

# Report on K-12 Literacy Instructional Program Minidoka School District *November 29–30, 2016*

## **Purpose and Overview of Visit**

Education Northwest (EdNW) conducted a two-day instructional review of the Minidoka School District literacy program tailored to the districts goals. The purpose of the visit was to:

- Grow the capacity of school and district staff to recognize, improve, and support the practices and conditions that contribute to improved literacy outcomes for all students.
- Conduct targeted classroom observations in elementary, middle, and high schools to assess current literacy practices using a standard protocol developed by Education Northwest.

The specific topics for review were determined by the district's goals for empowering students through meaningful engagement, clear learning objectives, and the use of formative assessment. Education Northwest identified factors that current research relates to successful literacy outcomes, prioritizing those that are most closely related to the district's goals.

For literacy, these research-based factors include explicit teaching of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and thinking and reasoning in the primary grades using both fiction and nonfiction text. Idaho Content Standards require a shift in cognitive demands beginning in third grade in terms of levels of text complexity and questioning and gradual release of responsibility from the teacher to the student for learning throughout the system. Additionally, emphasis is on writing with opportunities to draw from many sources and increasing sophistication in argumentation.

## **Process**

Six staff members from EdNW with expertise in literacy, writing, English Learners, and school improvement at the elementary and secondary levels visited Minidoka School District on November 29–30, 2016. EdNW used observation protocols that were customized for elementary and secondary levels to gather both quantitative and qualitative data on literacy instruction throughout the district. Observations were conducted in 149 classrooms, including general education and special education in both literacy specific subject areas as well as literacy in content areas, such as math and science.

Observations were customized to give attention to how literacy instruction was currently supporting the district's goal of empowering students through:

- The use of meaningful engagement strategies
- Learning objectives that are clear and posted
- Formative assessment of student learning

Since the primary purpose of the visit was to answer the question of how well the district’s literacy program was being implemented, EdNW designed the visit around our 4A’s process for inquiry. The 4A’s are:

1. **Ask a question** - Minidoka initiated the question by asking about the current status of literacy implementation. The question was open ended and was intended to be a needs assessment that will guide future decisions about curriculum, instruction, leadership, and professional development.
2. **Acquire the data** - EdNW acquired the data by calculating elementary and secondary classroom practices on a standards-based observation protocol and collecting anecdotal notes on the state of current practice.
3. **Analyze and interpret the data** - EdNW conducted a synthesis of themes that emerged from our ratings and qualitative data and presented this to the MSD administrative leadership team to partner in the initial steps of analysis and interpretation on November 30. Further analysis will continue in the weeks to come as we partner to make inferences from the data.
4. **Arrive at a decision** - EdNW provided MSD with a set of strengths, opportunities, and considerations that are summarized in this report. EdNW will serve as a thought partner to MSD in the coming weeks and months to assist with prioritizing the recommendations and deciding on feasible next steps that the MSD administrative leadership team develops consensus around.

## Elementary Observation Data

Observations of elementary school classrooms were evenly distributed across all schools in the district and reflect the relative size of the school. Table 1 provides the number and percent of observations that occurred in elementary schools. Figure 1 shows that each of the four elementary schools received between 19 and 33 percent of all the observations, with the exception of TLC, which is proportionately fewer.

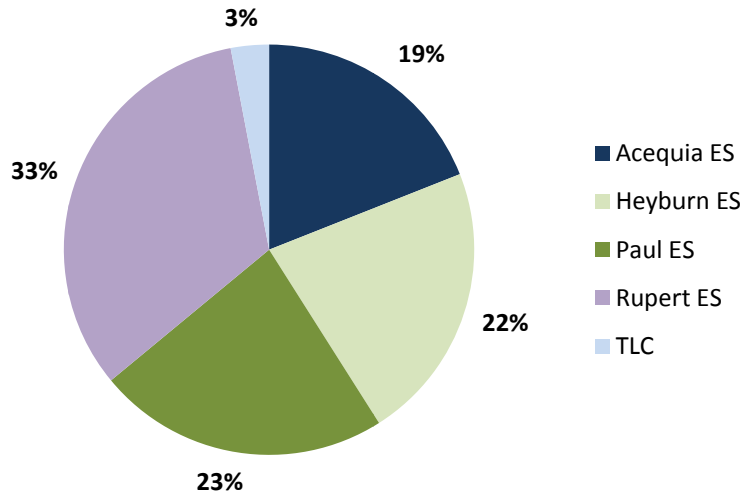
**Table 1. Number of Observations**

School	#	%
Acequia Elementary School	15	19%
Heyburn Elementary School	17	22%
Paul Elementary School	18	23%
Rupert Elementary School	26	33%
TLC	2	3%
<b>Total Observations</b>	<b>79</b>	

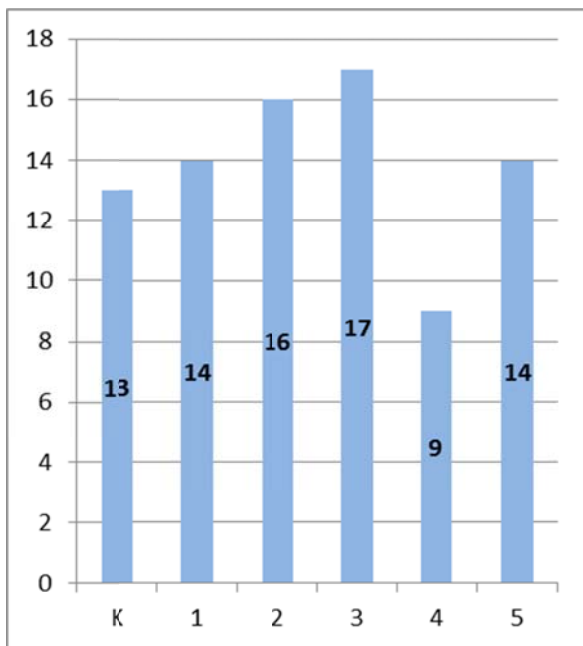
All grade levels (K–5) were observed. Figure 2 illustrates the number of observations that each grade received of all 79 observations of elementary classrooms. Observations occurred during both core instruction and intervention (Figure 3), with the majority of observations occurring

during core instruction. Figure 4 demonstrates the ratios at which different modes of instruction (whole group, small group, pairs, and independent work) were observed. Whole group instruction was the predominant mode overall, but this varied between schools.

**Figure 1. Schools Observed**



**Figure 2. Number of Observations at Each Grade Level**



**Figure 3. Instructional Setting**

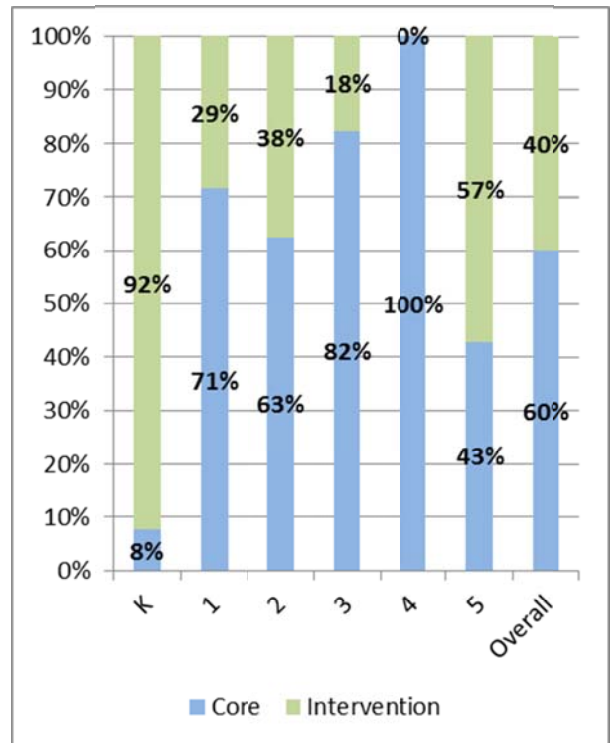
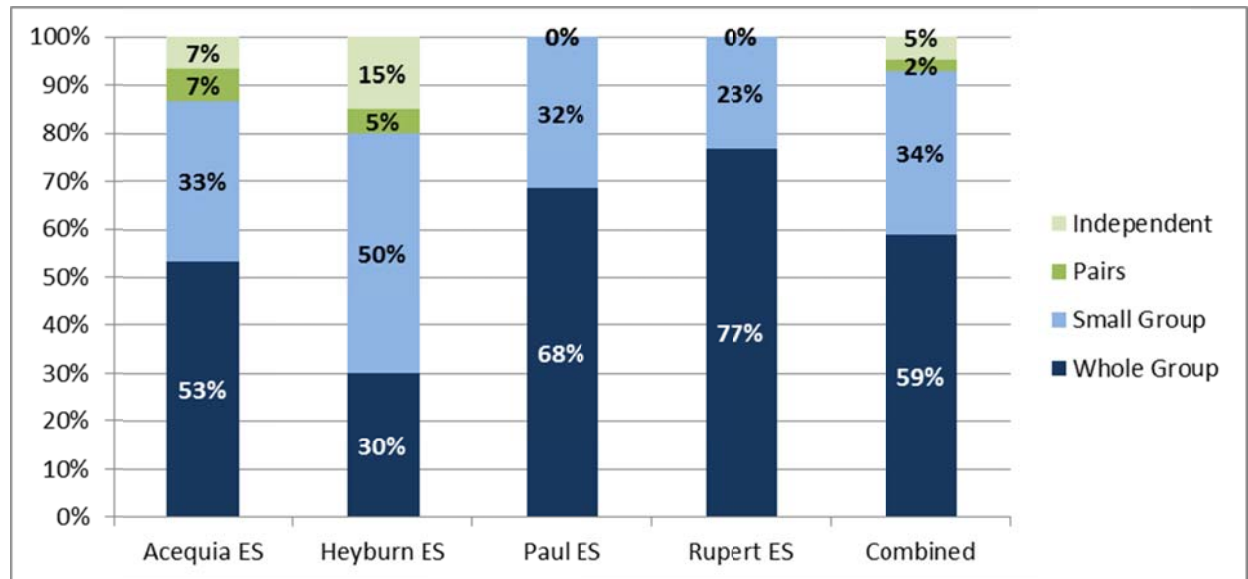


Figure 4. Predominant Modes of Instruction in Elementary Grades by School



Observation data was collected on seven key indicators of elementary literacy instruction (Table 2). Roughly two thirds of the classroom observations tended to indicate that teachers have relative clarity of focus related to setting learning objectives and working together as a system. The first two indicators show 67 and 66 percent of classrooms, respectively, are on track; and there were very few marked as “not observed.” This seems to indicate that the structures and processes that were of high value during the Reading First program have been sustained in many cases. In general, pacing was similar across classroom and materials used were consistent, which suggests strong levels of collaboration within schools and across the district. However, some of the reasons that indicators 3, 4, and 5 tend to be lower is that while the processes and structures of Reading First have been sustained, some of the pedagogy observed is less clearly evidence-based. This is why indicators 3 through 5 had a lower score and also why a greater degree of classes were marked as “not observed.” There were pockets of excellence, and teachers made strong attempts at explicit, evidence-based instruction. However, the purpose of the lessons was at times unclear to the students and possibly some teachers as well. Observers anecdotally noted that multiple teachers made minor mistakes when teaching the structure of the English language and at times did not seem to understand the nuances of some of the elements in the core program. Additionally, observers noted that there was substantial teacher talk and limited opportunities for students to respond and engage in metacognitive reading strategies.

**Table 2. Elementary Indicators of Effective Literacy Instruction**

<b>Performance Indicators</b>	<b>% At or Above Standard</b>	<b>% Not Observed</b>
1. Teacher facilitates a cohesive lesson in which all lesson elements are sequenced and organized in order to lead students toward mastery of objective. Objective of the lesson is clear to 90% of students.	67%	8%
2. Teacher selects and executes instructional strategies that effectively support lesson objectives.	66%	5%
3. Students connect lesson content to prior knowledge in order to build new learning.	63%	18%
4. Students explain the lesson's objective and what they will be doing in the lesson in their own words.	47%	27%
5. Students articulate how their work will be assessed or what assessment the teacher is using to measure learning.	29%	43%
6. Students practice, apply, and demonstrate the skills and knowledge they are learning during the lesson through meaningful learning activities.	61%	4%
7. Students demonstrate an understanding of lesson content and skills through correct responses in student work or by asking relevant questions.	60%	8%

## Secondary Observation Data

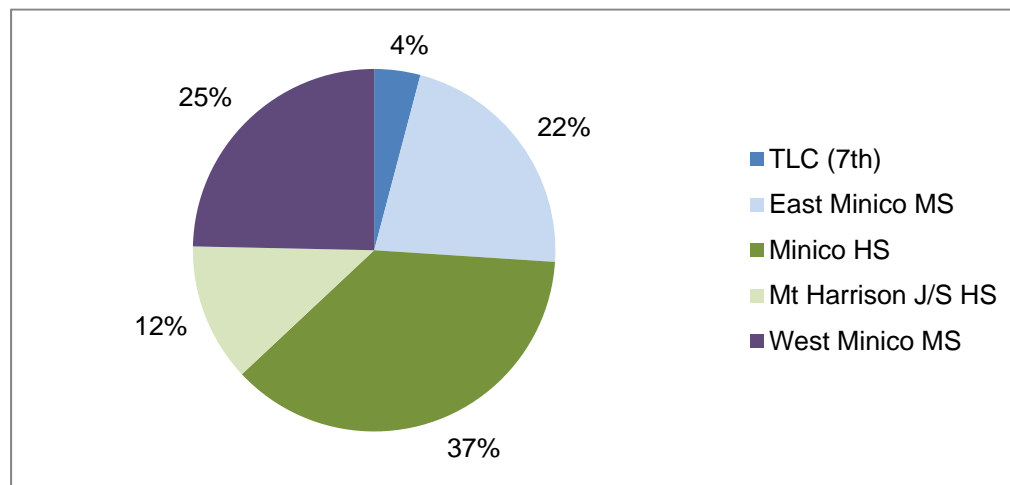
Observations of secondary school classrooms were evenly distributed across all schools in the district and reflect the relative size of the school. Table 3 provides the number and percent of observations that occurred in secondary schools. Figure 5 shows that each of the secondary schools received between 12 and 37 percent of all the observations, with the exception of TLC, which has proportionately fewer classes.

**Table 3. Number and Percent of Secondary Observations**

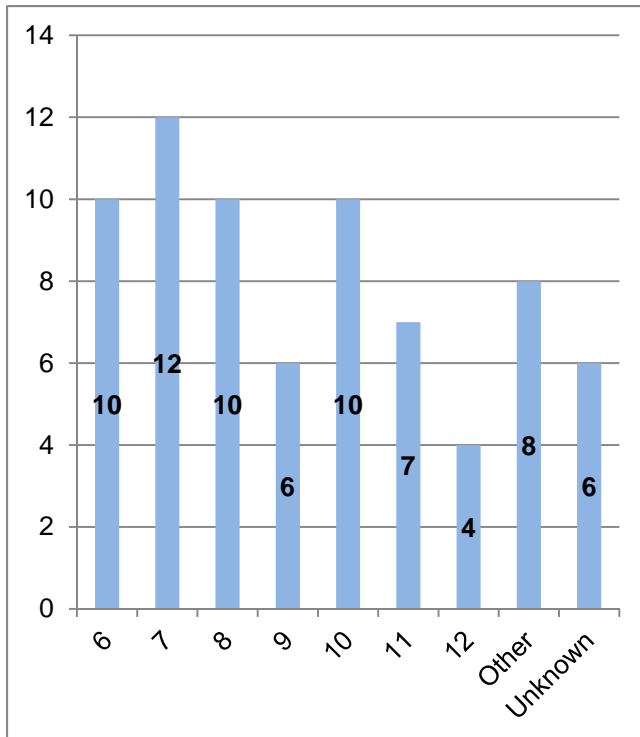
School	#	%
TLC - 7th Grade	3	4%
East Minico Middle School	16	22%
Minico Senior High School	27	37%
Mt Harrison Jr/Sr High School	9	12%
West Minico Middle School	18	25%
District office - 7th Grade	3	4%
<b>Total Observations</b>	<b>73</b>	

All grade levels (6–12) were observed, although some observers were unsure of the grade level in some cases; and a few classes seemed to be hybrid grade levels. Figure 6 illustrates the number of observations that each grade received of all 73 observations of secondary classrooms. Observations occurred in both ELA courses and literacy in the content areas (Figure 7), with the majority of observations occurring during content area courses. Figure 8 demonstrates the ratios at which different modes of instruction (whole group, small group, pairs, and independent work) were observed. Whole group instruction was the predominant mode overall, but this varied between schools.

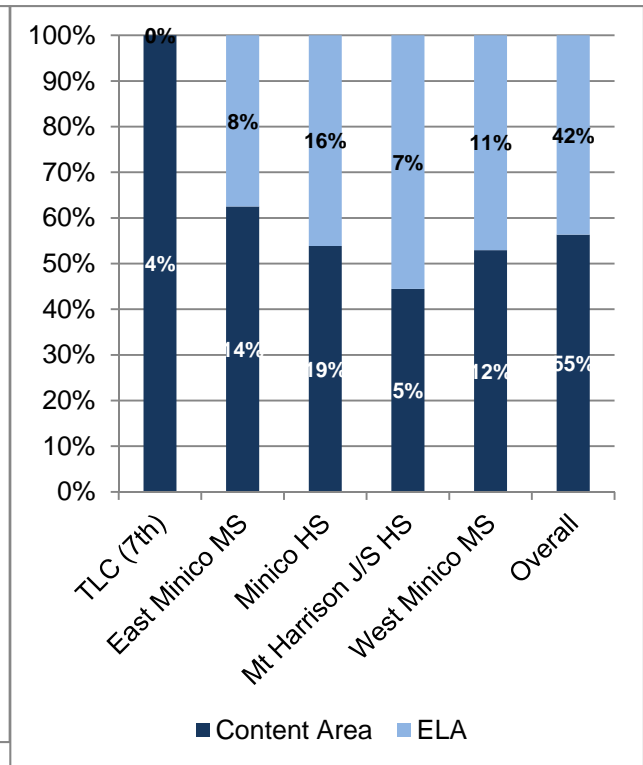
**Figure 5. Secondary Schools Observed**



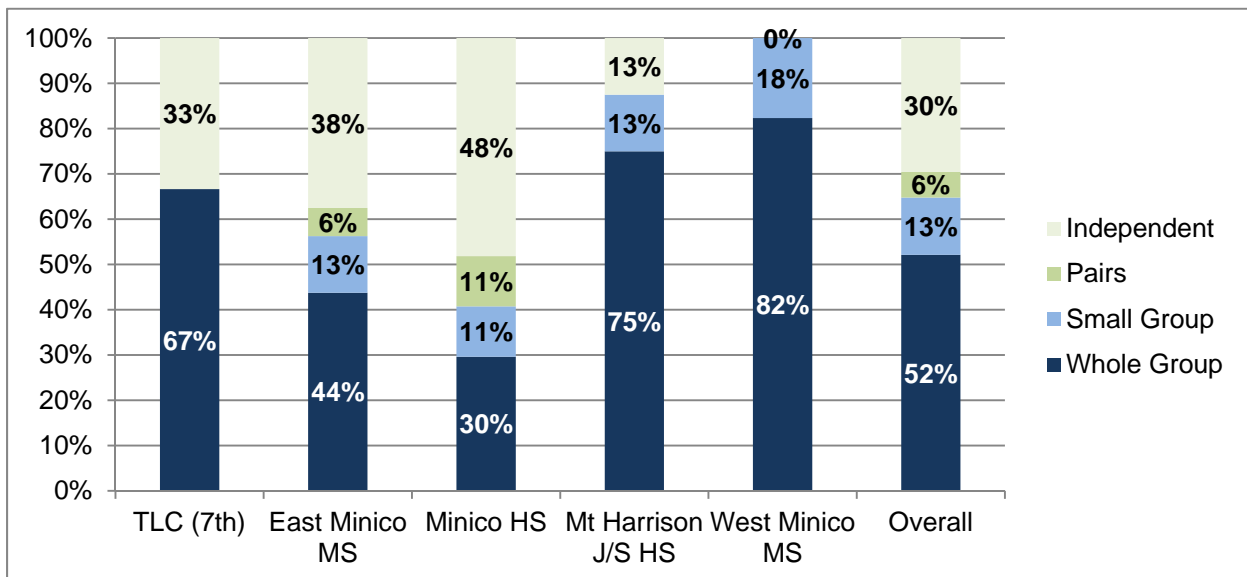
**Figure 6. Number of Secondary Observations at Each Grade Level**



**Figure 7. Instructional Setting in Secondary Schools**



**Figure 8. Predominant Modes of Instruction in Secondary Grades by School**



Observation data was collected on twelve key indicators of secondary literacy instruction (Table 4). The majority of observations indicate that high quality texts are generally in use by teachers and students and lessons are focused on reading, writing, or speaking about texts (Core Action 1). However, the types of questions and tasks posed of students tended to be at a lower level than what is necessary for students to perform proficiently on Idaho Content Standards. In Core Action 2, the percentage of classrooms in which questions and tasks met our observation standards ranged from a high of 58 percent to a low of 33 percent. For example, Core Action 2.B (citing evidence), which is at 43 percent, could be improved by having teachers utilize strategies that combine close reading, think-pair-share, and written responses. Our observers noted that many classrooms had a traditional teacher lecture approach with individual student turns and little chance for students to demonstrate their own thinking. This is evident in the data for Core Action 3 (engagement). Just as in the elementary setting, observers at the secondary level noted that there was substantial teacher talk and limited opportunities for students to respond and take responsibility for their own metacognition while engaging with text.

**Table 4. Secondary Indicators of Effective Literacy Instruction**

**CORE ACTION 1**

<b>Focus each lesson on a high-quality text (or multiple texts).</b>	<b>% At Standard</b>	<b>% Not Observed</b>
A. A majority of the lesson is spent reading, writing, or speaking about text(s).	75%	13%
B. The text(s) are at or above the complexity level expected for the grade and time in the school year.	64%	26%
C. The text(s) exhibit exceptional craft and thought and/or provide useful information.	61%	31%

**CORE ACTION 2**

<b>Employ questions and tasks, both oral and written, that are text-specific and accurately address the analytical thinking required by the grade-level standards.</b>	<b>% At or Above Standard</b>	<b>% Not Observed</b>
A. Questions and tasks address the text by attending to its particular structure(s), concepts, ideas, and details.	58%	26%
B. Questions and tasks require students to use evidence from the text to demonstrate understanding and to support their ideas about the text. These ideas are expressed through both written and oral responses.	43%	26%
C. Questions and tasks attend to the words (academic vocabulary), phrases, and sentences within the text.	52%	27%
D. Questions are sequenced to build knowledge by guiding students to delve deeper into the text and graphics.	33%	33%



**Table 4 (continued). Secondary Indicators of Effective Literacy Instruction**

**CORE ACTION 3**

<b>Provide all students with opportunities to engage in the work of the lesson.</b>	<b>% At or Above Standard</b>	<b>% Not Observed</b>
A. The <b>teacher</b> keeps all students persevering with challenging tasks.	44%	21%
B. The <b>teacher</b> expects evidence and precision from students and probes students' answers accordingly.	41%	22%
C. The <b>teacher</b> encourages reasoning and problem solving by posing challenging questions and tasks that offer opportunities for productive struggle.	37%	24%
D. The <b>teacher</b> demonstrates awareness and appropriate action regarding the variations present in student progress toward reading independently.	29%	38%
E. When appropriate, the <b>teacher</b> explicitly attends to strengthening students' language and reading foundational skills.	32%	36%

**Synthesis of Data**

The observation team synthesized both the quantitative and qualitative observation data and identified multiple strengths and opportunities within the district. These are listed below.

***Strengths***

We identified five key areas of districtwide strength.

1. ***Evidence of shared literacy vision.*** Many of Minidoka's schools were participants in the Reading First program, which ended in 2010. Although six years have since passed, it is evident that key structures, processes, and values continue to exist and are guided by a collectively shared vision among teachers and leaders. It cannot be understated how significant an asset this is to the future of the district. It serves as a foundation upon which other program improvements can be built. Evidence of shared vision includes such things as the use of common instructional materials (e.g., Imagine It!), alignment and collaboration between teachers (e.g., similar instructional pacing), and shared beliefs about dedicated time for core instruction and intervention. While many other districts in the nation have not been able to maintain their core values from Reading First, the fact that Minidoka has remained true to these guiding principles means that the focus for improving the literacy program in the future can be narrowed to improving what exists rather than entirely rebuilding the program.
2. ***Strong use of high quality technology.*** Teachers throughout the district had access to high quality technology and made use of their resources in creative ways to support teaching and learning. Technology was used to promote lesson design and student skill practice. Many teachers seemed to have a high comfort level with technology, and it was evident that the

culture of the district had been strategically designed to make this a reality. The use of technology is a tremendous asset the district will be able to build upon.

3. ***Positive culture and climate.*** It was evident throughout the district that there is a positive culture and climate among faculty and staff. Teachers and leaders are kind to each other and students and generally demonstrate warm, caring relationships. As outside observers, we noticed that schools felt like welcoming environments. Having positive culture and climate will allow the district to catalyze their work more quickly to focus primarily on instructional solutions and less on environmental barriers.
4. ***Strong classroom management.*** Students throughout the district were well behaved, and teachers seemed to have strong processes for managing their classroom environments. Classrooms were consistently respectful and orderly, and teachers seemed to have a positive rapport with their students. The district will be able to build upon this foundation of mutual respect as it works to incorporate new instructional solutions.

While this is a strength, we give a note of caution as it relates to the opportunities listed below. Student compliance with classroom management routines can also mean that engagement with meaningful learning is low when there is not a healthy balance of teacher and student talk. We will speak to this below in the section on teacher talk.

5. ***Evidence of teacher collaboration.*** As described above, there was strong evidence of teacher collaboration. We observed relatively high levels of common objectives, use of materials, pacing, and instructional strategies; which indicates that teachers are collaborating within their buildings and, to some extent, across the district. While we did notice a fair amount of variation in practices, key foundational elements and processes were in place. As mentioned above, the existence of such collaboration serves as an asset in the sense that it allows the district to focus on refining, rather than rebuilding, the program. It also suggests that educators in the district expect the system to work in an aligned fashion, which creates fertile ground for the district to continue its systemwide improvement efforts.

## ***Opportunities***

We found five key opportunities for improvement for teaching and learning in the district.

1. ***Grouping for engagement.*** As the data illustrate, the primary mode of instruction we observed was whole group. In general, observers noticed that a majority of classrooms utilized a teacher-centric model of instruction. During whole group instruction, it is still possible to differentiate by using strategies, such as think-pair-share or quick writes that engage every student in thinking about the lesson objective. However, in most instances, teachers called on students in individual turns (e.g., having students raise hands to answer a question and calling on just one student to talk at a time). This method is teacher-centric in the sense that it keeps all the control for learning in the teacher's hands and allows 90

percent or more of the class to disengage while one student answers. Student engagement will increase if the district supports educators in using multiple modes and groupings for instruction.

2. ***Balance of student and teacher talk (Who is doing the work?)*** Building on the previous topic of engagement, the district would benefit by building greater balance between student and teacher talk. Teachers were doing most of the work in terms of thinking about text. There was a noticeable gap in the quantity and quality of instructional strategies that would develop metacognitive thinking for literacy. In the elementary level, for example, the red band of *Imagine It* is designed to focus on metacognitive strategies that good readers use. The program is designed for teachers to model metacognition and then release students to do their own talking about their thinking. What we frequently observed was that teachers would ask questions to see if students “got it” rather than having students talk about how well they understand a text or the strategies they would use to help them understand and interact with it better. This reality decreases student engagement and results in students having less practice with the higher order thinking they need to be successful with the Idaho Content Standards. The district may want to consider identifying instructional solutions that highlight the types of strategies good readers utilize and then shifting teacher perspectives from teacher ownership of student comprehension to student ownership of their own reading comprehension. This requires a shift in pedagogy, while allowing existing resources to continue as the basis for instruction.
3. ***Guided questioning strategies.*** The district may want to consider dedicating some time during staff development to the effective use of questioning. While observers noted teachers were asking questions, the questions students were asked were not cognitively demanding. In other words, students had low levels of responsibility. The higher order questions (inference, point of view, connection to other learning) were modeled by the teacher but not then required of the students. Questions students were required to answer were mostly literal recall and did not require the student to cite text or to go “beyond the page.” Ideally students should be generating questions and making connections to either prior learning or generating opportunities for further inquiry. The district’s widespread use of technology lends itself to students being more actively engaged in inquiry-based literacy activities.
4. ***Variance in teacher practice.*** Minidoka has had a great deal of turnover in terms of teaching staff. The structures of prior literacy efforts are still in place, but it appeared to the observers that a significant percentage of teachers lacked deep understanding of how best to teach reading. The district may want to consider providing opportunities for teachers to understand the theory (structure of language, phonics, phonological awareness, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension) behind the programs. Whether MSD decides to purchase a new reading series or not, the teachers will be more effective if they understand the process of acquiring language and literacy.

5. ***Integration of writing.*** Minidoka’s leadership team had identified writing across the district as a focus area districtwide. It is recommended that the district select one framework or philosophy and require more writing in all grades and in all content areas.

## **Considerations**

Given the strengths and opportunities listed above that exist throughout the district, we recommend focusing on three key considerations at the elementary level and another three at the secondary level.

### ***Elementary***

At the elementary level, the following three actions may result in the highest leverage impact given current context and resources.

1. ***Read more during the reading block.*** Ensure that students have greater lengths of time to read text and make use of their own metacognitive strategies for reading by minimizing the amount of teacher talk during the reading block.
2. ***Tighten phonics and word knowledge routines.*** Deepen teacher knowledge on phonics and the structure of the English language to ensure instructional routines and practices are precise and accurate.
3. ***Increase the quantity of Positive Instructional Interactions (PII’s).*** Reduce the use of individual turns and decrease teacher talk; increase student talk by utilizing opportunities for all students to respond and interact through strategies such as think-pair-share, choral response, and turn and talk.

### ***Secondary***

1. ***Increase adolescent engagement strategies.*** Decrease teacher talk and increase student talk through PII’s. Encourage opportunities for students to discuss and follow-up on ideas they are curious about (i.e., inquiry mindsets) with less direction from teachers.
2. ***Integrate common approach to writing.*** Encourage the adoption of common methods, rubrics, and tools for incorporating writing across the curricula. Provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate across subject areas but using common approaches to writing instruction.
3. ***Differentiation for all students.*** Explore ways to promote differentiation for all learners, such as English learners, students with special needs, and culturally diverse perspectives by using strategies that increase accessibility to instruction. Examples include use of more visual representations, peer interaction, and sheltered instruction methods.

## **Conclusion**

The EdNW team was honored to be a part of Minidoka's Needs Assessment. The power of a positive climate and culture throughout the district cannot be underestimated in terms of any initiatives MSD chooses to pursue in the future. We are hopeful that this "slice" of instruction assists district leaders in their analysis of practices, and we welcome the opportunity to be thought partners as you arrive at decisions.