

# CDE SCHOOL SUPPORT TEAM REPORT

## Northeast Academy

### SECTION 1 - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

October 14 – 16, 2009

#### INTRODUCTION:

The school support team conducted a comprehensive review of **Northeast Academy** during the period of **October 14 to October 16, 2009**.

The school support team activities included a review of the school's essential documents, classroom observations (31), formal interviews and informal discussions with k-8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers (20), students (29), parents (5), Special Education personnel (1), front office personnel (3), custodian (3), principal (1), assistant principal (1), business manager (1), registrar (1), cafeteria staff (2), classified staff (4), library (1), and other support personnel (3).

The Standards and Indicators for School Improvement rubric was the primary assessment instrument used during the visit. The team also compiled results from surveys, written documents, and other artifacts. All of these results were considered in the development of this report.

The school support's review report was based upon examination of the documents provided in the school portfolio, team experiences, and observations. The specific findings and recommendations are organized under the headings of Academic Performance, Learning Environment and Organizational Effectiveness. Each of the ten standards for success is addressed in the following pages.

#### **Academic Performance:**

The following Academic Performance Standards address curriculum, classroom evaluation/assessment, and instruction.

- Standard 1:** The school develops and implements a curriculum that is rigorous, intentional, and aligned to state and local standards.
- Standard 2:** The school utilizes multiple evaluation and assessment strategies to continuously monitor and modify instruction to meet student needs and support proficient student work.
- Standard 3:** The school's instructional program actively engages all students by using effective, varied, and research-based practices to improve student performance.

## **Learning Environment:**

The following Learning Environment Standards address school culture, student family, community support, professional growth, development, and evaluation.

**Standard 4:** The school/district functions as an effective learning community and supports a climate conducive to performance excellence.

**Standard 5:** The school/district works with families and community groups to remove barriers to learning in an effort to meet the intellectual, social, career, and development needs of students.

**Standard 6:** The school/district provides research-based professional development opportunities for staff and implements performance evaluation procedures in order to improve teaching and learning.

## **Organizational Effectiveness:**

The following Organizational Effectiveness Standards address leadership, school structure, resources and comprehensive and effective planning.

**Standard 7:** School/district instructional decisions focus on support for teaching and learning, organizational direction, high performance expectations, creating a learning culture, and developing leadership capacity.

**Standard 8:** The organization of the school/district maximizes use of time, all available space, and other resources to maximize teaching and learning and support high student and staff performance.

**Standard 9:** The school/district develops, implements, and evaluates a comprehensive school improvement plan that communicates a clear purpose, provides direction, and an action plan focused on teaching and learning.

**Standard 10:** The school demonstrates strong leadership through their procedures to promote their mission, their strategic planning, current knowledge of legislative issues, policy development, commitment to professional development, provision of resources, oversight/support of administrator, ability to build effective committees, and established networked community relationships.

The full report contains the following sections: a “detail report” of how the school scored on Standards 1 through 9. The detail reports describe the team’s findings on the indicators for each standard and the sources of evidence used to substantiate the findings. The numbers listed in the performance level section tie directly to the rubrics that were used in the school review. The numbers indicate the following:

1. Little or no development and implementation (Red)
2. Limited development or partial implementation (Black)
3. Fully functioning and operational level of development and implementation (Blue)
4. Exemplary level of development and implementation (Green)

The landscape summary shows how the school scored on all of the standards. The report also includes this executive summary, which presents specific themes observed by the team and provides commendations and recommendations.

### **COMMENDATIONS:**

- The administration and staff care deeply about the students and want them to succeed.
- A positive culture of respect has been created.
- The facility is clean and well taken care of.
- Parents are very pleased with the safe atmosphere of the school.
- Students enjoy the school and are eager to talk about school.
- The principal has established a large number of community partnerships.
- The school is welcoming and hospitable.
- Enrollment is increasing as a result of high parent satisfaction rates.
- The leadership and school personnel are committed to serving low-income students.
- The school's focus on character development has helped reduce discipline problems. Students are polite and friendly.

### **RECOMMENDED STRATEGIC ACTIONS:**

Northeast Academy was born out of a desire to reach underserved students from low-income homes. The compassion that led to the creation of the school is still evident today. The administration, classified staff, teachers and the support staff genuinely care about their students. They want them to succeed at school. They want them to strive beyond low expectations and achieve their dreams.

When the current principal was hired at Northeast Academy, he was given the charge to create a positive culture, ensure the building was safe and clean, and establish community connections. These areas are now all strengths of Northeast Academy, and form a strong foundation on which the school can continue to grow. Although much positive work has been done over the past several years, there is still progress to be made. The academic growth of students is not as strong as it should be. The school needs to embrace high expectations for student learning on a more consistent basis. The principal spends much of his time on the aforementioned areas, in addition to significant time with student discipline. The assistant principal is charged with discipline and the area of curriculum and instruction. In reality, most of her time is spent on discipline. This creates a void in the area of instructional leadership which the review team believes is reflected in the performance of the teaching staff and the students.

In observing classroom instruction, the team sees a need for higher, more consistent student engagement in learning. Teachers need to energize and engage students in the Core Knowledge curriculum. It is uncertain whether staff has the training to implement this curriculum. The care the staff has for the students should translate more consistently into dynamic teaching that students willingly participate in. If student engagement levels are higher, less energy will be needed for discipline by teachers, aides, and administration. It is often unclear what the role of education aides is, and if they have been trained for that role. In some classes, the aides seem to be a distraction to learning rather than a help. In some classes, the aides presence in the classroom during instruction, served a reminder for students to pay attention, rather than provide instructional support or guidance for students needing additional help.

The school often looks to nearby public schools for best practices and inspiration. Given that achievement rates are generally no better and sometimes worse at neighboring schools, looking to them may be counterproductive. Instead, the team recommends Northeast Academy develop relationships with other successful Core Knowledge charter schools in the state to use as a model of best practices.

This report groups the issues identified by the CSSI team into three themes:

**Major Theme 1: Instruction and Learning**

**Major Theme 2: Data Driven Culture**

**Major Theme 3: Organization**

When addressing these issues, Northeast Academy needs to know that it is not alone. There are other charter schools in the state that are willing to share best practices. The Colorado Department of Education's Schools of Choice Unit provides many resources. Templates of school planning documents, policies, procedures, mission statements, visions statements and other documents are available at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/index.htm](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/guidebook/index.htm). Additionally, CSSI has its own step-by-step guide to addressing each standard. The Resource Handbook is available at [www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/download/CSSIHandbookFinal07-08.pdf](http://www.cde.state.co.us/cdechart/download/CSSIHandbookFinal07-08.pdf).

**Major Theme 1: Instruction and Learning**

Instruction was the number one challenge identified by the review team. The test data have not improved as the school culture has improved. Student performance even among individuals who have been with the school for several years remains consistently low. Some teachers were unaware of the need for improvement of academic performance. The team has one recommendation which it believes will bring significant change in this area, and will influence most of the other recommendations under this theme. Since the principal and assistant principal are extremely busy with other areas of the school, the team believes the school should hire a director or assistant principal of instruction to oversee only the academic programs of the school. This would preserve the many positive elements of the school, and allow one

administrator to focus purely on academics. The team recommends this person come from outside the current staff. This person would be focused full time on improving classroom instruction, disaggregating and using student academic data, professional development, observing, modeling and coaching, and curriculum.

***Short Term Recommendations (Year 1):***

- Hire a curriculum director with many years of experience with the curriculum, coaching and mentoring staff, data disaggregation, professional development and instructional best practices.
- Set clear guidelines for teachers on good classroom management.
- Establish consistent expectations for student engagement for the instructional staff.
- Provide regular feedback to staff regarding classroom management and engagement.
- Set forth clear and concise job descriptions for the educational aides
- Ensure that aide duties support instruction and do not distract from it.
- Establish higher, more consistent expectations of academic rigor and the development of higher order thinking skills.
- Instill students with confidence as they achieve at higher levels.
- Provide teachers training in classroom management and student engagement.
- Increase energy and pacing of instruction.
- Protect instructional time from distractions such as announcements.
- Establish norms for use of classroom time and time on task.
- Ensure all teachers are highly qualified.
- Create common planning time for each grade level teacher to meet and plan common instructional goals daily, along with opportunities to review classroom assessments (quizzes, tests, etc.)
- Identify essential learning targets in each content area to create engaging learning opportunities-lesson plans and effective assessment resources.
- Establish school-wide best practice instructional minutes for literacy (reading/writing) and math instructions.
- Create rubrics in each content area for students to acknowledge in advance, learning expectations.

***Long Term Recommendations (Year 2 and beyond):***

- Develop a long term comprehensive professional development plan.
- Evaluate teachers consistently based on clear criteria for student engagement.
- Renewal decisions for instructional staff should be tied to the ability to deliver quality instruction.
- Have a sample lesson be a regular part of the hiring process for new teachers.
- Increase expectations for teaching staff.

- Create a master curriculum map.
- Increase instructional delivery expectations for teaching staff and support staff (educational aides).
- Hire English Language Acquisition personnel to address the educational needs of the growing second language population.

**Questions to Consider:**

*What training do we need to excel with the Core Knowledge curricula we have chosen?*

*How are we sharing best practices with each other?*

*How can we maximize instructional time through better classroom management?*

*What are reasonable strategies to meet the needs of all learners in our classrooms?*

*How can the staff quickly ramp up the pacing of instruction?*

*What successful Core Knowledge charter schools can we partner with?*

*How effective is modeling best practice after DPS schools?*

*Can current instructional staff make the necessary changes in instruction with consistent guidance?*

*If our ELL population continues to increase, how will we address meeting their educational needs?*

**Major Theme 2: Data Driven Culture**

Northeast Academy has remained a low performing school in spite of an improving positive culture. As stated earlier, some staff members were unaware of the need to increase academic performance of students. The middle school team has begun to collaborate with each other to analyze data, identify best practices, and more consistently implement effective teaching. The SPF for middle school is beginning to show improved results. Similar efforts would benefit the elementary school. A major part of all these discussions and the weekly faculty meetings should be actual student assessment data. CSAP, benchmark testing, curriculum imbedded assessment, and others should be routinely analyzed. Instruction should be designed and modified to address areas of concern raised by analyzing data. Professional development, teacher retention, hiring, planning, resource allocation, and organizational structure should all be evaluated in light of student achievement data. While a positive culture of caring and respect is evident, the school needs to also embrace the achievement data so that students are more likely to leave Northeast Academy with the skills and abilities to successfully complete a challenging high school program. In short, the school needs to develop a culture of success with decisions driven by data.

**Short Term Recommendations (Year 1):**

- Evaluate the schools success by student learning rather than teacher presentation of lessons.
- Make extensive use of the Alpine Achievement system to look at individual student growth.
- Disaggregate data to identify general strengths and weaknesses.
- Ensure that weekly plans are aligned to standards.
- Hire an experienced director or assistant principal to oversee instruction.
- Set aside time each week to meet with teachers to analyze student data.
- Establish common planning time with the expectation that teachers will collaborate on lesson plans, data analysis, and problem solving.
- Conduct a formal needs assessment to determine individual and group professional development needs that align with data analysis.
- Develop a professional development plan based on student data, teacher evaluations and school goals.
- Develop expectations for math instruction and assessment that are consistent at each grade level.
- Work with a Core Knowledge partner school to allow teachers to visit classrooms of successful schools.
- Base teacher renewal decisions, at least in part, on student academic growth.
- Provide more opportunities for students to demonstrate performance by creating effective learning engagement opportunities.
- Create instructional – assessment rubrics for students to acknowledge learning targets and reach higher goals.
- Conduct student conferences after data has been compiled for students to review results and set personal educational learning goals in each content area.
- Establish common planning time at each grade level for teachers to plan appropriately and consistently, which will create opportunities to review assessment results and ongoing monitoring of student progress.
- Evaluate the school's programs for Special Education, Title I, ELL, and Gifted to ensure legal compliance and effectiveness. Make changes as necessary.
- Develop a systematic approach to collecting and analyzing data, then using that analysis to modify instruction
- Train teachers on how to use data to modify instruction and individualize instruction for each student.
- Evaluate remediation programs and make changes as necessary.

***Long Term / Ongoing (Year 2 and Beyond):***

- Recruit teachers that have experienced a data driven culture in a previous school.
- Increase the number of professional development days at the beginning of the year and once a month thereafter.
- Consider using a nationally-normed test like NWEA for ongoing and timely feedback instead of DPS benchmark testing.
- Analyze NWEA results against Virtual Comparison Groups.
- Consider additional assessments for struggling and gifted learners

### **Questions to Consider:**

- Does the teaching staff know all the data we are collecting?
- Do we collect and review student results in a timely and ongoing manner to address individual students learning needs?
- What are we doing with data once we collect it?
- How is data analysis informing/changing instruction?
- What does it mean to be “standards based”?
- How do we build leadership capacity to use data within our staff?
- What can we learn from those schools that are excelling in this area?
- How do we incorporate new staff into a data driven culture as the school matures?

### **Major Theme 3: Organization**

Northeast Academy has undergone many changes since its inception. The organization has had more principals than years of operation. While some of this can be attributed to the normal struggles of a start-up organization, the lack of stability has been difficult for the school. In some ways, the school seems like a first or second year school rather than one that is five years old. The current principal has provided stability and energy to the school. He has created a safe learning environment for students, along with an increase in student enrollment and parent involvement, which is reflected in the increase of diverse student population. He has built a positive, safe, respectful school culture. The current board of directors has recently been seated. Since the normal standards (10 & 11) for board and finance were not requested for this visit, little is known about the activity of the board. The team recommends that these two standards be evaluated at the earliest possible date.

The school is pursuing many extra programs and partnerships. While most of these are positive efforts, it does not seem that there is a consistent organized approach. Additionally, the budget is developed primarily by the CPA, with some input from the business manager and little input from the principal and assistant principal. This creates a resource allocation procedure that is less responsive to academic needs that is currently needed at the school. The school should also consider an organizational structure where there are clear lines of authority and decision making processes. Any organizational decisions should be tied to the mission of the school, especially the academically rigorous section of that mission.

### **Short Term Recommendations (Year 1):**

- Make academic achievement the focus of budgeting decisions.
- Formally evaluate all school programs to ensure high quality implementation, results and alignment with school goals.
- Evaluate new program ideas for research-proven effectiveness with the target population and coherency with existing programs.
- Re-evaluate the cost and effectiveness of the high number of educational assistants, custodians, and office personnel.
- Monitor compliance with the “conflict of interest policy.”
- Schedule board training in effective governance for the new board.
- Involve the instructional staff in the School Improvement Plan process and make the document usable.
- Ensure background checks are completed and filed for volunteers.
- Ensure personnel files are complete and that all teachers have documentation regarding their highly qualified status.
- Adjust classes to meet class size limits.

***Long Term / Ongoing (Year 2 and Beyond):***

- Conduct a needs assessment for budgeting purposes on an annual basis.
- Formalize effective practices and programs, eliminate ineffective ones.
- Add structure to staff meetings and grade level meetings.
- Define roles more clearly within the organization.

***Questions to Consider:***

- What informal practices need to be formalized?
- Would an employee satisfaction survey be informative?
- What organizational documents need updating?
- What community relationships are most supportive for the school?
- How can structuring team meetings and staff meetings improve productivity?
- What assistance and resources are available to us?
- What role will each staff member play in the implementation of the School Improvement Plan?
- How can all parts of the mission be made actionable and relevant in the school community?

## **IN CONCLUSION:**

The CSSI team extends its assurances that the team strived for objectivity in its findings. Most importantly, we commend **Northeast Academy** for its willingness to undergo an evaluation and for its desire to grow and become one of the top schools in the state.