



Nebraska Framework Schools Continuous Improvement External Team Visitation Report

Grand Island Public Schools
Grand Island, Nebraska
January 16-18, 2019





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External Visitation Team Members

Team Leader: Sarah Salem, Lincoln Public Schools

Sarah Salem	Director of Continuous Improvement & Professional Learning Lincoln Public Schools
Kristen Abueg	Leadership & Learning Facilitator Millard Public Schools
Terry Bauer	High School Principal Silver Lake Public Schools
Dianah Steinbrink	Teaching & Learning Coordinator Educational Service Unit 10
Kelly Simmons	Counselor Wilcox-Hildreth Public Schools
Trent Benjamin	McDonald Elementary School North Platte Public Schools
Hillary Bentley	Title 1/Future Problem Solvers/Junior Class Sponsor Elwood Public Schools
Blake Thompson	Assistant Principal/AD Harvard Public Schools
Sarah Hansen	6th grade teacher Central Valley Public Schools
Rachel Hanson	Special Education k-6 Wallace School District
Lane Carr	Director of Accountability and AQuESTT Nebraska Department of Education
Kellie Joy	Principal, Lakeview Elementary Lincoln Public Schools



Onsite Review Agenda

According to *Rule 10, Regulations and Procedures for the Accreditation of Schools*, all Nebraska schools are required to conduct an annual review of their school improvement process and overall advancement toward district and school goals. In addition, an external visit is required at least once every five years.

The external review team arrived on-site on the evening of January 16, 2019 for a district presentation and overview. District staff presented important district data, including information about demographics, student achievement, attendance, and district programs. The external team used that information, in addition to school and district documents provided by the GIPS staff, to begin to analyze the evidence and determine areas for further investigation.

Starting the next day, the external team split into sub groups to conduct site visits at a sample of Grand Island schools. Each group was assigned to visit one school in the morning and one school in the afternoon. Visits at each site included presentations from school staff, student interviews, staff interviews, parent interviews and classroom observations. In addition, a stakeholder interview of board members and community members was conducted at the district office. The evening of January 17th was additional time for the external team to discuss their findings, evaluate their experiences, and gain additional clarity around strengths and opportunities for the Grand Island Public Schools. After additional work-time on the morning of Friday, January 18, a summary of the findings was presented to the GIPS leadership team.

Overall, the external team visited 8 school sites, conducted interviews with 139 students, 64 parents and stakeholders, 119 staff members, and conducted over 24 hours of classroom observations.



GIPS District Overview

As the fourth largest city in Nebraska, Grand Island Public Schools continues to grow with new residents attracted to jobs in the community each year. Over the past 10 years, Grand Island Public Schools has grown by 20 percent and has become significantly more diverse. It now serves students from many ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds with Hispanic students representing the largest portion of the student population.

The district includes a preschool, thirteen elementary schools, three middle schools, an alternative middle school, one senior high school, an alternative high school and a career academy campus. Combined, these buildings house over 9,800 students. GIPS has invested in 1:1 technology, created a leading-edge Career Pathways program, and adopted best practices at the district, school, and classroom levels. The district employs approximately 1,500 staff members.



Overview of Improvement Process

The Grand Island Public Schools have embarked on an ambitious strategic plan that will guide their work over the next few years, and beyond. Centered around the four pillars of EMPOWER, PERSONALIZE, DESIGN, and PARTNER, Grand Island Public Schools has a clear theory of action to take their district to the next level of student achievement and success. Using the strategic plan, each school submits an action plan each year. To help schools evaluate and monitor their goals, each school participates in a one-day workshop to help school teams evaluate and analyze their progress.

While each school sets their own school goals for achievement and student success based on academic benchmarks, Grand Island Public Schools has crafted 11 measurable goals to ensure they are providing equitable outcomes for all students across the district. These goals include

1. Increased percentage of incoming kindergartners having participated in a high-quality early childhood education experience.
2. Increased percentage of students meeting or exceeding proficiency every year across all assessed grades and subjects assessed on the Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA) centralized state testing process.
3. Decreased achievement gaps among all student sub-groups on state accountability tests.
4. Decreased percentage of students who are absent 15 or more days as reported by Nebraska Department of Education (Excessive Absenteeism).
5. Decreased number of students who are suspended or expelled and a reduction in disproportionate (by race/ethnicity, poverty, and identified disability) suspensions and expulsions.
6. Increased percentage of students with a high level of school connectedness and high commitment to learning.
7. Increased percentage of students self-reporting growth mindset, self-efficacy, self-management, and social awareness.
8. Increased percentage of students on track to graduate at 3rd, 8th, and 9th grades.
9. Increased percentage of students graduating from high school in four years.
10. Increased percentage of students graduating with one or more of the following:
Industry certification.
 - College credit for at least one course.
 - A score of three or higher on at least one Advanced Placement (AP) exam.
 - A score meeting ACT college readiness benchmarks for each tested subject.
 - Completion of one or more Grand Island Preparatory Academies (GIPAs) pathways.
11. Increased percentage of students enrolled in postsecondary education, enlisted in military, or employed six months after graduation.



District Commendations

1. Grand Island Public Schools has fostered a strong focus on instructional leadership.

The most important school factor in determining student outcomes is the quality of instruction each student is provided. Grand Island Public Schools is committed to enhancing the instructional leadership of the administration, instructional coaches, teachers, and specialists. This commitment to high quality instructional practices is evident based on the resources and professional learning opportunities the district has invested in. Evidence to support this include, empower hour, partnership with Learning Sciences International, and through professional development opportunities locally, statewide, and nationally.

Interviews with staff demonstrated an overwhelming appreciation for the Instructional Coaches in each school. These coaches support all staff members as they implement and reflect on their teaching practices. One teacher said, “Our coach is a wealth of knowledge, does a lot of professional development, and helps us implement strategies right away with tips so we can get things up and running.” Instructional leaders, such as principals and district administrators support this work through their commitment to professional learning communities, instructional rounds, data analysis, and constructive feedback. Staff appreciate the continued focus on instructional leadership in the district.

2. The district is committed to student-centered learning environments and student-centered decision making.

Within Grand Island Public Schools there are many ways for students and teachers to personalize the educational opportunities available to them. Key decisions are made with a focus on the individual needs of students. District-wide, the Response to Intervention (RTI) process is a fully functional model that utilizes district screeners to place students in appropriate interventions, progress monitor, and adapt and refer students to additional supports as necessary. During interviews, school staff were well informed and reported using data and the RTI process to make decisions that are best for each individual child.

In addition to a strong system of interventions, the external team noticed that teachers consistently post clear learning targets for all lessons. This powerful practice empowers students to take ownership of their education and reflect on their own personal progress. “They know it, they learn it, they OWN it,” said one teacher. Prior to each administration of the NWEA MAP test, students set personalized growth goals to help them understand and monitor their own improvement. Throughout many of the staff interviews the external team heard how teachers are utilizing collaborative learning groups across grade levels and curriculum to empower students and foster learning. In addition, this was confirmed during classroom observations. Positive student-teacher relationships were evident across all of the schools visited.

Another major theme that shows the district’s commitment to providing unique and student-centered opportunities is the many GIPS partnerships with the community. These community agencies provide a variety of after school educational opportunities, extension activities, and engage students in interest-based learning. The GIPS high school Academy pathways also draw on these community partnerships to provide personalized and authentic curriculum to secondary students.

3. A positive culture and “GIPS pride” permeate the district and the community.

It was evident from the beginning of the review that community stakeholders have a strong sense of GIPS pride and confidence in the direction of the school system. Community members and parents believe the perception of Grand Island Public Schools has positively shifted in the last ten years, and that GIPS is known as an innovative district throughout the state. GIPS staff and families are excited about the present and future relationships with the community and its business partnerships, both during and outside of the school hours. The community is involved in curriculum development at the high school academies and during the after-school enrichment programs. As stated by a teacher in the district, “In the end, we all achieve something grand, greater than we could individually.”

The community repeatedly highlighted GIPS staff as a major asset to the school system. One parent commented that GIPS staff are, “composed of supportive and caring individuals who provide a quality education for all students.” Teachers commented that the school board and administration support their teaching efforts. It was noticeable that there is strong morale between the staff. As one teacher stated, “I have been here a long time and would not want to teach anywhere else.” Students see their teachers as helpful and caring. “Our school wants the best for us and for us to be the best person we can be.”

4. Grand Island benefits from visionary leadership from the board, district leadership, school administrators and school staff.

The Grand Island Public Schools excel in the area of visionary leadership on all levels. This visionary leadership model is led by an imaginative, creative, enterprising, and hopeful common thread that helps lead the district in an innovative manner. As the district continues to progress with this visionary leadership, communication will be key in order to streamline the future visionary success. The school board is actively involved in the educational process and welcomed by district administration to be an integral part of district planning. This is evident in the board data retreats, data analysis, and the overall involvement the board has in measuring and monitoring specific student outcomes. The external team heard on more than one occasion that the board is always looking forward to see what is possible. Indeed, one school board member commented, “Our school board did not hit the ‘easy button’ during its strategic planning process.” This commitment to rigorous goals and expectations of excellence is appreciated by the community.

Having a vision is important, but having the effective people in place to appropriately implement that vision is a higher-level concept that the district of GIPS is highly successful in achieving. District and school administrators, as well as school staff felt confident in the vision and direction of the district.



District Recommendations

1. Continue to refine and clarify the district PLC process and expectations.

GIPS has made a substantial investment in the PLC process, with school staff benefitting from a set aside time each week for collaboration. The external team found a strong foundation of teacher collaboration and data analysis at many of the school sites visited. In addition, it was observed that school administrators play an active role in supporting PLC work. While teachers overwhelmingly appreciate this time to focus on student needs, the use of PLC time was found to be fairly variable between schools and between PLC groups. The external visitation team recommends additional refinement, monitoring, and communication about the processes and procedures that ensure effective outcomes for all PLC teams.

2. Formalize and communicate the process for program evaluation at the school and district levels.

Grand Island Public Schools is an ambitious district with many initiatives, each specifically designed to support students academically and socially. Based on a thorough review of school and district action plans, and interviews with staff and administration, the external visitation team observed a wide array of focus areas and initiatives at the different school sites. GIPS should consider how they can develop a systematic way to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, interventions, and action steps that are being used throughout the district. This information can then be used to prioritize efforts and resources that have the greatest impact on student learning.

During staff interviews, staff reported the language within the Marzano evaluation program in conjunction with LSI, WIN time, PLCs and other district initiatives, can be overwhelming, and can impact their ability to monitor each program as effectively as they would like. By formalizing and communicating a process for program evaluation, staff will develop a clear understanding around the effectiveness of their action plans and can more easily prioritize their future action steps for success.

3. Bolster current efforts to solicit authentic input and engagement from all stakeholders, representative of the student population, in order to facilitate the most equitable educational opportunities for all children.

Grand Island has committed to a bold, community-changing vision for educational equity, including the reduction of achievement gaps, and a strong focus on reducing disproportionality in student discipline rates. One way to realize this goal is to create a comprehensive plan to engage parents from different communities, including English learners, immigrant families, families of color, and families living in poverty to better understand concerns and to make representative voices heard. Community members and parents suggested the district might increase their outreach in churches, community employers, and community centers that are highly representative of the student population. By monitoring the representative membership on stakeholder input groups and soliciting authentic two-way communication with all community members, GIPS will be in a position to clearly communicate the district vision for equity and the impact that vision has on resource allocation and decision making.



Next Steps for GIPS

Next Steps:

1. Celebrate the commendations and the great work that is happening in the Grand Island Public Schools!
2. Review the report from a district perspective and begin to address the recommendations through your continuous improvement process and strategic planning.
3. Develop a plan to address each of the recommendations as part of your strategic/action planning at each school.

By focusing effort on the next steps, GIPS will be well on its way to another successful cycle of continuous improvement for the benefit of students, staff, and the broader Grand Island community.