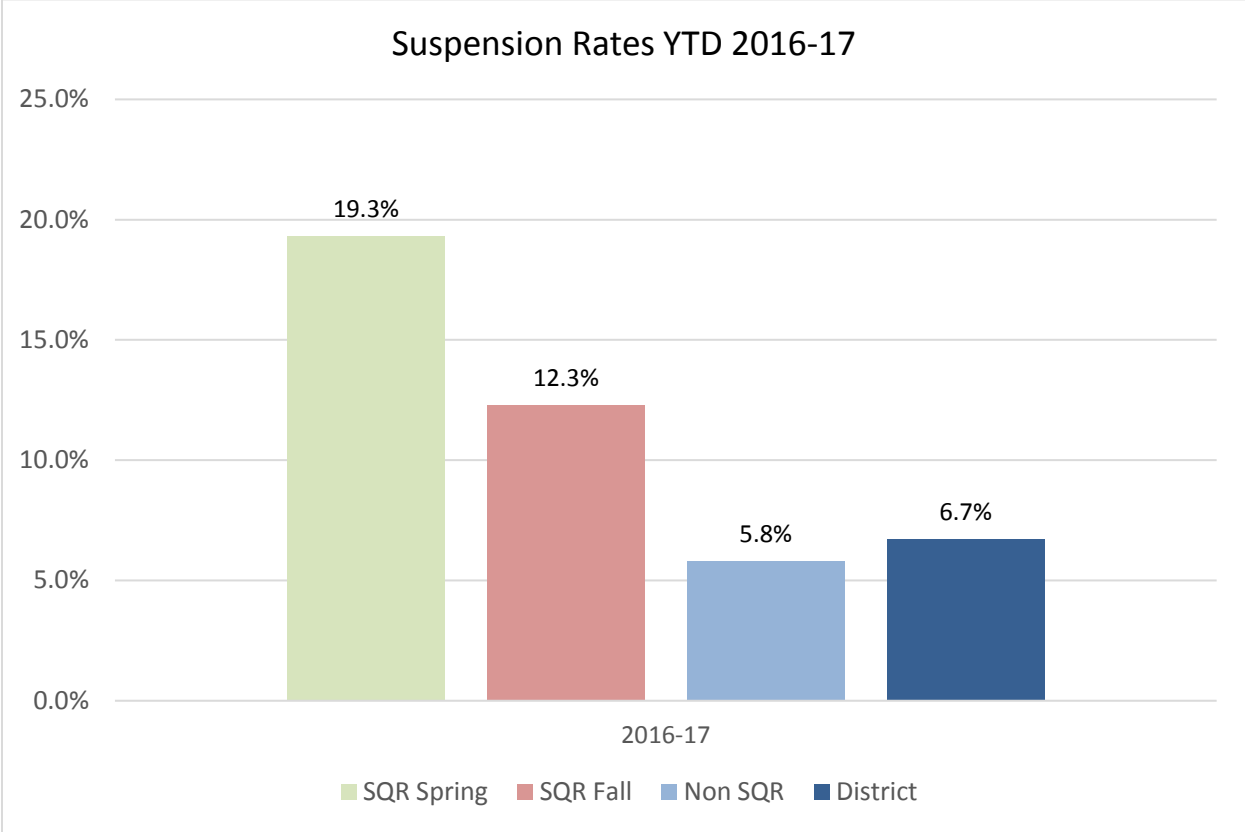
Table 1. Inequities in Student Enrollment: SQR Schools vs. Non-SQR Schools vs. the District 2016-17 YTD

School Type	FRL %	SpEd %	ELL %	Af Am %	Hispanic %	White%	Asian %	Native Am %	HI %	Other %
SQR Spring	87.7%	27.4%	8.6%	79.5%	12.7%	2.9%	4.5%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%
SQR Fall	82.6%	22.8%	6.3%	65.9%	22.2%	7.5%	3.5%	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Non-SQR Schools	75.7%	17.4%	10.9%	46.3%	29.7%	15.1%	8.1%	0.7%	0.1%	0.0%
MPS District (All)	78.7%	19.8%	9.8%	54.7%	25.8%	12.0%	6.8%	0.7%	0.1%	0.0%

As the table above illustrates, students with special education needs and African-American students are overrepresented in the SQR schools' enrollments. This trend has held true over recent years, and is not an emergent phenomenon.

Student Suspensions

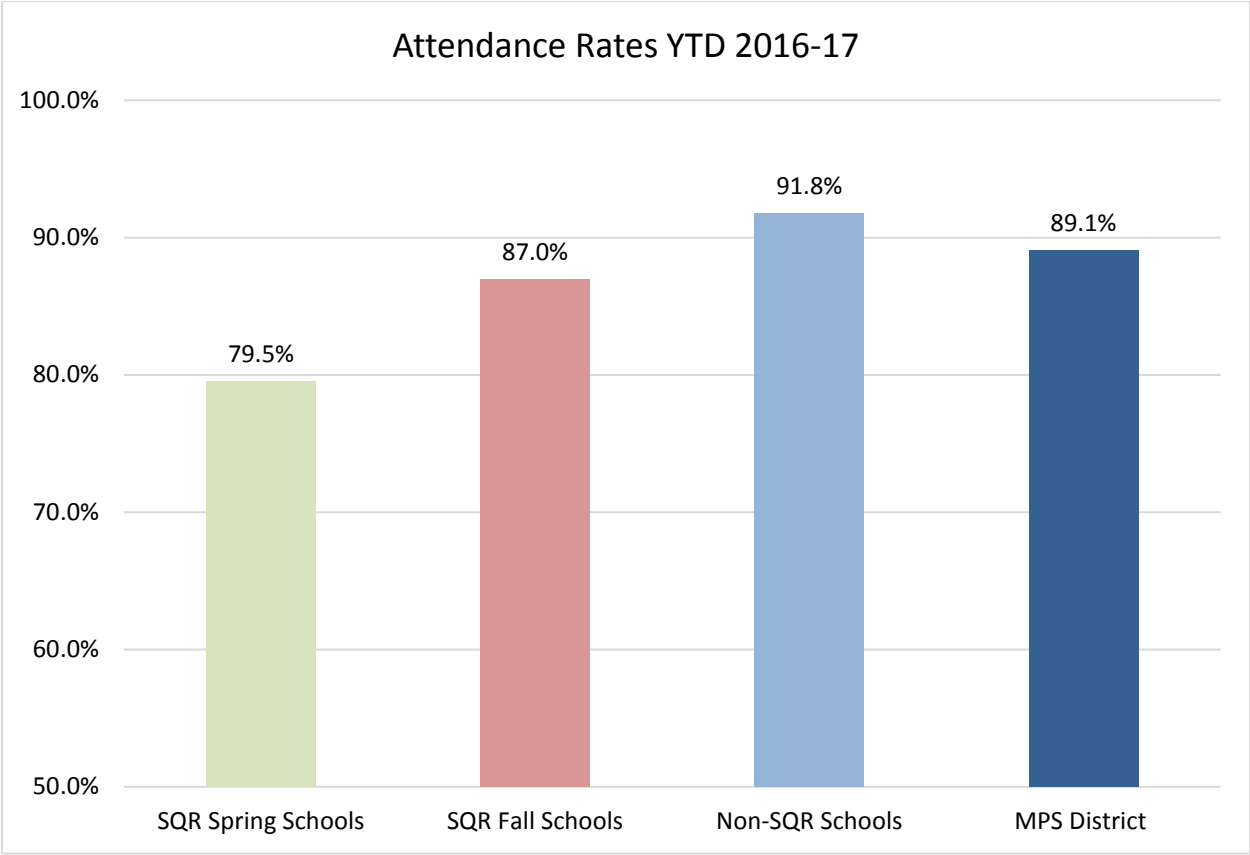
Chart 1. Differences in Suspension Rates: SQR Schools vs. Non-SQR Schools vs. the District 2016-17 YTD



Students in SQR schools are suspended at higher rates than in non-SQR schools. Again, the data shown here refer to suspension rates to date in the current school year, but are representative of trends that have held relatively stable for the past several years.

Student Attendance

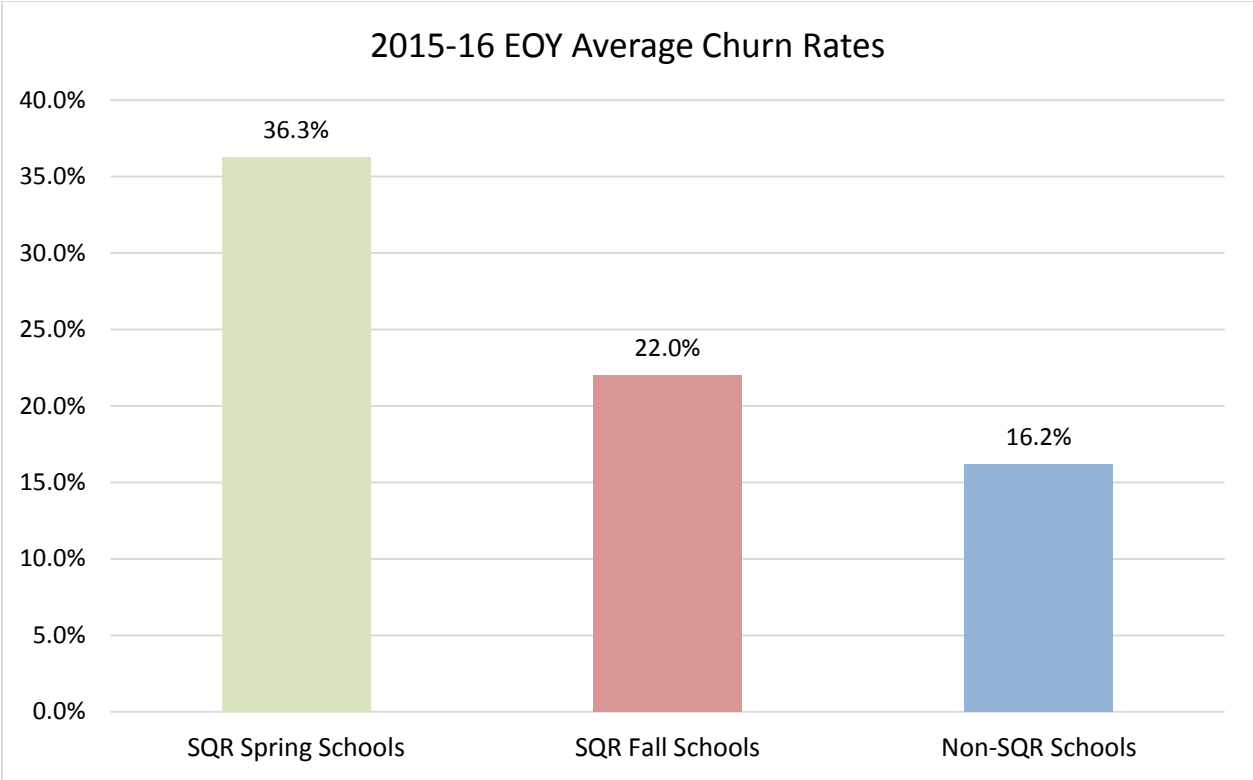
Chart 2. Differences in Attendance Rates: SQR Schools vs. Non-SQR Schools vs. the District 2016-17 YTD



Students in SQR schools attend at lower rates than in non-SQR schools.

Student Movement

Chart 3. Historical Average Churn Rate by School Type in 2015-16



The “churn rate” is the total percentage of students that either enroll late or withdraw early from a particular school. In SQR schools, the student population changes more over the course of the school year compared to non-SQR schools. The trends have been stable throughout the recent past within a few percentage points.

Staffing Vacancies

Table 2. Inequities in Staffing Vacancies by School Type for 2017-18

School Type	Current Vacancies for 2017-18	Percent of Schools
SQR Spring	68	13%
SQR Fall	40	15%
Non-SQR Schools	68	72%
MPS District (All)	176	100%

The table above displays the number of teaching (including librarians and counselors) vacancies by school type. The SQR schools included in the spring 2017 review account for 39% of all teaching staff vacancies in the district for the next school year, although the spring 2017 SQR schools only comprise 13% of total schools. In other words, SQR schools reviewed in the spring of 2017 have proportionally three times the number of vacancies as all MPS schools.

ACHIEVEMENT

The school demonstrates high levels of academic achievement in the core subjects, and the trend of achievement shows improvement at all grades and in all subjects. The school uses available student performance data to take and adjust actions to improve the quality of students' learning.

Overall, academic achievement is an area with more opportunities to grow than strengths for the 21 schools in the spring 2017 SQR. This is not particularly surprising, given that student performance on the Wisconsin Forward assessment is a major component of the school report cards issued by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

However, findings indicated some bright spots in specific areas among some schools. For instance, a few schools demonstrated progress in reading or math within the 2016-17 school year, according to STAR assessment results. Some schools also emphasized achievement through activities like a data wall, but this was not widespread.

Academic achievement was a strong area of aspiration for many schools. Focus-group participants, particularly students and parents, expressed a desire to see their school achieving at high levels. Parents at one high school said they would like to see that school “on the level of a Reagan or a King.” Students commonly said they wanted to go to college, and teachers generally agreed that they wanted achievement to be higher at their school.

The schools reviewed indicated a need for resources to assist them in reaching those aspirations. At several schools, students lacked basic academic resources, including paper, pencils, and adequate or culturally relevant textbooks.

CURRICULUM

The curriculum is relevant and appropriate to the needs of all children, across all grades, and for all sub-groups in the student population.

Although there were some strengths in terms of curriculum in the schools reviewed, this is generally an area where schools have more aspirations than strengths. Many of the schools reviewed had specific programs that are well-regarded and points of pride: for instance, the automotive program at Pulaski, the National Academy Foundation and culinary arts programs at James Madison and Washington High Schools, and arts integration in the Turnaround Arts schools.

Generally, school communities want to see these programs continue and grow. Students in specialty programs said they want the programs to expand so other students can participate. Teachers and leaders in schools that were once strong in their area of specialty (e.g., Carson, Elm, and Roosevelt) would like to see those programs return to their historical peak, and staff in schools with an arts focus expressed a desire to see arts more fully integrated across their curricula.

Some school staff expressed that they need specific tools to help their programs succeed. In particular, some of the leaders in specialty schools believe that the ability to hire teachers and enroll students who are aligned with and have an interest in their specialty would greatly enhance their school's focus.

Finally, some school resources appeared to be underused that could enhance the schools' curricula and offerings for students. For instance, libraries were observed to be commonly empty, and schools with art rooms and musical instruments were not being used.

TEACHING AND INSTRUCTION

Student learning, progress, and standards are a direct result of challenging instruction and high-quality teaching. Decisions are based on use of data and evidence.

Generally, the schools reviewed were in need of improvement in terms of teaching and instruction, but there was one common strength across multiple schools. The primary strength in each school was that there were a few teachers who were exemplary in terms of classroom management and/or delivering lessons that engage students, including the use of technology. Observation review teams often pointed to specific teachers as potential leaders for the school, suggesting that other teachers could learn skills and practices through observing them.

However, despite strong practices by some teachers, findings indicate a need for improvement. Procedures and classroom management techniques were not consistent across and within classrooms, and this often led to lost instructional time as teachers redirected behaviors. Furthermore, the behaviors that were redirected were sometimes minor, for example, students sharpening pencils during instruction, and could be prevented through a strong and consistent beginning or transition to lessons.

Students often appeared disengaged from academic lessons, and some of this appeared to be due to teaching practices. Teachers commonly did not provide opportunities for student discourse. For instance, teachers would ask simple recall questions, or teachers would ask more challenging questions of the class, but then answer their own question without providing students enough time to respond. Another common indicator of lack of engagement was that students were at their desks and quiet, but appeared to have nothing to do or working on low level assignments (e.g., worksheets) that appeared to be below their grade level. In fact, in more than one focus-group, students specifically requested work that is more challenging.

Technology is an additional area of opportunity for teaching and instruction. In some cases, technology was not used or underutilized. For example, students in one classroom were using Chromebooks, but appeared to be browsing non-academic websites. Furthermore, students in middle and high school were often distracted by their cell phones, and teachers either redirected students with minimal success or failed to redirect this behavior.

Teachers indicated that they wanted more consistent standard operating procedures for classroom management and transition times. One group emphasized that having these in place from the first day in the school year could make a large impact.

Teachers in some high schools indicated that there are students in the school who cannot read. The teachers said that resources to help students read are needed at the high school level, but currently high schools do not have any such resources.

Observation review teams also had suggestions for resources needed in this area. Schools could use support around how to use technology to appropriately engage students, and in some cases, technology resources were broken and in need of replacement before they could be used. Teams also mentioned that although learning intentions and success criteria were sometimes posted in classrooms, this was not a widespread practice, and often when they were posted, the intention and criteria were too abstract or vague to be helpful.

Finally, school leaders often pointed to the difficulty in attracting and retaining high quality teaching staff significantly impacts the quality of instruction in their school. During review observations, there were often many substitute teachers in the school, and lack of adequate staffing was a common theme among school staff. The extant data further indicate that 39% of teaching vacancies for the 2017-18 are in the schools reviewed.

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

The school has a high quality leadership and management team with a clear vision, ambition, and goals; a focus on student achievement; a sense of purpose and high aspirations; and strategies which impact directly on students' learning.

Schools varied quite widely in terms of the strength of leadership and management teams. Some administrators have the support of teachers, students, parents, and community partners. These groups mentioned that they especially appreciate their leader's accessibility, openness to new ideas, and desire to work with others.

On the other hand, other administrators did not appear to have the confidence or support of staff. During some teacher focus-groups, a tone of strife and distrust was detected. Also, in several of the observations, school administrators were not clearly present or were only in hallways and not seen in any classrooms.

A common theme that emerged was a lack of consistency in how disruptive behaviors are handled. Teachers and students alike expressed that some students are not held to the same standards as others, and this negatively impacts the school.

The school self-studies and teaching staff also mentioned that consistent leadership is needed, and some expressed frustration at the frequent turnover in school leadership. More than one school reviewed had a different principal during each of the last few years. School staff and observation review teams agreed that stable leadership is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for a school to make progress.

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The school has a safe and orderly environment and makes full use of its available resources, including technology, to directly impact student learning.

The culture and climate of schools could use improvement and, especially, consistency. A few schools pointed to successes in reduced behavioral issues compared with last year in their school self-studies, but this was not widespread. Observation teams saw some teachers who had developed respect and rapport with their students, as well as some administrators who had positive relationships with students. This was demonstrated through calling students by their first names, asking how they are doing outside of school, and an overall friendly demeanor, but, again, this was the exception rather than the rule.

Safety and disruptive student behavior was a common concern among school constituencies, including staff, parents, and students. In one high school, an observer saw a boy hitting a girl, and one school staff walked by without intervening before another school staff member stopped the behavior. Furthermore, although friendliness toward students is generally a positive school cultural practice, in some cases the friendliness with students seemed to overshadow staffs' responsibilities to them. For instance, some school safety staff appeared to act more as friends to students, allowing them to remain in hallways talking with their friends after class had started, and not encouraging them to get into class.

Some teacher behavior also caused concern. It was sometimes observed that instructional staff appeared to create conflict with students, by, for instance, asking, "Why do you always...?" There is also a need for consistent policies and procedures around cell phone use and expectations for students in the classroom. In one high school, students were using a large amount of profanity in the classroom, and the teacher did not redirect this behavior.

A contributing factor to climate and culture challenges may be the higher than average "churn rates"¹ in the schools studied. For example, during the 2015-16 school year, schools in the spring SQR had an average churn rate of 36%, compared with 16% in non-SQR schools.

The challenges in culture and climate were often acknowledged by school communities. Teachers, students, and parents commonly expressed a desire for more orderly, safe, and respectful learning environments. Some teachers expressed that having standard operating procedures set from the beginning of the school year would help their school improve. Generally, there was not a sense of clear and consistent application of procedures both in and out of the classroom to address student behavior.

¹ The "churn rate" is the total percentage of students that either enroll late or withdraw early from a particular school.

In addition to culture and climate, the physical environment of schools was a cause for concern. Although some of the schools observed had bright classrooms and clean hallways, the majority of the schools have issues with their physical environments. More often, observers saw broken fixtures and lights, inadequate or even no lighting in classrooms, cluttered classrooms (desks stacked along the wall), dirty hallways and bathrooms, broken furniture, and walls that were a neutral color and bare. Observers commonly remarked that they would like to see student work posted.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH PARENTS/GUARDIANS AND COMMUNITY

The school has a range of regular, two-way methods for communicating with parents, guardians, and the wider community and takes steps to encourage active engagement in the education of their children and involvement in the life of the school.

The schools reviewed had a mix of parental support. Some schools had several parents attend focus-groups, others had a few but committed number of parents attend, while other schools had no parents attend focus-groups. Although parents in one school expressed frustration at the school's lack of progress, parents were generally supportive of their child's school and believed that progress was possible.

Similarly to parents/guardians, schools had a range in the number of community partners who attended focus-groups. One school had 10 partners attend, but another school had none. Partners tended to be very supportive of schools, and some expressed a desire to align more closely with the school and with each other to address school needs.

While the involvement of partners in focus-groups varied from school to school, there was a general consensus among teachers, parents, and partners that schools underutilize partnerships. For instance, Pulaski is located in a business- and organization-rich environment, and it was suggested that they could partner with nearby St. Luke's Hospital, as an example, to expose students to careers in health care.

Suggestions were made by partners and others that would help strengthen school partnerships with the community. One partner wanted to establish regular meetings between partners and school leadership to allow for more communication and alignment of efforts. Another resource that would help strengthen partnerships was a clear message from the district on what partnerships are, how they can help school achieve their missions, and guidance on how to establish and manage them.

NEXT STEPS

This report summarizes results from the 21 schools reviewed during the spring of 2017. As stated in the introduction, there will be an SQR for the other 21 of the 42 lowest-performing schools, along with three School Improvement Grant (SIG) schools, during the fall of 2017. In addition to those schools, a mixture of five schools that have shown performance growth or in the process of “turnaround,” will be reviewed to compare and contrast with the findings with schools on the lowest-performing list.

While the main purpose of the SQR process was to gain a broader perspective on the district’s 42 lowest-performing schools, particularly in terms of resource allocation, the results could be used in other district activities. For instance, the reports could help schools inform their School Improvement Plan, and/or used as a method for schools and regional teams to more fully align their efforts, based on the congruence of what school leadership believes the school needs for supports and what supports the regional team believes are needed.

It is important to note that although this report is organized by the six review criteria, the criteria are interrelated. For instance, stability and strength of leadership and management impacts the trust among staff, which impacts staff stability and buy-in into initiatives and common practices. Similarly, the perception that these schools are failing is related to student churn rates and difficulty attracting high quality teachers, which in turn impedes a school’s ability to improve student performance. While there is merit in focusing on particular areas of need, it is suggested that the interrelated nature of instruction, curriculum, learning environment, leadership, partnerships, and achievement are taken into consideration when reviewing SQR findings and reports.

Finally, the SQR teams raised some topics for consideration when they met to reflect on the process regarding the implications of SQR findings for the district. It was suggested that the SQR process could be intentionally mapped to align more fully with other initiatives, such as regional walkthroughs that use Danielson’s Framework, particularly in terms of aligning supports to schools. Another suggestion was that our district continue to operationalize key terms and best practices, including student engagement, high quality instruction, and positive relationships. Finally SQR reviewers wanted to continue to focus on how we can best prioritize our efforts to maximize student outcomes.