

Comprehensive Site Visit
Iowa Department of Education

Benton Community School District

Team Findings
February 4-6, 2003

Iowa Department of Education
Grimes State Office Building
Des Moines, IA 50319-0146

The following findings are based upon *interviews conducted* and *documents reviewed* on February 4-6, 2003.

Notes:

Suggested Areas of Improvement are considerations only. The intent is that the recommendations in this report provide a variety of options for a school/district to consider in its pursuit of continuous school improvement.

**Component #1
Student Benefit as a Result of the Comprehensive
School Improvement Plan**

The following specific areas were considered in writing this section:

- progress toward achieving the school's/school district's goals
- progress toward reducing achievement gaps
- trends in achievement levels
- progress on other state indicators

Areas of Strength

1. The trendline scores in the area of fourth grade and eighth Mathematics indicate that the percentage of students performing in the less than proficient range on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) has decreased significantly over the past four years, while the percentage of students scoring in the highly proficient range of achievement has increased.

Percentage of Fourth and Eighth Grade Students Scoring in the Less Than Proficient and Highly Proficient Range in Mathematics on the ITBS

| | Less Than Proficient | | | | Highly Proficient | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------|------|------|------|-------------------|------|------|------|
| Years → | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 |
| 4 th Grade | 34.8 | 18.7 | 31.0 | 20.0 | 10.7 | 12.2 | 15 | 19.2 |
| 8 th Grade | 40.9 | 18.3 | 26.0 | 18.0 | 9.1 | 9.2 | 12 | 27.0 |

2. The trendline scores in the area of fourth grade and eighth grade reading comprehension indicate that the percentage of students performing in the less than proficient range on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) has decreased significantly over the past four years.

Percentage of Eighth Grade Students Scoring in the Less Than Proficient Range in Reading Comprehension on the ITBS

| Years → | Less Than Proficient | | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|------|------|------|
| | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 |
| 8 th Grade | 34.8 | 29.8 | 19 | 22.1 |

3. A review of the district's 2002 ITBS scores indicates that the percentage of students proficient in mathematics and reading comprehension at grades four and eight is greater than both the state and national averages.

Percentage of Students Proficient at the District, State, and National Levels in 2002

| | Mathematics | | | Reading Comprehension | | |
|-----------------------|-------------|--------------|------------------|-----------------------|--------------|------------------|
| | Benton CSD | Iowa Average | National Average | Benton CSD | Iowa Average | National Average |
| 4 th Grade | 80 | 72.4 | 60 | 90 | 69.0 | 60 |
| 8 th Grade | 82 | 73.1 | 60 | 78 | 69.4 | 60 |

4. A review of the 2001 ITBS data indicates that the scores of the district's fourth grade students who are economically disadvantaged (low SES) compare favorably to the national and state averages in the areas of reading comprehension and mathematics.

Percentage of Low SES Students Proficient at the District Level Compared to State/National Averages for All Fourth Grade Students.

| | Mathematics | | | Reading Comprehension | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | Benton CSD (low SES) | Iowa Average (all students) | National Average (all students) | Benton CSD (low SES) | Iowa Average (all students) | National Average (all students) |
| 4 th Grade | 79.5 | 72.4 | 60 | 76.4 | 69.0 | 60 |

5. The district disaggregates ITBS and other test data in order to make district-level decisions regarding goals and action steps. The results are well publicized and communicated and stakeholders at all levels had an opportunity to be aware of the trend line scores for the district.
6. The visiting team found that rich and varied opportunities exist for high school students to enhance and/or expand their learning. Evidence of these opportunities include the following:
- VITAL,
 - Post Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) through Kirkwood Community College,
 - Job shadowing,
 - Work study,
 - Internships, and

- The Health Occupation Service Association (HOSA).
This work appears to be embedded in the school culture. Students as young as seventh grade were able to verbalize these opportunities. Benton Community ranks second in the Grant Wood Area Education Agency (GWAEA), regardless of district size, for PSEO credits obtained by students.
7. At the middle school level, student study groups have been developed to provide additional academic support for any students who need it. These efforts are linked to specific individual student learning goals.
 8. Benton graduates experience a high level of post-secondary experiences based on ACT data and graduate survey results. Of the seventy-four students who took the ACT in 2002, sixty-seven percent scored 20 or higher, a benchmark for identifying potential post-secondary success. A high number of graduates surveyed have engaged in post-secondary education of some kind.

Suggested Areas of Improvement

9. Several stakeholder groups interviewed expressed a concern about the performance of students with disabilities on district wide assessments, especially in the area of science. The visiting team recommends that the district research the following:
 - The number of secondary students who have IEP goals that are related to standards and benchmarks in science, as well as the amount of time devoted to instruction that is specially designed to address those science related goals,
 - The roles and/or responsibilities of special educators,
 - Strategies for improving problem solving, as well as reading comprehension for content and skill development,
 - Teaming with general educators to minimize tutoring and increase vocabulary and skill building in content areas, and
 - Opportunities for increasing participation in lab type experiences and activities for secondary students with disabilities.
10. Many teachers interviewed were unable to articulate an understanding of student achievement data at the building or grade-level. A need exists to create the same level of awareness of student achievement data at the building, classroom, and student level that exists at the district level. Building level action teams may want to consider analyzing these data in their action planning. Consider using standard scores and/or grade equivalents and item analysis to monitor student growth and grade-level/building performance. A greater use of these data may provide for better-informed instructional decisions at the classroom/grade level.
11. Parent groups interviewed expressed some confusion regarding how to interpret standardized test results. The district may want to consider providing more education regarding interpreting test results for parents.

Component #2
Leadership Aligned with the Comprehensive
School Improvement Plan

The following specific areas were considered in writing this section:

- the involvement of all stakeholders
- improved teaching and learning
- the process used to establish goals
- the development of content standards/benchmarks
- the determination of actions to meet the educational needs of all students

Areas of Strength

12. Multiple interviewees indicated that the superintendent has integrity and is trusted, responsive, and visionary. They reported that he has been involved with district initiatives without micro-managing. Interviewees also indicated that a high level of trust exists among district stakeholders including the superintendent, the school board, administration, teachers, and community.
13. The School Improvement Advisory Committee (SIAC), also known as the Communications Committee, meets monthly to discuss and analyze issues related to school improvement. Interviewees indicated that attendance at these meetings is high. They also reported that the SIAC has great impact on a variety of district decisions (e.g., district staff development proposals, Annual Progress Report (APR) information, and federal program expenditures).
14. The district administration uses data to drive decision-making. This is evident with the implementation of writing across the curriculum, CORE classes (coordinated recovery education), Reading Recovery, at-risk, and guided reading.

Suggested Areas of Improvement

15. The district may want to consider reviewing its policy regarding the delivery of gifted education services. Several interviews indicated that because the position is a K-12 assignment, the needs of gifted students are not being consistently met at all levels.

Component #3
Monitoring and Adjustments of the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan

The following specific areas were considered in writing this section:

- the process used to implement curricula
- instructional practices to support the curricula
- the implementation and adjustment of action plans including resource allocation (e.g., materials, money, time, and people)
- adjustments to classroom instruction
- the implementation of content standards and benchmarks

Areas of Strength

16. Standards and benchmarks are constructed in areas beyond the required areas of reading, mathematics, and science. These are shared with stakeholders through a variety of means, including the district's web-site.
17. Many stakeholders interviewed reported that they had input into the decision-making process regarding block scheduling. Teams of parents, teachers, and administrators visited other districts utilizing the block schedule. Several stakeholders indicated that the district invested a considerable amount of time and resources in this research process. They also indicated that block scheduling has increased student opportunities for experiences such as PSEO and school to work programs.
18. Benton Community School District has participated in the development of the Benton County Professional Development Consortium designed to improve classroom level data-based decision-making. This three-year commitment will provide opportunities for teachers to improve practice and is aligned to the Iowa Professional Development Standards.

Suggested Areas of Improvement

19. Middle school teachers have purposefully implemented standards and benchmarks in their lesson plans. As a best practice, the district is encouraged to implement this process at all building levels.
20. The visiting team found little evidence that supports the use of data driven decision-making at the building/classroom level. The district may want to develop a plan to implement the use of data to drive curricular decisions at those levels.
21. District level action plans are clear and articulated; however, the visiting team found no evidence of building level action plans to meet building goals. The district may want to encourage buildings to develop action plans to provide better focus at the building level.

Component #4
Staff Development Aligned with the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan

The following specific areas were considered in writing this section:

- the alignment of staff development with the school's/school district's goals
- the impact of staff development on improved teaching and learning
- the impact of staff development on the achievement of the school's/school district's goals

Areas of Strength

22. Multiple interview groups indicated that the district staff development initiatives have become more focused over the last three to four years and are being aligned to the CSIP goals. Areas noted include reading at the elementary level, writing across the curriculum at the secondary level, and Phase III alignment with staff development and CSIP goals.
23. Prior to the purchase of a new mathematics curriculum, the curriculum director, the administration, and mathematics committee members are reviewing a variety of mathematics series to ensure that the program/curriculum align with district benchmarks and standards.
24. Interviews with non-certified staff members revealed evidence of strong district support for their participation in staff development activities related to their positions. Para-educators attend in-service at various locations and records technicians received training on record access procedures.

Suggested Areas of Improvement

25. As the district strives to ensure that its staff development is more sustained and focused, consideration should be given to constructing and implementing ways to measure growth in student achievement related to new instructional strategies. The district may want to develop a plan to measure the effectiveness of its professional development to ensure maximum student benefit.
26. The district may want to consider developing and implementing a scoring system and rubrics to ensure that its efforts in the area of writing across the curriculum are consistent district-wide. GWAEA personnel would be able to provide support in this area.
27. Parents and students interviewed displayed a lack of awareness regarding the content of staff development activities. The district is encouraged to communicate this information to stakeholders utilizing channels that are already in existence (e.g., district web site and the local newspaper).
28. The district provided special educators with training opportunities designed to improve the quality of Individualized Education Plans (IEP's). An audit of these demonstrated improvement in several areas (documentation of milestones and a general increase in measurable baselines for goals). Teachers continue to need support for writing conditions and criterion for

goals, as well as time and frequency for services. Related to this, teachers of students turning 18 need to have a process in place for implementing the required transfer of rights at the age of majority. The district is encouraged to further its efforts in these areas.

29. Through interviews and document review, a lack of evidence exists with regard to alignment between the professional evaluation process and professional development. The district is encouraged to develop ways to incorporate professional development into its professional evaluation process.

Component #5

Alignment of the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan Components

The following specific areas were considered in writing this section:

- the district's progress with each of the components of the Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (needs assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, and reporting)
- the alignment of goals to data showing gaps in subgroup achievement
- the alignment of actions to goals
- the effectiveness of actions to meet goals
- the implementation of actions identified in the CSIP

Areas of Strength

30. Teacher observation and feedback from graduates prompted the district to focus on the implementation of “writing across the curriculum” at the high school level in an effort to improve written communication in multiple venues.

31. A variety of tools are used to gather data for the needs assessment process. These include the following:

- Standardized assessments,
- Performance tasks,
- Classroom assessments, and
- Perception surveys.

Standardized achievement assessments include Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), Iowa Test of Educational Development (ITED), Basic Reading Inventory (BRI), and American College Testing (ACT).

Suggested Areas of Improvement

32. The district is encouraged to collect and analyze the data from IEP Results for special education students. The IEP team for each student with disabilities is responsible for documenting the conclusions about student progress, discrepancy from peers, level of independence, and goal status for each goal area. These data should be directly related to district standards and benchmarks and available by class, building, and district.

Component #6 Other Areas

The following specific areas were considered in this section:

- licensure/endorsement/certification staffing issues
- board policy manual review
- record keeping
- school calendar issues
- the distribution of the Annual Progress Report including district and building data, the disaggregation of information on student progress, the reporting of progress toward goals, and, for public school districts only, other reporting to parents involving K-3 diagnostic assessment results and specific consolidated program reporting requirements

Areas of Strength

33. The district provides a variety of communications to the community. Examples include regular submissions by the superintendent to the local newspaper, regular e-mails to board members, and updates to the Communications Team and other groups. Information is regularly posted and updated on the district's web-site and district and building newsletters.
34. The visiting team noted a strong sense of pride and ownership in the school community. There is strong parental involvement and support in the school. Staff members take an active part in school events. Many of those interviewed used the word "family" to represent the close relationship between the school district and the community. In addition, many Benton graduates currently live and work in the community. The community recently approved a Physical Plant and Equipment and Instructional Support Levies.
35. School Board meetings rotate to the various communities within the district providing residents with easier access to the school board and administration.
36. The guidance department and student support services offer a variety of strategies to students and their families. There is an effort to maintain students within the district and ensure that they graduate. The guidance department and student support services are supportive in working with students in comprehensive planning for high school scheduling, post-secondary planning, and work to ensure that each student has an opportunity to be successful. This is reflected in the district's 99% graduation rate.
37. A variety of opportunities exist for public recognition with regard to student academic and extra-curricular achievements. Published honor rolls, assemblies, and displays throughout the school reinforce the importance of these individual achievements.
38. The school board is informed via the Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB). New board members are supported by both the IASB and current

board members. The superintendent provides meaningful, on-going, weekly communication to the board to keep them informed.

Suggested Areas of Improvement

39. While the district works effectively to provide communication to the community in a variety of ways, consider developing standard expectations for classroom teachers in communicating with parents at the classroom level. Parent groups indicated that teacher communication varies significantly depending upon the specific teacher/building their child attends.
40. While the district is aware of the following issues, the visiting team recommends that the district continue to dialogue about the following:
 - Community needs and expectations regarding attendance centers.
 - Declining enrollment and current budget concerns.
 - The shift in geographic location of the student population.
41. While students who achieve at high academic and extra-curricular levels receive meaningful recognition, the visiting team recommends that the district provide equal recognition to those students who show significant growth in academic performance and/or extra-curricular participation, but who do not necessarily achieve at the levels now required for recognition. Students and parents interviewed indicated that students who demonstrate growth over time do not receive recognition for their accomplishments.

