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Winnisquam Regional School District Core Practice Audit Report

Benchmarking Your Practices to Higher Performing School Systems

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Submitted By:

National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA)
8701 North MoPac Expressway, Suite 200
Austin, TX 78759

Efrain Mercado, Director of Outreach
Phone: 512.320.1800
E-mail: emercado@nc4ea.org

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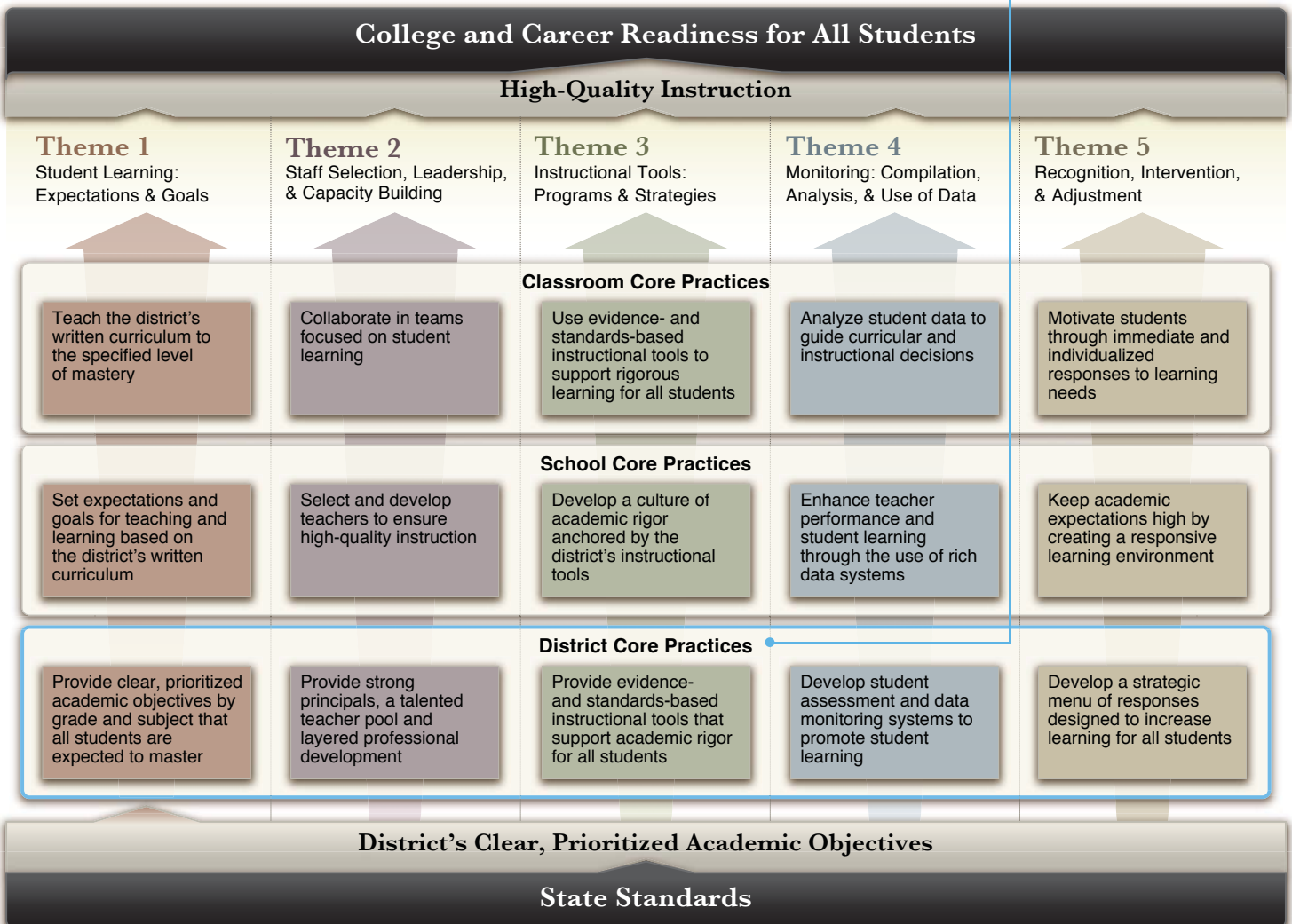
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Introduction

This report presents the findings and recommendations of a Core Practice Audit conducted by the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA) for the Winnisquam Regional School District (WRSD) during the first semester of the 2010-11 school year. The audit focused on the fundamental principles of teaching and learning as identified from the study of consistently higher performing school systems and represented in the NCEA Core Practice Framework.

While the Framework presents the practices of higher performing school systems at three organizational levels—district, school and classroom—the Winnisquam Regional School District audit focused on a study of the practices at the district level only.

The Core Practice Framework



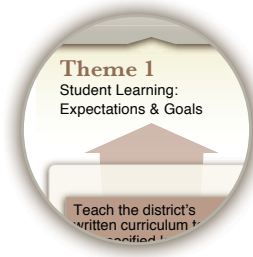
Research Base

Five organizing themes within the Framework provided the primary structure for the audit of the practices of the Winnisquam Regional School District. Built upon NCEA's study of more than 550 schools, these themes capture the primary curricular and instructional activities undertaken by school systems and represent the major content areas in which practices of higher performing school systems differed from their average-performing counterparts.

Theme 1

Student Learning: Expectations & Goals

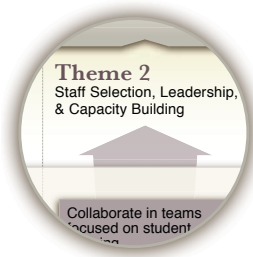
This theme focuses on the learning target—what it is that we expect all students to know and be able to do by grade and subject. Higher performing school systems have clear academic targets from kindergarten through Grade 12. Principals and teachers understand the learning goals and understand that these goals are meant for all students and are non-negotiable.



Theme 2

Staff Selection, Leadership, & Capacity Building

This theme focuses on the selection and development of a school system's most precious commodity—people. Once the academic goals of the system are clear, the leaders and teachers must be selected and developed to make these goals a reality for every learner in the system.



Theme 3

Instructional Tools: Programs & Strategies

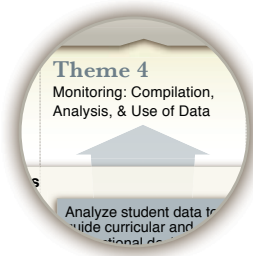
This theme focuses on the “things” that higher performing school systems use (e.g., the arrangement of time, the instructional resources and materials, technology). Strong instructional leaders and highly qualified teachers need evidence-based tools and resources to reach high standards with every learner.



Theme 4

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, & Use of Data

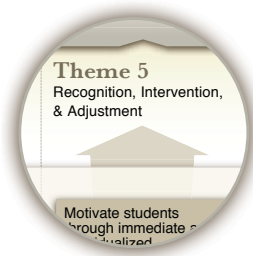
After clearly identifying what is to be learned by grade and subject and ensuring that the schools are equipped with the staff and the tools to successfully deliver the curriculum, educators then ask and answer an important question, “How are we going to know if students learned what we said they would learn?”



Theme 5

Recognition, Intervention, & Adjustment

The most important question of all follows the monitoring of student performance... “What are we going to do if students do not learn the knowledge and gain the skills we said they would?” Higher performing school systems have pyramids of intervention that provide immediate and intense intervention at multiple levels when learning is interrupted.

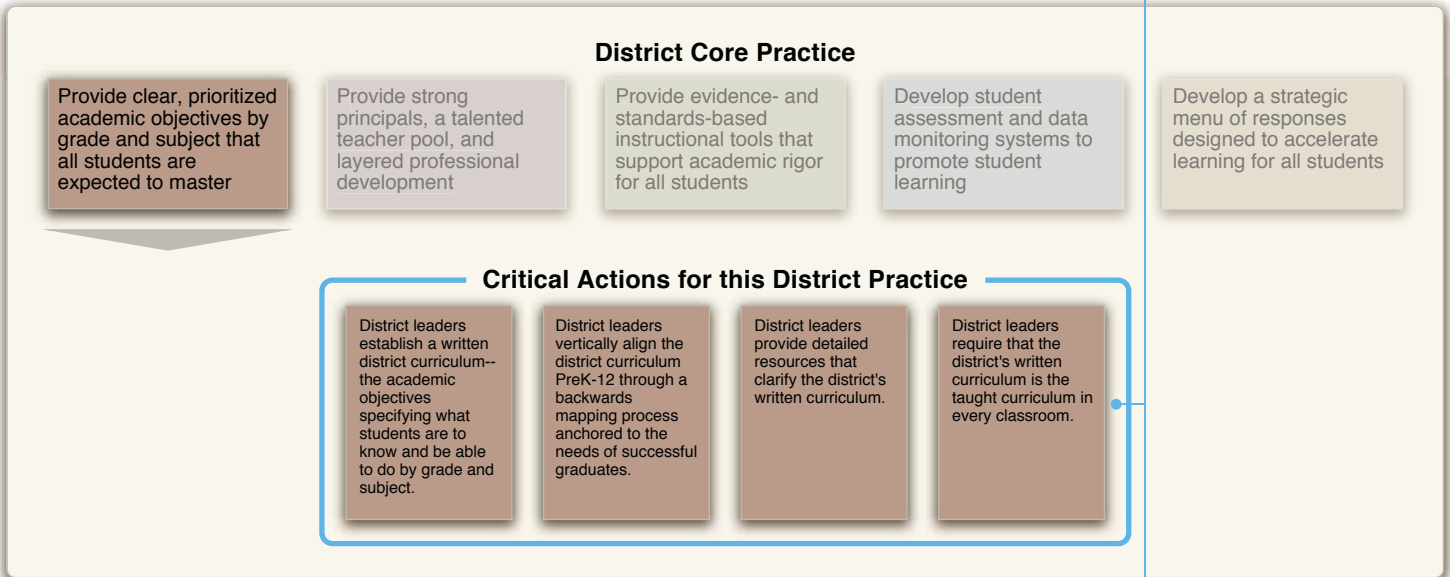


The actions taken by educators at the three organizational levels—district, school and classroom—are summarized in the Framework by five practices at each of these levels, one in each theme. Each of the five practices for each organizational level is further detailed by specific Critical Actions describing each practice.

There are 20 Critical Actions describing the five district-level practices of higher performing school systems. The graphics below and on pages 6-7 list the 20 district-level Critical Actions by theme and practice.

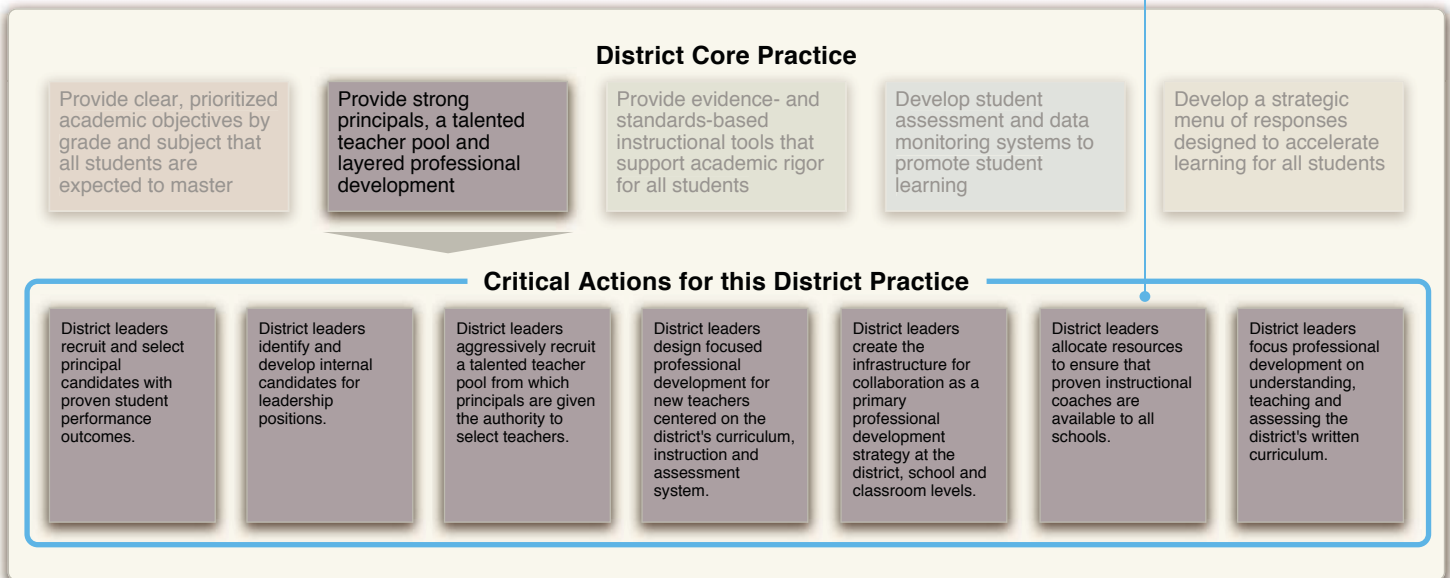
Theme 1

Student Learning: Expectations & Goals



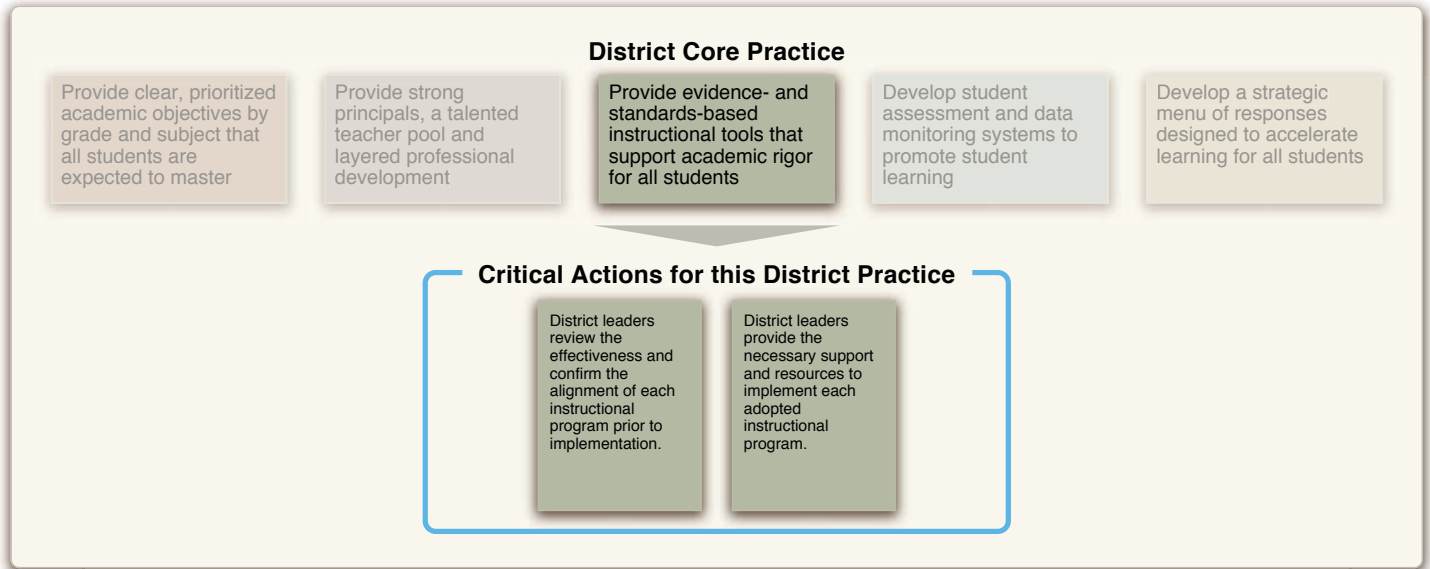
Theme 2

Staff Selection, Leadership, & Capacity Building



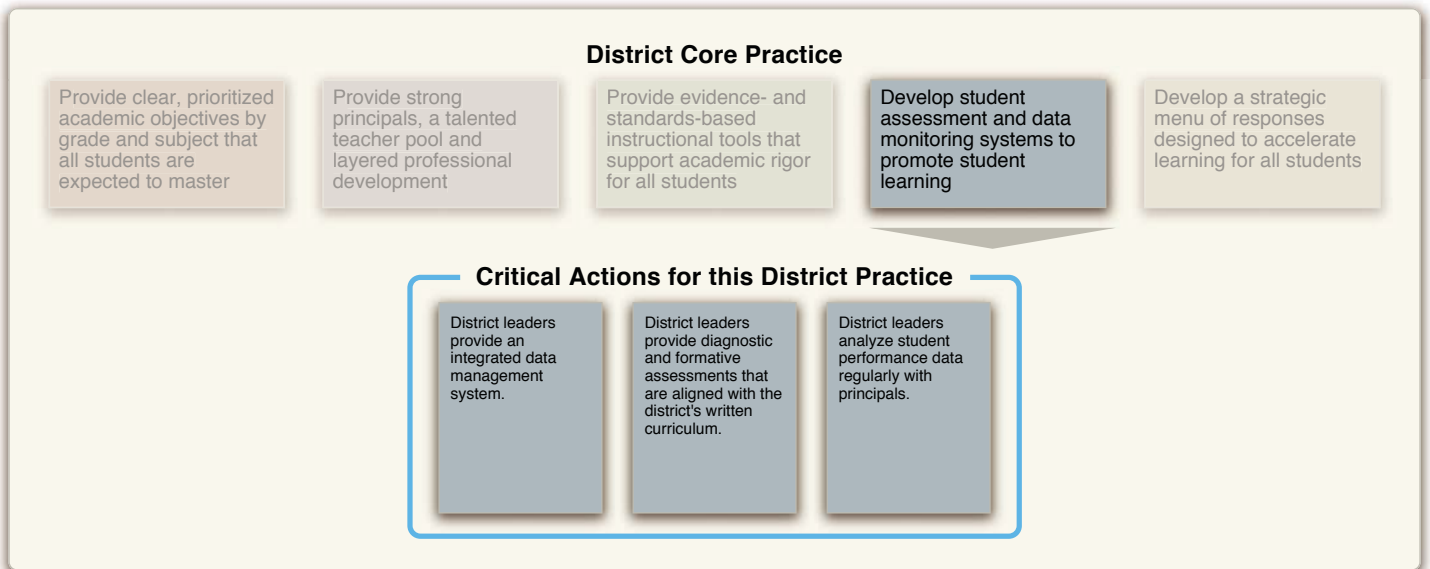
Theme 3

Instructional Tools: Programs & Strategies



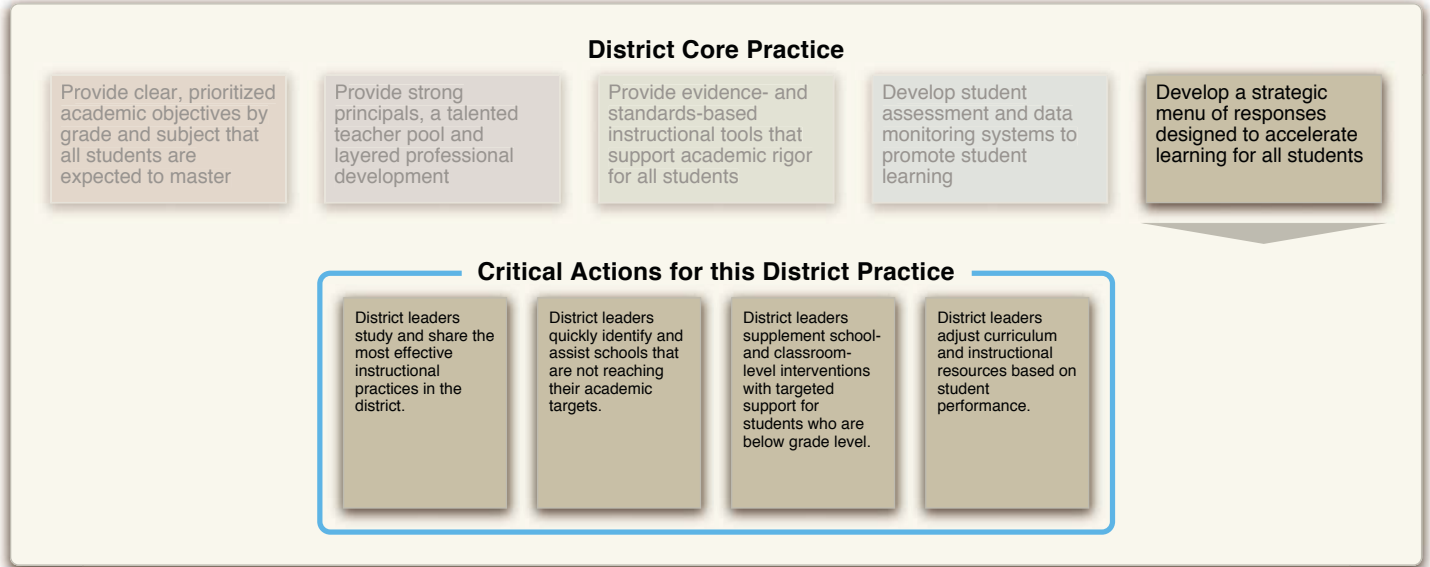
Theme 4

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, & Use of Data



Theme 5

Recognition, Intervention, & Adjustment



Audit Process

NCEA's audit process includes three phases: 1) pre-audit collection and review of district documents; 2) district site visit; and 3) analysis and benchmarking.

1. Document Collection and Review

The audit review team submitted a list of requested documents to the district approximately three weeks prior to the site visit. The requested documents were intended to provide detail about the district's systems and procedures in the five themes of the NCEA Core Practice Framework. District administrators were able to submit approximately half of the requested documents. In some cases, the particular documents requested were not used in the district. In other cases, the documents were undergoing revision. The audit team reviewed the documents in the week before the site visit and also referred to key documents during the post-visit analysis and benchmarking process.

See Appendix A for a list of the documents requested, received and reviewed.

2. Site Visit

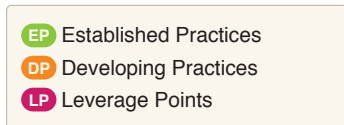
A team of NCEA auditors visited the district from September 27-29, 2010. The first day of the visit consisted of a panel interview with the administrative team and individual interviews with the superintendent and director of curriculum. Researchers spent the remaining two days visiting each of the district's five schools. At each school, the team interviewed the principal and conducted a focus group with approximately four to five core content teachers. For each site visit activity, the audit review team used protocols developed and refined over 10 years of NCEA school research.

See Appendix B for a complete site visit schedule.

3. Analysis and Benchmarking

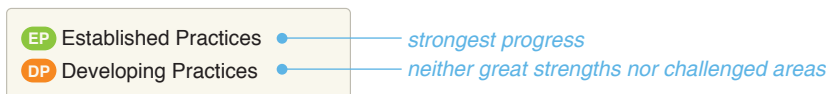
Upon completion of the site visit, the audit review team reviewed data collected from interviews, focus groups and district documents. Using this evidence, the team benchmarked the district's practices against NCEA's 20 Critical Actions of higher performing school districts.

The review team placed each of the 20 Critical Actions in one of three categories:



The Winnisquam Regional School District shows the highest development in the six practices listed as *Established Practices*. Further detail about these findings is presented in the *Established Practices* section of this report.

The six Critical Actions placed in the *Developing Practices* category were practices that reviewers cited as under development. Additional time is needed for the practices to be institutionalized and properly categorized as strengths or leverage points. As a result, reviewers have provided less detailed information relative to these practices.



The eight Critical Actions that are cited as *Leverage Points* are the practices which the review team felt district leaders should consider to gain even greater traction in the district. By leveraging these practices at key points, reviewers would hope district leaders would achieve the greatest *bang for the buck* in terms of student achievement. In many cases, district leaders are already addressing the listed practices in many ways. It was the intent of this report to find *Leverage Points* where the already considerable development might be boosted forward.

 Leverage Points — *focus of primary effort and attention*

The review team then used three-point scoring rubrics, developed from NCEA's extensive research into higher performing school systems, to look more closely at each of the Critical Actions in the *Leverage Points* category. Based on the rubric ratings, recommended action steps were developed for each of the eight Critical Actions in this category. These steps represent NCEA's recommended areas of focus for future district improvement planning. Further details about the audit findings in these areas as well as all *Recommendations* are presented within the report.

Overview

The Winnisquam Regional School District (WRSD) serves the communities of Northfield, Sanbornton, and Tilton in the Lakes Region of New Hampshire. The district's five schools include three elementary schools (Grades PreK-2, Grades 3-5, and Grades K-5), one middle school (Grades 6-8), and one high school (Grades 9-12). The superintendent is in her fifth year of leading the district along with an administrative team that includes a small district staff and the five school principals. Many members of the district administrative team are relatively new to their positions, and the team works collaboratively to address the needs at each school and the concerns of the district as a whole. The district's current strategic plan details priorities that include improving student learning, aligning secondary curriculum, making data-driven decisions, integrating technology, and reaching out to the community.

The strategic plan is full of actions that are intended to accomplish the district's goals. Many of these activities are already underway, as educators at all levels work to build a school system that can deliver on its intentions: "to graduate highly skilled students by meeting the learning needs of all students." The review team was impressed by the dedication of all interviewees to their students and to the communities they serve. Throughout the interviews, reviewers heard of the many activities that educators at all levels were balancing; some interviewees expressed concern that educators in the district were "working at capacity." Yet, nearly to the person, the review team encountered individuals in WRSD who were not afraid of difficult work, not hesitant to take on more responsibility, and not driven by their own agendas over the needs of their students. If anything, interviewees seemed to be looking for confirmation that their efforts would pay off in the end and that they were working hard *on the right things*. Without question, one great strength of WRSD is its people.

Many of the challenges faced by WRSD are functions of its size and the volume of work to be done. District leaders are already aware of many needs discussed in this report. In fact, much of the work of the educators in the district is already targeted at these needs. Unfortunately, the urgency of the concerns has created a situation in which teams of educators are working hard in parallel without any significant alignment or connective framework. It is an overarching framework that ultimately brings the needed coherence to all of the activity going on within the district. Reviewers were somewhat surprised to encounter—in a district of only five schools—a system with so little alignment, particularly with a small, collaborative district administrative team in place. Perhaps that observation reflects the New Hampshire spirit of "Live Free or Die," but such a condition is academically detrimental to students going through the WRSD system.

The strategic plan refers specifically to aligning middle and high school courses. That work is underway, but it is insufficient. The primary need in the district is that the curricular goals must be clarified to create a seamless K-12 educational pipeline for students. The first four recommendations included in this report focus on this need, as it is fundamental to all other work in the district. The absence of a coherent curriculum document actually presented a significant challenge to this review because many current initiatives and practices in WRSD

should only be judged within this context. For instance, considerable effort is currently being expended to develop curriculum materials absent this larger curricular framework. Reviewers cannot gauge whether or not those efforts are appropriate without seeing the curricular products in a broader context.

From the focus of professional development to the selection of instructional programs to the creation of professional learning communities, schools are addressing their own individual needs without a strong district blueprint for how all the pieces fit together. In interviews, reviewers heard varied comments such as: “We are focusing on grading this year,” “We are focusing on PLCs,” “We are focusing on Understanding by Design,” “We are transitioning to block schedule,” and “We are focusing on our new *FOSS* science kits.” All of those are laudable activities, but in the absence of a well-articulated curriculum, it is understandable why educators may question the benefits of the activities when they feel they are just “busy meeting.” A coherent K-12 curriculum, once established and commonly understood, can become a powerful grounding element for all other activities that go on in any particular school or in the district.