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Ann Arbor, Michigan: Focusing on Achievement Gaps

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As they prepare for initial implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), many state and local education agencies across the country have been taking the opportunity to redefine how best to support improvement in their lowest-performing schools. ESSA requires districts to play a larger role in the improvement process, with SEAs continuing to provide supports and monitor improvements. This report provides an example of how one district has done so — by strengthening leadership, providing better student support, and implementing effective instructional and data practices to decrease achievement gaps among students. It begins with an introduction of the context, followed by a description of the district's improvement process. The brief concludes with an analysis of the district's impact and a discussion on how to sustain the results.

Ann Arbor Public Schools

Located approximately 40 miles from Detroit, Ann Arbor may be best known to the broader world as home to the University of Michigan. Its school district, Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS), serves approximately 17,000 students (see sidebar on page 2) in 32 schools. In summer 2012, based on student achievement data from school year 2011/12, 27 AAPS schools were identified by Michigan Department of Education as *focus schools*. Focus schools in Michigan were defined as the 10 percent of public schools with the largest achievement gap between their highest-performing 30 percent of students and their lowest-performing 30 percent, as measured by standardized tests.[1] The following summer, two additional AAPS schools were identified as being in that group.

The focus-school designations came as a shock to many in the Ann Arbor community, prompting an outcry about both the designation of local schools and the formula used to calculate the state's list. As indicated by a number of those interviewed for this report, the general feeling at the time was one of disbelief. How could schools with so many high-performing students

1 Retrieved from Michigan Department of Education, http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-22709_62253—-,00.html

Ann Arbor Public Schools Profile, School Year 2014/15

Schools	1 Pre-Kindergarten 19 Elementary 5 Middle 2 K–8 3 High Schools (traditional) 2 High Schools (alternative)
Students	17,000
Eligibility for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	24%
English Learners	8%
Students Receiving Special Education Services	11%
Asian	15%
Black	14%
Hispanic/Latino	5%
Multi-Racial	11%
White	54%
Teachers Holding Master's Degree or Above	81%
Number of Languages Spoken by Students	64
Number of Advanced Placement Courses Offered	25

Source: Ann Arbor Public Schools (2014c).

be considered low-performing, they wondered, when they believed there were lower-performing schools elsewhere in the state that were more in need of attention. Moreover, parents of some of those higher-performing students apparently worried that in the district's efforts to eliminate achievement gaps, their own student would somehow be shortchanged. Another ingredient in the emotional brew stirred up by the focus-school identification was the frustration reportedly felt by some district and school staff who had already been working to improve outcomes for students considered to be at risk academically and now saw designation of the focus schools as an indication of failure.

During this emotional time, there was also a major leadership change, with the superintendent resigning. In replacing her, school board members knew they would need to find someone who could address the achievement gap problem head on, while also maintaining a sound education system for all students — and they needed to do it quickly. Soon thereafter they hired Jeanice Swift, who, in turn, quickly recruited a former AAPS deputy superintendent, Lee Ann Dickinson-Kelley, to come out of retirement to serve as the assistant superintendent of instruction with the specific charge of helping the focus schools to improve.

For its part, the state education agency provided an outside consultant to support district staff in the improvement process. The initial contractor, brought on soon after the focus schools had been identified and working through the leadership transition, made only limited progress. Once Swift and Dickinson-Kelley were in place, that first contractor was replaced by Noni Miller, who began working to support Ann Arbor by bringing her knowledge of additional best practices and systems to the district and by facilitating connections and collaboration among AAPS and Michigan Department of Education staff as needed.

After several chaotic months, the district and community began to settle down under the new leadership, which, among other things, focused on shifting people's energy away from complaining about focus school designation to improving the district's schools to better serve all students. Dickinson-Kelley and Miller proved to be a dynamic and successful team that, with Swift's and the school board's leadership, was able to foster rapid change in AAPS. A little more than two years after the initial identification of AAPS focus schools, all 27 district schools

Table 1. AAPS Focus School Identification and Exit

School Year	Identification/Exit	Total Schools in Status
2012/13	• 27 schools identified as Cohort 1 focus schools (based on 2011/12 performance)	27 focus schools (Cohort 1)
2013/14	• 11 schools exited (some became award schools; others were not re-identified) • 2 schools identified as Cohort 2 focus schools (based on 2012/13 performance)	18 focus schools (16 remaining in Cohort 1 & 2 in Cohort 2)
2014/15	• No new identifications • 16 schools exited	2 focus schools (Cohort 2)

Source: Michigan Department of Education's website page, Focus Schools: http://www.michigan.gov/mde/0,4615,7-140-22709_62253---,00.html; Correspondence with AAPS (February 11, 2016).

that had been in the state's first cohort of focus schools had exited status (see table 1).

To understand how the district and its designated focus schools made this positive shift, the lead author of this report conducted some initial phone interviews with district and school staff, then followed up with two days of in-person interviews of several district leaders, a school board member, and nine school-level staff members (principals and teachers). Data analysis and document review complemented the in-person interviews to generate a holistic picture of the district's work. (For the full list of those interviewed, see appendix C.)

Because the majority of AAPS schools had been identified as focus schools, district leaders knew that the district-level improvement strategies they chose would positively affect all schools. According to Dickinson-Kelley, the overall effort started with Superintendent Swift working with both district and focus-school leaders to shift the dialogue from continuing to argue about the designation to talking about how better to support students. As Dickinson-Kelley saw it, AAPS already had many strong systems and practices in place for educating and meeting the social-emotional needs of students, but that they were being implemented in isolated pockets rather than consistently across the district. Equally important, they were not implemented in an aligned fashion. To achieve broad change, district leaders realized that this would have to change. With support from Miller, an increasingly collaborative district staff developed a two-year

> **"We didn't do anything incredibly profound; we just said we were going to do it, and we were focused and intentional about it."**
>
> —Lee Ann Dickinson-Kelley, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, Ann Arbor Public Schools

The Improvement Process

After identification of the first 27 focus schools, AAPS set out to close achievement gaps between the lowest-performing students and highest-performing students. In planning how to do so, district leaders conducted their own data analysis to better understand the factors underlying the state-identified achievement gaps; they looked in particular at what was going on with students in traditionally underserved subgroups.

districtwide improvement plan for *all* schools that called for:

- Instating school-level improvement planning
- Engendering a sense of urgency about improvement
- Building school-level staff capacity
- Accounting for non-academic factors that influence student learning
- Aligning curricula within and across schools
- Tracking and improving programs and policies

Instating School-Level Improvement Planning

While concentrating specifically on raising the achievement of the lowest-performing students, district leadership used the identification of focus schools as an opportunity to implement a variety of programs that would benefit all students and, by doing so, would improve the district's reputation, which had been bruised by identification of its focus schools. This latter goal was important for a number of reasons, not least because the state was in a fiscal crisis and there was decreased state funding for schools. AAPS needed not just to maintain its baseline revenue by encouraging current students to remain in the district; it also needed to *increase* revenue by increasing enrollment. To that end, it needed to ensure that AAPS schools would be attractive to the many new families who come to Ann Arbor for work at the university.

AAPS leaders looked for ideas in other school districts and found it in an unlikely location. In autumn 2014, Miller had the opportunity to travel to London, England with several other educators from the Michigan Department of Education and Michigan State University's Office of K–12 Outreach, to learn from British educators working with at-risk student populations. She returned ready to help AAPS and its schools implement some new strategies, including the practice of increasing students' ownership of their learning and expanding student services to better address social and personal needs.

In addition, AAPS required each school to develop an improvement plan, which was then reviewed by the district's performance committee, made up of the superintendent and three school board members. Because so many AAPS schools had been identified for improvement, even schools that had not been identified felt the pressure to improve, concerned that they may have been close to receiving a focus-school designation.

In addition to reviewing and providing feedback on the improvement plans, the performance committee received frequent updates from Dickinson-Kelley, allowing them to monitor the improvement process and to highlight any areas of concern. Reflecting on the improvement plans, one board member interviewed for this report said, "We could see strong differences between schools, and we let district and school administrators know when we weren't impressed and when changes needed to be made" (A. Thomas, personal communication, January 12, 2016).

Dickinson-Kelley and Miller also did their own on-the-ground monitoring of progress at each school. Once a month, the two conducted an on-site meeting with staff at each school to discuss problems and share success stories. School leaders interviewed by CST generally found these meetings to be helpful for checking in on implementation issues, identifying areas of weakness, and brainstorming solutions as needs arose.

Engendering a Sense of Urgency About Improvement

"We had to shift the entire [school] community's focus from one of despair to one of opportunity," Dickinson-Kelley recalled. Throughout several months of staff and community denial, frustration, and lack of ownership for the quality of AAPS schools, she encouraged each principal and school leadership team to start matching faces to the data by identifying and discussing the academic performance and needs of individual students. Doing so helped to create the needed sense of urgency around improvement efforts. Through discussions, presentations, and other forms of district communication, it was also made clear to school staff and the community that district leaders wanted to improve education for all students, not just for the lowest-performing students.

Collecting, analyzing, and using performance data effectively to improve instruction and target student needs has been essential to Ann Arbor's transformation, and sharing these data helped the district create a sense of urgency by demonstrating the realities of the education system. The importance of data was noted in every interview conducted for this report. One principal commented, "Data is crucial to our work; everyone talks about it all the time." In fact, the need to use data to drive improvement had already been mentioned throughout the district's strategic plan, indicating that people already knew the importance of data and now just needed to act accordingly.

Another principal noted that the identification of focus schools made the staff more intentional in the work they did. Underscoring that idea, one teacher commented in an interview that she and her colleagues had already been "looking at those kids" in the bottom levels of performance, but that the focus-school designation had "upped the ante on what we were doing" (C. McAlinden, personal communication, January 12, 2016). Bringing data to the forefront helped guide the district and its schools toward action. Based on what they saw in the data, said one school staff member, "[we] were able to change adult practices and better support students."

Building School-Level Staff Capacity

An overarching goal in the district's improvement plan was to build capacity at the school level so that once improvement had been made, it would be sustained after a school had exited focus status.

Ensuring that each focus school had strong leadership was a top district priority. If district staff believed that principals had the necessary skills and dispositions to guide school improvement, these school leaders were allowed to remain in place or, in a few cases, were shifted to other schools where there was greater need. The district did, however, move a handful of principals out of leadership positions. While these staffing decisions could have been controversial, there was an understanding at the district and school board levels that strong building leaders were crucial to the narrowing of achievement gaps at focus schools and that some people needed to be replaced in order to achieve the necessary improvement.

> **"The [focus-school designation] gave staff [the impetus] to focus on a few core issues and the opportunity to prioritize our work."**
>
> **— J. Swift, personal communication, January 12, 2016**

With trusted school leaders in place, AAPS gave them greater autonomy in making school-level staffing and resource decisions. To support them in using this autonomy as wisely as possible to advance improvement, the district also provided them with specialized professional learning related to human resources and budgeting.

With this new degree of autonomy, school principals could make minor staffing changes on their own. Several principals said they had shifted some of their existing staff around to better meet student needs. For example, if a fifth grade teacher retired or left the school, the principal may have shifted an existing second grade teacher who he or she thought would do well with fifth graders and hired a new second grade teacher instead. Most of the flexibility with staffing occurred when a position opened and a principal had the ability to hire. Indicative of positive school culture in most schools, staff turnover remains low in many of the formerly identified focus schools.

Some schools already had established leadership teams; in other cases, schools needed help in creating a leadership team. Once the teams were ready, Dickinson-Kelley and Miller began working with them, charging them with taking ownership for the improvement efforts at their individual school.

School Spotlight: Mitchell Elementary School

Mitchell Elementary School has historically been one of Ann Arbor's lowest-achieving schools. Nearly 80 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-price meals and 40 percent are designated English learners. In response to being identified as a Cohort 1 focus school, Mitchell implemented a number of strategies aimed at reducing its achievement gaps.

First, the school transitioned to providing an International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which increased both academic and behavioral expectations for all students. In preparation for the IB program, teachers were required to reapply for their jobs and, as part of that process, they needed to demonstrate their capacity to deliver the more rigorous IB curriculum. Those who were not prepared or did not want to meet the higher expectations and increased accountability related to the IB program could choose to work at another school.

Mitchell, along with the neighboring Scarlett Middle School, also developed a partnership with the University of Michigan School of Education. In a more traditional approach, education students attend classes on the college campus and have a practicum, or student teaching experience, toward the end of their degree program. In the model used in the Mitchell-Scarlett Teaching and Learning Collaborative, the school of education concentrates student teachers in one school rather than spreading them across multiple schools. It then targets its professional resources on that school. As part of the university partnership, university professors come to the school to observe and provide feedback on the instruction of both pre-service teachers and school staff, and some education classes are held on site with existing staff invited to attend for professional learning. In addition to increasing the capacity of the student teachers, who might end up seeking employment at the school or within the district, according to school leaders, the program has also raised the overall quality of staff instruction and accountability.

Developing shared accountability for educating students was already a priority for Mitchell staff prior to Mitchell's designation as a focus school, said Mitchell principal Kevin Karr. The focus-school designation advanced that effort, causing staff to work more closely together to identify problems, brainstorm solutions, and implement actions. School leaders pointed to several additional strategies that contributed to the school's improvements, including more effective use of performance data, strategic staff assignment, and elimination of ineffective programs.

In 2014/15, AAPS provided leadership training for principals, evaluated classroom practices (such as instruction and discipline), and implemented new programs for student support. Principals from focus schools were brought together monthly to share strategies and frustrations, to support each other, and to learn about relevant research and reports. Reflecting on the joint meetings, one principal observed that, while some schools had already been having these types of conversations, "now you're in a room with more principals [from] similar schools and talking about it in a way that you haven't talked about it before. It was genius" (G. Vasquez, personal communication, January 12, 2016).

The district also offered educators greater flexibility in their assignments, recognizing that some might choose to opt out of their assigned school due to their changing responsibilities related to the school's improvement plan. For example, when AAPS and the University of Michigan launched a teaching partnership and a more rigorous curricular program in two schools, school staff could request a transfer if they did not want to become part of the program. (For more information, see School Spotlight: Mitchell Elementary School above.)

Accounting for Non-Academic Factors that Influence Student Learning

Identifying and addressing non-academic factors that impacted student learning was a core aspect of the district's improvement work. In closely analyzing suspension and expulsion rates, district and school leaders saw how the use of discipline adversely and differentially impacted specific subgroups of students. "If you were a male African American with special education needs," said Dickinson-Kelley, "it's likely that you were out of the classroom due to disciplinary issues on a regular basis."

To address such issues, AAPS modified discipline procedures throughout the district, and also provided additional supports for students with behavioral problems. For example, school principals went to classrooms to address discipline incidents immediately, as opposed to having teachers send students to the principal's office. Some schools implemented a progressive-discipline approach. In this approach, which is similar to tiered academic interventions, there are three tiers of intervention, with less intensive measures always tried before student suspension. Making sure that all students felt safe and comfortable in the classroom became a district priority, with the expectation that adults would adjust how they addressed classroom management and disciplinary actions so as to meet the needs of individual students. In addition, additional tutoring opportunities and personal supports (such as a nursery for young mothers) were also provided for students.

Aligning Curricula Within and Across Schools

The goal of aligned curricula was a thread throughout AAPS improvement efforts, with district leaders identifying a need for better vertical and horizontal alignment. Due to the reform efforts, some middle schools in the district began working more closely with their elementary feeder schools (vertical), consistency across grade levels and subjects improved (horizontal), and staff within schools increased their level of communication about the scope and sequence of their curricula (horizontal and vertical).

Common planning time is critical to enabling this type of alignment, yet the reality was that in some AAPS schools, scheduling issues prevented shared planning time. As a work-around, some school leadership teams created data-analysis and lesson-plan templates for their staff, and teachers started posting lesson plans to a private online community. These resources allow teachers to view each other's lesson plans on common templates, to increase alignment across courses.

Tracking and Improving Programs and Policies

Throughout the improvement process, AAPS and its focus schools implemented a number of new programs and policies. However, district and school staff were encouraged to first identify and look for solutions to root causes as opposed to immediately setting out to buy a new program or hire consultants. Encouragement to use data to track and better understand what's actually working, what's not working, and what might lead to improvement is especially important for districts and schools that are feeling pressured or otherwise motivated to see quick change. In such situations, Dickinson-Kelley noted, there can be a temptation to simply "buy additional programs to fix a problem" whereas there may well be other, better ways to address the problem without needing additional funds. Many of the new AAPS programs and policies were implemented within existing budgets.

Although AAPS's district leaders determined the focus of overall improvement efforts at the district level (e.g., use of data, building school-level leadership capacity), principals were given considerable autonomy to select and implement new programs or policies (e.g., instructional approaches, theme programs, provision of socioeconomic supports) intended to help all students. Several school staff interviewed for this report commented on the importance of stepping back, analyzing all programs and policies being used, assessing their value, and determining which should be maintained and which could be eliminated, enabling reallocation of associated resources.

Practice Spotlight: Assessment Literacy

When two Clague Middle School staff members attended training focused on assessment literacy, the concept immediately resonated for them in thinking about the needs of their school. When they returned to the building, they shared what they had learned, and assessment literacy was integrated into the school's strategic plan, becoming a foundational strategy for the entire building.

The concept of assessment literacy is that educators will understand the full range of assessment types and their different purposes. Teachers will be able to use formative student assessments to adjust instruction and to use a deliberate summative assessment strategy to know what students are learning. In talking about increased use of formative assessment, one teacher commented, "This makes teaching much more diagnostic; it makes us better professionals. With any of my students, I can say this is where you're struggling, this is where you're succeeding, and this is what we can work on" (A. Wiens, personal communication, January 12, 2016).

As teachers develop greater assessment literacy and greater facility in communicating with students about the value of assessment results, students, in turn, are able to use those results to better understand their own learning and to guide their efforts. The instructional program at Clague, which also includes tiered interventions for students and the use of non-academic supports, is based on teachers' use of assessment results to guide their work with students and on students being engaged in their own learning growth — understanding their baseline performance, setting their own goals, and monitoring their progress toward those goals.

School staff reported in interviews that teachers and students alike have adopted a growth mentality; a C grade is now called "almost there." One teacher noted that when conversations about learning shift to a focus on growth, "the kids are not as fearful of making mistakes" (J. Donnally, personal communication, January 12, 2016). One result, the principal noted, has been fewer student behavioral issues and a better overall classroom environment because students have a better understanding of where they are in their learning and of the fact that staff will help them improve. The principal also observed that teachers seem to be having more fun teaching and that they feel more of a partnership with their students.

Having teachers and their students be more literate about assessment aligned with and supported other important strategies that AAPS was already trying to integrate as a district, including developing greater student ownership of their learning and having teachers adapt instruction to meet students' needs through differentiation.

See appendix A for more information on Clague Middle School's approach to instruction and assessment literacy.

With each AAPS school being given increased autonomy over its budget, one principal, for example, used her discretionary funding to provide substitutes for three-and-a-half days so that her staff could participate in intensive professional learning and, also, to purchase additional literacy intervention kits and math programs — all of which better aligned with her school's needs than what the funding had been supporting prior to the shift. Another school leadership team used their programmatic autonomies to focus on assessment literacy as a strategy for reforming their instructional approach. (For more information, see Practice Spotlight: Assessment Literacy, above.)

Examples of some of the new or expanded programs or policies implemented districtwide or in specific focus schools include:

- a mentoring program, in which upper classmen are matched with the lowest-performing 30 percent of incoming students to support their transition into high school;
- an open enrollment policy giving students the ability to attend any school within the district, regardless of traditional school attendance boundaries;
- a pre-K–12 International Baccalaureate program;
- expansion of world languages programs to include Arabic and Chinese;
- Project Lead the Way, which enhances STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Math) in five high schools and five middle schools;
- consolidation of two alternative high schools into one program that included a nursery for young mothers, dual-enrollment options, and vocational training;
- expansion of magnet/theme schools;
- a virtual school program (through which, according to AAPS staff, 1,500 classes were taken last year);
- expansion of early childhood programming, specifically a Young 5's classroom; and
- expansion of an existing partnership with the University of Michigan School of Education in order to include summer learning programming for English learners.

AAPS leaders said they felt that the focus-school designations provided the perfect rationale for implementing such programmatic changes. In any improvement effort, some parents of higher-performing children may worry that their children will somehow lose out as resources are prioritized toward serving lower-performing students. Implementation of the innovative programs showed promise of positively impacting all students, not just those with a history of low performance.

Table 2. Student Enrollment

School Year	Student Enrollment
2010/11	16,552
2011/12	16,637
2012/13	16,634
2013/14	16,449
2014/15	16,815
2015/16	17,104

Source: Ann Arbor Public Schools (2014c); 2015 correspondence with AAPS.

Impact

AAPS staff interviewed for this report described improvements in several success-related indicators, including enrollment; discipline and suspension; and scores on high school standardized tests.

Enrollment

Given the presence of charter schools in Michigan and the ability for students to choose from among any public school, enrollment is considered a strong indicator of effectiveness for traditional public schools. In addition, any student attending a focus school has the ability to attend a non-identified school within AAPS or in a surrounding district. District and school leaders reported that no students chose to leave their identified school because of its designation as a focus school.

Northside Elementary School is just one example of a focus school that became more appealing through the improvement process. In 2013, it was one of the lowest-performing elementary schools in the district. As part of the improvement process, it was transformed into a K–8 STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, math) magnet program. By 2016, the previously under-enrolled school had a wait list of approximately 200 students.

One school board member noted that AAPS has had the largest student enrollment growth in the state over the last two years. As seen in table 2 above, since 2010/11, AAPS's enrollment

Table 3. Changes in Percentage Proficient from 2012/13 to 2013/14 in MME Results

Type Proficient	Reading	Math
African American	scores rose more than 5%	scores rose more than 5%
Asian	scores rose 5%	scores rose less than 5%
White	scores rose 5%	no change in scores
Hispanic	no change in scores	scores rose 5%
Multi-Ethnic	scores rose more than 5%	scores rose more than 5%
Economically Disadvantaged	scores rose more than 5%	scores dropped less than 5%
ELL	scores rose more than 5%	scores rose more than 5%
Special Education	scores dropped less than 5%	scores rose more than 5%
Total	scores rose less than 5%	scores rose more than 5%

Source: Ann Arbor Public Schools. (2014b, October 8). *Annual student achievement report*. Report presented at board of education meeting, Ann Arbor, MI, pp. 14, 16.

has trended upward, which provides additional revenue for the district and suggests that it is a desirable school system for families that are new to Ann Arbor or those that had previously opted for charter or private schools.

Discipline and Suspension

AAPS staff pointed to decreased suspension rates in both middle and high schools as another indicator of the district's improvement; lowering suspension rates and also relying more on in-class discipline rather than sending students to the principal's office had been a district priority. Between 2010/11 and 2014/15, middle school suspension rates demonstrated steadily decreasing trends for African American, Caucasian, economically disadvantaged, and special education subgroups. Asian students showed a slight increase one year (from 1 to 2 incidents), but then the number of suspended students dropped back to zero. In the same time frame, high school suspension rates demonstrated decreasing trends for African American and special education subgroups; Caucasian and economically disadvantaged subgroups initially declined and then held steady for 2013/14 and 2014/15. Similar to middle school rates, Asian students' suspension rates held steady, but remained minimal (AAPS, 2014c; AAPS Board of Education, 2015).

Academics

In the period from the Michigan Department of Education's initial designation of focus schools across the state to 2016, Michigan switched from one statewide assessment system to another, so it is difficult to monitor the changes in academic achievement over time. However, some early results are promising. The Michigan Merit Exam (MME) has been administered for several years to all grade-11 students in reading, mathematics, science, social studies, and writing. Recently, AAPS schools outperformed the state in almost every subject and every monitored student subgroup (AAPS and the state tied on the science score for economically disadvantaged students in 2013/14). In many cases, AAPS outperformed the state average by more than 20 percentage points. This comparison data is found in appendix B. As seen in table 3 above, when AAPS broke down two years of MME results by subgroup, improvements were noted in almost all subgroups (AAPS, 2014b). However, economically disadvantaged students struggled in all areas except reading, and that subgroup remains a priority for the district.

AAPS sees room for more improvement. The overall graduation rate rose 3 percent between 2011 and 2013 (AAPS, 2014a). While the graduation rates did not rise as much as anticipated, this is consistent with statewide trends and may be due to changes to the state graduation requirements in 2011. Some student subgroups in AAPS showed improved graduation rates (i.e., Latino and special education) and some showed improvements, but at slower rates (i.e., African American, Asian, two or more races, economically disadvantaged, and White; AAPS, 2014a). These graduation rates demonstrate that some achievement gaps are closing for certain identified subgroups, but they also indicate that the graduation rate for "all students" has not increased significantly.

Sustainability

Swift and Dickinson-Kelley initiated the district's improvement efforts with the belief that systems and practices had to be embedded to a degree that would enable continued improvement even in the face of school or district staff turnover. Once the majority of focus schools exited that status, the Michigan Department of Education eliminated financial support for the external provider, Miller. But due to what the district saw as Miller's crucial role in supporting the schools, AAPS allocated district funds to continue working with her until the practices were more strongly embedded throughout the system. Meanwhile, Dickinson-Kelley and Miller continued to closely monitor schools that have exited focus-school status, to make sure that their successful practices continued — that they did not backslide and would not show up again on the state's list.

Several improvement practices that started specifically at the focus-school level were also scaled to other schools in the district, among them, development of teachers' assessment literacy, positive changes in disciplinary practices, and efforts to enhance students' ownership of their own data by better understanding their baseline performance and setting performance goals. In addition, all schools are now required to write a Title III plan for English language learners that describes monitoring, relevant professional development for staff, and outreach to parents.

School staff noted that while many improvements were made in focus schools, some of the schools would continue to have achievement gap challenges. One principal commented, "With the levels of poverty and the [social issues in the] families we serve, we know kids are going to come in with achievement issues when they start school, but our gaps are closing." Recognizing that some students will already be behind when they start school, many school staff reported feeling confident that as teachers or school leaders, they are on the right path for continuing to close achievement gaps and ensuring that all students demonstrate more than one year of growth each academic year.

Key Takeaways

- **Develop a collective purpose:** In interviews, AAPS staff reinforced the notion that both the staff and the education community (including the board and partner organizations) had a collective purpose and believed that achievement gaps could be closed. It was important for school staff to know that district leaders were by their side, and district staff required the same support from AAPS's Board of Education. The superintendent and the Board of Education worked closely together to ensure that district structures and practices were in place to support the focus efforts. While some board members strongly disagreed with the focus-school identification criteria, once the improvement work started, the "board committed not because we wanted to get out of the status … but because it was the right thing to do for the kids. The progress we've seen was made from the will of the board, not because of the status" (A. Thomas, personal communication, January 12, 2016). Regardless of the underlying motivation for improvement efforts, having committed staff — from individual teachers and principals to the superintendent and board members — is imperative to making needed changes.

- **Develop strong relationships:** Miller and Dickinson-Kelley had not worked together previously, but they quickly formed a strong working relationship and their skills proved to be complementary. They shared the same values and brought new content, practices, and research that could strengthen the district. In addition, Superintendent Swift trusted Dickinson-Kelley and gave her the autonomy to do the work she was hired to do. AAPS staff also developed a healthy degree of positive peer pressure that centered around the moral purpose and collective good of educating students. Hiring strong staff is an important factor in developing such relationships, but a culture of trust, respect, and support must also become pervasive through all levels of the staff.

- **Build strong school leaders:** The importance of having strong school leaders cannot be overstated. AAPS knew this and ensured that all focus schools were led by principals who had the capacity to transform buildings and the belief that all students can learn. While the principals started out with a high skill level, Dickinson-Kelley then implemented monthly meetings to increase accountability. In addition, the principals were brought together to problem-solve jointly, to learn new skills and the latest research, and to challenge each other to implement academic and behavioral practices with fidelity.

- **Create a sense of urgency:** While the focus-school designation was controversial in Ann Arbor and the criteria for identification were confusing to staff and the community, interviewees noted that AAPS would not be where it is today without those designations. One principal said, "Due to focus [identification], we launched a lot of new initiatives and had a lot of discussions around how to close the gaps. The improvements wouldn't have happened without the cloud looming over our head of 'what happens next?'" (C. Carter, personal communication, January 12, 2016). The designation of the majority of Ann Arbor's schools forced significant changes and required a sense of urgency to bring to scale some of the strong practices already being used by the district, to implement all programs and practices with fidelity, and to intentionally focus on both the lowest-achieving students and all students. Further, the fact that Dickinson-Kelley came out of retirement to take on this work underscored its urgency and, reportedly, had a major impact on school staff.

Conclusion

Moving forward, AAPS plans to continue monitoring the implementation of the improvement strategies and the progress in closing achievement gaps. While the community has supported several bonds targeted at enhancing the district's technological infrastructure and capital improvements, the district has also experienced some recent budget cuts. District leaders know they must remain vigilant in their quest to improve education opportunities for their students, especially those who need additional supports, and improved systems and structures in order to succeed.

Ann Arbor's experience with closing the achievement gaps between its lowest- and highest-performing students, while also improving the quality of education for all students, provides an important set of considerations for other schools and districts across the country.

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Appendix A: Clague Middle School's Assessment Literacy Overview

Where am I going?

Strategy 1: Provide students with clear and understandable vision of the learning target.

- Clague teachers share the learning targets with students, refer to the target and establish a culture that *learning* is important (not point accumulation).
- A common understanding that students will reach learning targets at different times.
- A common understanding that differentiation must be part of the teaching plan.
  - Retake opportunities Test (Summative assessment)
  - Penalty-free practice (Formative assessments not counted in final grade)
  - Grade represents learning only — not behaviors … working towards a SBG
- Clague teachers teach lessons, and activities that are directly tied to the learning targets (CCSS, NGSS, C3).

Strategy 2: Use examples of strong and weak work.

- Clague teachers are currently gathering student models of student work for four levels. This helps students see where they are and what they need to do to reach the target.
- Have strong and weak models of work for writing for math, social studies, and language arts.
- A common understanding and commitment to the growth mindset.

Where am I now?

Strategy 3: Offer regular descriptive feedback during the learning.

- Clague teachers have had PD about using descriptive and useful feedback. It is an ongoing process of improvement.
- AL training offers suggestions for success and partial understanding feedback.

Strategy 4: Teach students to self-assess and set goals for next steps.

- Clague teachers are aware of the unique learning needs of adolescent learners.
- A common understanding that students need to take ownership of their learning experiences.
  - "Redo" centers in classrooms
  - Target surveys — students rate their understanding of the learning targets before and after the unit and set goals on what they need to do next.

How can I close the gap (between where I am going and where I am now?)

Strategy 5: Use evidence of student learning needs to determine the next steps in teaching.

- Clague teachers have had PD about how to gather data and use that data to inform the next "teaching move."

Strategy 6: Design focused instruction followed by practice with feedback (workshop model).

- Teachers are adapting the AL model of teaching*
  - Partner work/practice/problem of the day in Math
  - Guided reading/writing workshops in ELA
  - Science labs
  - Social studies group work

Strategy 7: Provide students opportunities to track, reflect on and share their learning process.

- Clague teachers invite students to share their learning process using a myriad of activities such as "Think, Pair, Share, Math Problem of the Day, Talking to the Text" and many more.
- Ideas for students to track their progress are discussed in the AL training. However, this may be a focus for next year.

Source: Clague Middle School

Appendix B: 2013/14 MME District Compared to State

	2013/14 Reading AAPS	2013/14 Reading State	2013/14 Mathematics AAPS	2013/14 Mathematics State	2013/14 Science AAPS	2013/14 Science State	2013/14 Social Studies AAPS	2013/14 Social Studies State	2013/14 Writing AAPS	2013/14 Writing State
Total	77	59	60	29	54	28	68	44	72	51
White	85	65	67	33	61	33	77	50	82	57
African American	46	31	21	6	15	5	31	17	35	23
Asian	90	72	89	61	77	48	85	61	90	70
Hispanic	56	45	39	15	36	15	46	31	48	34
Multi-Ethnicity	78	59	57	25	55	27	65	44	71	50
Economically Disadvantaged	46	43	19	13	14	14	28	27	31	32
English Language Learner	35	19	41	7	18	3	38	12	29	13
Special Education	37	24	19	4	16	5	26	11	25	11

Source: Ann Arbor Public Schools. (2014b, October 8). *Annual student achievement report*. Report presented at board of education meeting, Ann Arbor, MI, p. 11.

Appendix C. Interviews Conducted for this Report

An initial phone interview took place with Lee Ann Dickinson-Kelley on November 2, 2015. On-site interviews were conducted in Ann Arbor, Michigan, January 11–12, 2016 with the following staff and community members:

Jeanice Swift, Superintendent

Lee Ann Dickinson-Kelley, Assistant Superintendent

Andy Thomas, Member of Board of Trustees

Noni Miller, Consultant

Kevin Karr and Matt Hilton, Principal and Assistant Principal, Mitchell Elementary School

Gerald Vasquez, Principal, Scarlett Middle School

Che Carter, Mark Donnelly, Aaron Wiens, and Julie Donnelly, Principal and staff, Clague Middle School

Pam Sica and Collen McAlinden, Principal and staff, Abbot Elementary School

Casey Elmore, Kristal Jaaskelaninen, and Kaye Wade, SLC Principal and staff, Skyline High School

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