

## A Case Study Description of Jensen Middle School<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction and Background

Susan Davis was hired as the principal of Jensen Middle School, a 6-8 school, in January of the 2012-13 school year after the previous principal unexpectedly resigned. Jensen was a school in crisis; most students were performing significantly below grade level in both reading and math, and behavior issues were pervasive.

Susan had successfully turned around several failing schools and was brought into Jensen with the expectation that she would lead significant improvement in instruction and increases in student achievement. Because she entered mid-year, she did not make dramatic changes immediately, but spent her first few months getting a feel for the school, its students, and staff. However, district policy allowed significant flexibility over the way resources at the school were organized, and Susan was excited to use the summer to think with her leadership team about how she could reorganize Jensen's design to use resources more wisely in support of her top goals.

At the close of the 2012-13 school year, only 23 percent of Jensen's 690 total students were proficient in reading, putting the school at the bottom of all middle schools in the district. Forty-three percent of students were proficient in math, which was just below the districtwide average. Furthermore, Jensen seemed stuck in this pattern of low performance—over the past several years the school showed little improvement in either subject. A quick scan of student growth data showed that Jensen students grew at just below the average district student in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, but that students lost significant ground in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Attendance at the school was low, with the average student missing 20 days of school, and tardiness was commonplace. Frequently, teachers would have only half of their class in attendance at the start of first period. Behavior issues were also widespread; students were frequently sent out of class and to the assistant principals for disciplinary issues. In addition, social-emotional and mental health needs among students were high; many students came to school angry, sad, and/or having experienced significant personal trauma. Twenty percent of students had been identified to receive specialized services.

The previous principal had developed a significant structure for social-emotional and behavioral support outside the classroom to try to address students' needs, and it included social workers and discipline deans. In addition, a few teachers were known for their efforts to create meaningful relationships with students, which, in Susan's experience, had often turned out to be the most effective support mechanism. However, most teachers perceived relationship-building as going above and beyond, not as a part of their day-to-day responsibilities. Susan's hypothesis was that with more effective tier one and social-emotional and behavioral support within the classroom, and deeper relationships between students and teachers, the need for many of these external supports would be reduced and many students could likely be exited from special education.<sup>2</sup>

Susan had comparable evaluation scores for all the teachers in the building. In addition to an overall effectiveness score (with the possible ratings: highly effective, effective, developing, minimally effective, and ineffective), the evaluation tool returned a score for each teacher on four more granular dimensions, including content knowledge, planning and preparation, instruction, and the classroom

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<sup>1</sup> This is a hypothetical school.

<sup>2</sup> Note: This case exercise assumes 0 students are served in an ELL or self-contained special education model for simplicity

environment. Susan’s analysis of this evaluation data showed that only five teachers (of 52 total teacher positions) were highly effective, with 15 (29 percent) effective, 20 (40 percent) developing, and five (10 percent) minimally effective. Fifteen (29 percent) of the teachers at the school were in their first three years, and Susan had seven vacancies to fill for the upcoming year. The more granular evaluation data showed a mix of strengths and weaknesses. As indicated by the small number of teachers who were highly effective, few teachers were strong in all three areas. However, in any given area, between 15 percent and 20 percent of teachers had scored in the highest category. The five highly effective teachers were spread across the four core content areas, though none taught in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Susan had noticed that there was essentially a “closed door” culture at the school amongst teachers—they tended to work independently from one another. The one exception to this rule was the 8<sup>th</sup> grade team, which planned and worked very deliberately together. Susan knew this group of teachers had been together for some time and really valued working together.

At the beginning of her planning process, Susan sat down to summarize her assessment of Jensen’s student need and instructional practice. Her summary is below.

| Student need   | Instructional practice   |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Priority content:</b> reading highest priority for the large majority of students, with most students also behind in math</li> <li>• <b>Priority student groups:</b> 6<sup>th</sup> grade; special education; almost all students are struggling</li> <li>• <b>Social-emotional/health needs:</b> Significant social-emotional needs and behavioral issues; low overall engagement in school evidenced through attendance rates</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Performance distribution:</b> most teachers need significant support in the planning and delivery of instruction as evidenced by the evaluation tool, informal observations, and student performance data; a handful of expert teachers is a key strength to leverage; five very low-performing teachers should be exited</li> <li>• <b>Common strengths/weaknesses:</b> reading and SE/behavior support and relationship building are clear priorities for support, with more data needed on specific focus areas by subject/grade level</li> <li>• <b>Vacancies:</b> 7</li> <li>• <b>Culture/mindset:</b> Culture of isolation among teachers</li> </ul> |

The district had provided a career- and college-ready standard-aligned scope and sequence outlining the skills that students should learn in each grade, as well as a vetted curriculum to support it in each grade in ELA and math. The curriculum included high-quality task and lesson plan level resources, as well as formative assessments. In addition, students were required to take interim assessments every nine weeks that assessed their mastery on the skills outlined on the scope and sequence for the previous nine weeks. Because the district had given schools flexibility over curriculum decisions, the previous principal had not required that teachers use the district curriculum, instead letting each teacher choose to craft his or her own content, leveraging the district curriculum as one resource. Many teachers used portions of it, but most also used various other sources available online. With the exception of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade team, there was little coordination of content across classrooms—any two teachers teaching the same grade and subject could be teaching very different things in very different ways at any given time.

## Current Resource Use (Organization of Time, People, and Money)

**School schedule and staffing.** Jensen served 690 students overall, split evenly across the grades. Each grade level had two teachers per core subject (ELA, math, science, and social studies). In addition, there were 18 elective teachers (including six foreign language teachers), three reading intervention teachers, and seven special education teachers on the teaching staff. All other staffing resources performed administrative or pupil services functions.

Jensen's school year was 182 days long and the typical student day was structured as shown in the table below. The typical student took four core courses (ELA, math, science, and social studies), one foreign language course, and two elective courses. Electives were one semester long, with all core courses lasting the full year.

| Period             | Time          | Duration   |
|--------------------|---------------|------------|
| 1st Period         | 7:40 - 8:30   | 50 Minutes |
| 2nd Period         | 8:35 - 9:25   | 50 Minutes |
| 3rd Period         | 9:30 - 10:20  | 50 Minutes |
| 4th Period (lunch) | 10:25 - 11:15 | 50 Minutes |
| 5th Period (lunch) | 11:20 - 12:10 | 50 Minutes |
| 6th Period (lunch) | 12:15 - 1:05  | 50 Minutes |
| 7th Period         | 1:10 - 2:00   | 50 Minutes |
| 8th Period         | 2:05 - 2:55   | 50 Minutes |

Each grade had one reading intervention teacher who taught two sections of a two-period reading intervention course to a total of 40 students (20 students in each of two double periods). This reading intervention course met all year. Reading intervention teachers also each taught one section of a small pull-out, skill-based group; these groups targeted "bubble students" on the cusp of proficiency based on formative assessment data and met during electives. Students cycled in and out of this intervention over the course of the year based on need; about 15 students (three groups of five) schoolwide received the intervention at any given time.

Susan had heard from teachers and students that while the reading intervention period was beneficial for some students, it did not work for every student who needed remedial support. And, students taking the course often complained that it prevented them from taking any elective courses. However, Susan felt that given the school's low ELA proficiency rates, most students probably were not spending enough time on reading.

**Individual Attention Structures for Students.** Class sizes at Jensen averaged 23 students across most core areas; reading intervention classes averaged about 20. Non-core class sizes also averaged about 20, which was the result of the school trying to maintain a breadth of electives while also providing reading intervention courses that reduced the number of elective seats needed. With five courses, most core teachers' loads were about 115. Reading intervention teachers' loads were about 70 as they taught two groups of students for double blocks (for a total of 40 students), and rotated through new small groups of "bubble" students about six times a year. Students were scheduled individually (versus in cohorts) such that there were not discrete groups of cross-content teachers that shared the same students. See *Appendix D: Class Size Matrix*.

Many, though not all, teachers created targeted groups within their classrooms to ensure struggling students received more support. Most often, this meant that while most students worked independently on an assignment, the teacher would pull a small group of students who needed to go deeper or catch up on a given skill to provide additional support. Teachers used many different types of data to identify students for these groups, from grades on daily assignments and end-of-unit tests, to data from benchmark assessments.

Special education students were served through an inclusion model. Two special education teachers were on each grade level team. Each was dedicated to one of the two ELA or math classrooms. One inclusion teacher supported science across all three grades, rotating across grade levels throughout the week to provide support. Any student needing special education services was assigned to a classroom with a special education inclusion teacher, which meant that special education students were clustered together for ELA, math, and science. The relationship between the special education and the general education teacher within inclusion classrooms varied. In some cases, the two teachers planned together and functioned as co-teachers; in others, the special education teacher was not involved in planning and simply roamed the room to provide 1-1 support to special education students during instructional time.

Jensen had three social workers, each of whom had caseloads of 15-20 students who needed counseling support. Most of these students were special education students with emotionally disturbed or behavior disorder designations. The social workers sometimes worked with general education students who had been recommended by their teachers as well, but only as they had room in their caseloads. Students were pulled out of core and/or elective courses to receive counseling services, based on the social workers' schedule and availability. Susan thought the social workers were effective support providers; however, she also knew they were compensated at a higher rate than their peers in other sectors because they were paid on the teacher salary schedule, and they had many years of experience. Therefore, she felt that she was paying too much for the service they were providing. Jensen had one school guidance counselor who taught one "guidance" class designed around supporting social-emotional skill development and provided some small-group counseling (e.g., she met weekly with a girls club of 5-7 students who had been consistently acting out). Finally, the school had a partnership with the city through which two city mental health professionals were placed at the school—each of these providers had caseloads of 15 students. None of the school's social-emotional and mental health professionals were in frequent contact with students' classroom teachers.

Finally, because behavior was a significant challenge at Jensen, there were also significant resources dedicated to behavior interventions. Each grade level had a dedicated assistant principal (AP) who did triage on discipline issues as they arose. Jensen's APs told Susan that they spent up to 80 percent of their time managing disciplinary issues. APs referred students who required significant behavior interventions and/or consequences to a dean of students and an in-school suspension coordinator. Susan had noticed that there was great variation in teachers' ability to manage student behavior within the classroom; as a result, some teachers sent students out of the classroom far more frequently than others. By and large, sending students out of the classroom was the most common behavior intervention teachers used.

**The Teaching Job.** All teachers at Jensen had similar roles with respect to instruction and spent their time in similar ways across categories of instructional and non-instructional activities. Teachers taught for five of the seven instructional periods in the day and were responsible for lunch duty every other day. Teachers also had one hour outside the student day, split into a half hour before school and a half hour after school. This time tended to be used for classroom setup and cleanup, as well as all staff

meetings. Teacher compensation was based on a fairly traditional step-and-lane structure with a starting salary of \$42,000 and a maximum is \$112,000; a teacher with five years of experience made \$65,000. Top performers were capable of earning up to \$125,000 with performance-based bonuses. The living wage in the area was \$69,000.

Though the previous principal had built the schedule so that each grade-level team shared at least one 50-minute planning period per day, most of the teachers in the building were not used to collaborating regularly around instruction. Even the 8<sup>th</sup> grade team, which had a culture of working together, had been meeting only on an ad hoc basis every month or so to discuss grade-level administrative details (e.g., planning for graduation). Teachers used most of their planning time for individual lesson planning and grading. While the district had provided a common scope and sequence and textbooks that included about 60 percent of the material required for the scope, teachers reported that it was taking a great deal of their time to create daily lesson plans, match the right parts of the textbook to the scope and pull in supplemental materials as necessary. Teachers also spent a significant amount of time grading papers for their load of 115 students. In fact, Susan noticed that ELA teachers tended to give few writing assignments and provide fairly shallow feedback to students on the writing they did assign; she imagined this was likely due to the amount of time it would take to provide meaningful feedback to 115 students.

Jensen had three assistant principals (one per grade level) and one instructional coach. As noted above, APs spent up to 80 percent of their time managing discipline. The other 20 percent of their time was spent conducting formal and informal evaluations consistent with the evaluation system; each AP supported a specific grade level and conducted all evaluations for that grade level. At the beginning of each year, APs also worked with the teachers for whom they were responsible to develop individual professional growth plans based on their evaluation data from the previous year; teachers by and large trusted the evaluation data and saw this as a valuable process that identified important development areas. These plans also identified specific activities that teachers would undertake to improve in their lowest-scoring areas. The instructional coach spent 50 percent of her time providing deep support to new teachers (years one and two). She supported the creation of their individual professional growth plan and connected them to resources as necessary. She also observed each new teacher at least once every other week and provided detailed feedback on their development areas. In the other 50 percent of her time, the coach organized and ran schoolwide professional development initiatives.

Jensen's rigorous teacher evaluation system had allowed Susan to quickly identify and exit the lowest performers at the school (four exited last year); further, she was able to keep most of her strongest teachers with her promise of strong leadership and instructional support. She had, however, been disappointed to lose a few second- and third-year teachers she thought were high potential (three lost last year), and she knew she would need to focus on retaining this group going forward. Susan saw her seven open positions as a big opportunity to change the mix of teacher expertise at the school. She worked with a few of her teachers and leadership team members to design a rigorous hiring process composed of lesson demonstrations and assessments of content expertise and fit with the school's philosophy. Given her experience in the district, Susan knew the hiring pool she would have access to had improved in recent years, in part, because the district had changed its hiring timeline such that hiring happened slightly before other districts, and it had undertaken work to assess and provide ongoing feedback to key hiring sources. However, she still worried about her ability to attract the right folks who would come and stay at Jensen, which historically had not been a sought-after place in the district.

After completing the School Check resource assessment to analyze her current resource patterns, Susan identified the following as her priorities for design change in the following year:

- **Talent Management and Teacher Leadership:**

- *Improve quality of new hires, with focus on leadership capacity and reading expertise; exit low performers.* Given seven existing vacancies and five additional low-performing teachers that she wanted to exit, Susan prioritized exiting low performers, together with developing a hiring strategy to recruit very high-performing teachers skilled in areas where her existing teachers were weak, and with the capacity to take on team leader roles.
- *Improve overall teaching effectiveness by placing the strongest teachers in highest-priority areas.* To maximize student performance gains, Susan wanted to place her high-performing new hires in roles that most often focused on reading, and also reassign her existing expert teachers to maximize their expertise across all grade levels.

- **Expert-led Collaboration and Professional Learning:**

- *Organize teams focused on the excellent implementation of district-provided curriculum that have time to meet together and with experts to use data to plan instruction.* Susan knew that organizing time and supports so teaching teams had time to meet was critical, particularly with her new hires increasing the number of teachers who could provide expertise on teams.

- **Responsive Learning Community:**

- *Ensure structures exist to support relationships between students and their core teachers, and cultivate a learning culture based on shared schoolwide values and routines.* Susan thought that if she could work with staff and students to develop joint ownership over a single, shared learning culture in the school, and then strengthen the relationships between students and their core teachers that tend to that culture every day, students would not only be happier and more ready to learn, but she would also, over time, be able to pull back some of the resources being used to respond to pervasive behavior issues to re-dedicate to core instruction.

- **Personalized Time and Attention:**

- *Increase time in reading for all students, likely by revising the master schedule.* Susan thought that her first priority must be around reestablishing a baseline of effective instruction through the priorities above, which would then set a foundation for some of the more innovative strategies she wanted to pursue to ensure resources were deliberately matched to student need on an ongoing basis. However, she thought that in her first year, she could take a first step to use time more strategically by shifting her schedule to prioritize time on reading instruction for all students, rather than just the small number served through intervention courses.