Lawrence Public Schools Receivership



Baseline Data Collection

Report on Student, Teacher, and School Administrator Focus Groups and

District Official Interviews

Conducted in June 2012

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MONTH YEAR

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DECEMBER 2012

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Report Submitted March 2013

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**Submitted to the Massachusetts Department of  
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**Table of Contents**

Page

[Executive Summary 1](#_Toc350258658)

[Introduction 5](#_Toc350258659)

[Scope of Work 6](#_Toc350258660)

[Methodology 7](#_Toc350258661)

[Protocol Development 7](#_Toc350258662)

[Sample Selection 7](#_Toc350258663)

[Selection of Schools 7](#_Toc350258664)

[Selection of Focus Group and Interview Participants 8](#_Toc350258665)

[Data Collection 9](#_Toc350258666)

[Data Analysis 11](#_Toc350258667)

[Findings 14](#_Toc350258668)

[Core Questions of Focus Group Protocols 14](#_Toc350258669)

[Topic Areas of the LPS Turnaround Plan 16](#_Toc350258670)

[Context 17](#_Toc350258671)

[Time, Data, and Expectations 20](#_Toc350258672)

[School Time and Classroom Resources 21](#_Toc350258673)

[Data Availability and Use 22](#_Toc350258674)

[Expectations 24](#_Toc350258675)

[People and Partners 27](#_Toc350258676)

[Quality of Instruction 27](#_Toc350258677)

[Coaches and Support Staff 29](#_Toc350258678)

[Leadership 30](#_Toc350258679)

[LPS District Central Office 31](#_Toc350258680)

[Professional Development 33](#_Toc350258681)

[Recruitment and Retention 34](#_Toc350258682)

[Support and Engagement 35](#_Toc350258683)

[Social and Emotional Supports 36](#_Toc350258684)

[English Language Learners 37](#_Toc350258685)

[Special Education 38](#_Toc350258686)

[Enrichment Opportunities and High School Transition 39](#_Toc350258687)

[Parent and Community Engagement 40](#_Toc350258688)

[Autonomy and Accountability 42](#_Toc350258689)

[Teacher Autonomy and Decision Making 42](#_Toc350258690)

[Teacher Evaluations 43](#_Toc350258691)

[Discussions and Connections 47](#_Toc350258692)

[A Framework for Understanding Capacity 47](#_Toc350258693)

[Human Capital 48](#_Toc350258694)

[Social Capital 48](#_Toc350258695)

[Program Coherence 48](#_Toc350258696)

[Resources 49](#_Toc350258697)

[Challenges and Approaches to Improvement 49](#_Toc350258698)

[Conclusion 51](#_Toc350258699)

[Appendix A: Student Focus Group Protocol 52](#_Toc350258700)

[Appendix B: Teacher Focus Group Protocol 58](#_Toc350258701)

[Appendix C: School Administrator Focus Group Protocol 66](#_Toc350258702)

[Appendix D: Focus Group and Interview Data Codebook 74](#_Toc350258703)

# Executive Summary

The October 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review* identified core challenges in the Lawrence Public Schools (LPS). In addition, data from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) for the 2010-11 school year showed that three quarters of schools in LPS experienced achievement declines which placed LPS in the bottom 1 percent of districts in the Commonwealth in mathematics and English language arts proficiency, as well as graduation rates. Based on these findings, on the recommendation of Commissioner Mitchell D. Chester, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted to place LPS in state receivership in November 2011.

In January 2012, Commissioner Chester appointed Jeffrey C. Riley as Receiver for LPS, granting him all operational powers of the Superintendent and the School Committee. In May 2012, Commissioner Chester and Receiver Riley released the *Lawrence Public Schools Turnaround Plan*, which outlined specific challenges and strategies that would be used to begin the process to turn around the district and its schools. The LPS turnaround plan focused on the following areas:

* Time, Data, and Expectations
* People and Partners
* Support and Engagement
* Autonomy and Accountability

To help evaluate the implementation and outcomes of the turnaround plan, ESE contracted with American Institutes for Research (AIR) as an independent, external research organization to collect baseline data to describe and document the conditions and circumstances that existed as LPS was placed into receivership. The baseline data collection activities include focus groups and interviews of stakeholders (the focus of this report), classroom observations, and analysis of TELL Mass (Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning in Massachusetts) survey data.

**This report presents findings on the qualitative data gathered in June 2012 as part of the baseline data collection.** Specifically, this report addresses the research questions with data gathered in 18 focus groups of school-level stakeholders—including middle school and high school students, teachers, and school administrators—about their perspectives on LPS. Researchers also conducted individual interviews with several key district officials. These qualitative baseline data collection activities centered on the state of the schools in LPS leading up to and in the months immediately following the beginning of the state receivership.

AIR researchers, in consultation with ESE, selected a purposive sample of nine schools to participate in the focus groups to represent a variety of factors, including general school conditions, pending changes in school structure as a result of the turnaround plan, performance levels, and grade levels. Teachers and school administrators from two elementary schools, four middle schools, one school with elementary and middle grades, and two high schools participated in the focus groups. The findings reported from the analysis of focus group and interview data should be treated as *suggestive* of the perspectives of students, teachers, school administrators, and district officials in LPS and not as *representative* of the district as a whole. The findings are based on participants’ responses to questions, and thus represent participants’ perceptions and should not be interpreted as facts. Themes presented in the findings have been identified through coding and are based on the perceptions of multiple participants.

Focus group and interview participants shared perspectives on LPS and its schools related to what they perceived to be the strengths, challenges, and areas needing improvement.

**Strengths**

* Teachers and school administrators in the focus groups perceived teacher camaraderie and commitment to students as the top strengths in the schools, followed by connection to parents and community.
* Teachers perceived one of the district’s most important strengths to be professional development and support for continuing education.
* Students in the focus groups reported their perceptions that teachers worked with students to meet individual needs, schools provided additional student supports such as afterschool programs or summer enrichment opportunities, and schools prepared students for college and careers.
* Some participants also described an overall commitment from teachers to helping students succeed.

**Challenges and Areas Needing Improvement**

* According to teachers, the top challenges for schools were meeting the needs of English language learners (ELLs) and the social and emotional learning (SEL) needs of students. School administrator focus groups identified the same challenges but placed SEL needs and challenges related to poverty above ELL needs and challenges.
* The district’s most important challenges, as perceived by the teachers, were lack of communication between the LPS district central office and the schools, problematic student assessment and teacher accountability systems, and lack of appropriate supports for special education students.
* Across the school administrator focus groups, no specific challenges were noted by more than one focus group although lack of consistent leadership and negative media attention were mentioned multiple times within one specific focus group.
* Students suggested that raising expectations for student achievement and behavior is an area in which schools could improve.

In addition, focus group and interview participants shared their perceptions of various topic areas related to the LPS turnaround plan. In the report, the findings from these conversations are organized into five main themes, reflecting the district turnaround plan: Context; Time, Data, and Expectations; People and Partners; Support and Engagement; and Autonomy and Accountability.

The findings included in this report, as well as information from other sources such as the LPS turnaround plan and the 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review*, indicate that LPS faces several significant challenges as it embarks on implementing its turnaround plan. Common themes that emerged include the following:

**Increasing expectations across the district.** Focus group participants and interviewees perceived low levels of expectations at the district, school, classroom, and student level. Specifically, all groups of respondents expressed their perception of the need to hold themselves and others—district leaders, school administrators, teachers, and students—to higher performance expectations. For example, district administrators believed they could expect more of principals, and teachers believed they could expect more of themselves and students. In addition, some teachers mentioned feeling that they were not respected professionally. Teachers also voiced a desire to have more responsibility and flexibility to decide how best to meet the needs of their students.

**Using time effectively.** Teachers in the focus groups indicated that they desired more time in the day to allow them to collaborate with colleagues to improve student outcomes. More collaboration, they noted, would help them better understand the individual needs of their students and design approaches to meet those needs. According to teachers’ perceptions, the amount of time designated for collaboration was inconsistent within and among schools.

**Meeting the needs of special populations*.*** Across the focus groups, students, teachers, and school administrators shared concerns about the lack of targeted resources and expert support for students with special needs, most importantly for ELLs and students with disabilities. Participants perceived a lack of specialized training for general education teachers in meeting the needs of these students, and they perceived a need for more specialized personnel dedicated to meeting these needs. Participants also mentioned that the LPS district central office and schools need to provide more assistance to students in poverty and students needing social and emotional support.

**Clarifying roles of the LPS district central office and schools in supporting turnaround efforts*.*** According to the perceptions of respondents in the focus groups and interviews, different stakeholders have opposing ideas about what level of the system—school or district leadership—should be providing guidance and support at the school level. For example, responses from teachers and school administrators seemed to suggest that they needed—and in some cases were waiting for—support from the LPS district central office to help meet the needs of students in their schools. In contrast, responses from district officials seemed to indicate that they believed school administrators and teachers should be making such decisions at the school level. Furthermore, district officials noted that in their view, recent attempts to empower schools to make decisions have not been successful.

**Strengthening communication between district and school staff.** Many of the comments related to the operation of the LPS district central office before the receivership suggested that inconsistent communication between the district and school-based staff was common. In some cases, participants noted that there was no information shared around key issues such as the date for the first day of school or training dates for a new ESL program that was being implemented. In addition, many teachers and school administrators indicated that they did not receive sufficient communication from the LPS district central office regarding the receivership.

**Identifying school needs and distributing existing resources to meet those needs.** Some school-based participants perceived that supports provided to schools sometimes did not meet the needs of those particular schools. For instance, some students reported being forced to share books or use outdated editions with missing pages, while at the same time teachers and students praised recently updated technology in schools. In terms of professional development, teachers noted that the LPS district central office offered various activities but that the opportunities were not tailored to specific needs. For example, teachers mentioned having access to data but not knowing how to interpret those data.

# Introduction

In October 2011, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (Board) reviewed the *Lawrence Public Schools (LPS) District Review,*[[1]](#footnote-1) which described “a troubled school district with chronic underperformance…; a district where leadership and governance are flagging.” The level of concern was heightened by Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) data for the 2010–11 school year, which showed that three quarters of the schools in LPS experienced achievement declines. Achievement levels placed LPS in the bottom 1 percent of districts in the Commonwealth in terms of mathematics and English language arts proficiency, as well as graduation rates.

As a result of these findings and core challenges, in November 2011, on the recommendation of Commissioner Mitchell D. Chester, the Board voted to place LPS in state receivership, creating an unprecedented opportunity for the district to embark upon a turnaround effort. Although state receivership of a district is a first for Massachusetts, other states (e.g., New Jersey, California, Michigan) have used similar strategies to turn around low-performing districts. The theory of action of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) in turning around chronically underperforming schools is to build the capacity of districts, identifying well-functioning district systems as essential levers to make effective and sustainable school improvements.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In January 2012, Commissioner Chester appointed Jeffrey C. Riley as Receiver for LPS, granting him all operational powers of the Superintendent and the School Committee. In May 2012, Commissioner Chester and Receiver Riley released the *Lawrence Public Schools Turnaround Plan*, [[3]](#footnote-3) which outlined specific challenges and strategies that would be used to begin the process to turn around the district and its schools. The turnaround plan focuses on the following areas:

* Time, Data, and Expectations
* People and Partners
* Support and Engagement
* Autonomy and Accountability

To help evaluate the implementation and outcomes of the turnaround plan, ESE contracted with American Institutes for Research (AIR) as an independent, external research organization to collect baseline data to describe and document the conditions and circumstances that existed as LPS was placed into receivership. The baseline data collection activities include focus groups and interviews of stakeholders (the focus of this report), classroom observations, and analysis of TELL Mass (Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning in Massachusetts) survey data.

Documenting the process of turning around LPS is an important and essential step in informing, improving, and understanding ESE’s first state receivership of a chronically underperforming district. The lessons learned through the early stages of the LPS receivership will have implications for LPS as well as ESE, which faces the possibility of more districts entering Level 5 status in the future.

## Scope of Work

ESE contracted with AIR to collect baseline data that can be used to answer the following question:

* What were the conditions and circumstances that existed in LPS as the district started the process of receivership?

More specifically, these baseline data can answer two additional questions regarding the status of the district as it started the process of receivership, prior to implementation of the LPS turnaround plan:

* What was the existing capacity of LPS as a whole to improve student outcomes?
* What were existing practices in LPS, particularly with regard to those actions that are the focus of the LPS turnaround plan?

The answers to these questions are essential to understand the baseline conditions in LPS and to serve as guideposts for measuring the progress in the district, especially in the areas central to the LPS turnaround plan. This report presents findings from the analysis of qualitative baseline data collected in June 2012 through focus groups with students, teachers, and school administrators as well as interviews with district officials and the ESE Receiver, Riley. The findings help describe the conditions in LPS at the start of the receivership, and focus on conditions in LPS in general, and more specifically, those efforts related to the LPS turnaround plan in the following areas: Time, Data, and Expectations; People and Partners; Support and Engagement; and Autonomy and Accountability.

This report is organized into four major sections. The first two sections provide information on the methodology and data analysis. The third section reports the findings on the LPS context—both historical and current—at the time of receivership, followed by findings on each of the four main components of the LPS turnaround plan. The fourth section of this report provides a summary, including insight on how some of the findings may relate to district capacity.

# Methodology

From June 13 to June 19, 2012, researchers conducted 18 focus groups of school-level stakeholders, including students, teachers, and school administrators, and interviews of several key district officials, asking about their perspectives on conditions in LPS upon entering receivership. This section describes protocol development, sample selection of schools and study participants, and data collection.

## Protocol Development

Researchers developed three focus group protocols designed to capture the range of perspectives on the schools and the district. All protocols, although tailored to the study participants, focused on common themes. Researchers opened the semistructured focus groups with overarching questions on schools and the district, including questions on strengths and challenges. The second half of the protocols included questions and probes regarding issues highlighted in the LPS turnaround plan. Each group was asked questions about *at least one* of the following topic areas, which align with the topic areas highlighted in the LPS turnaround plan: People and Partners; Autonomy and Accountability; Student Supports; and Time, Data, and Culture. Researchers developed the final versions of the protocols (see Appendixes A through C), which were designed to be conducted in approximately 60 minutes, with input from two ESE staff members and one district official.

In addition to the focus group protocols, the study team developed interview protocols for district officials and the ESE Receiver that were designed to be conducted in up to 90 minutes. Although the interview protocols focused on the same general topic areas, the questions were tailored to the participants’ responsibilities in the district. As with the focus group protocols, the study team developed the district official interview protocols in consultation with ESE staff members and a district official. An appendix of the interview protocol is not included because questions varied among participants.

## Sample Selection

### 

### Selection of Schools

Researchers, in consultation with ESE, selected a purposive sample of nine schools[[4]](#footnote-4) to participate in the focus groups to represent a variety of factors, including general school conditions, pending changes in school structure as a result of the turnaround plan, performance levels, and grade levels. Teachers and school administrators from two elementary schools, four middle schools, one school with elementary and middle grades, and two high schools participated in the focus groups.

The findings reported here from the analysis of focus group and interview data should be treated as *suggestive* of the perspectives of students, teachers, school administrators, and district officials in LPS and not as *representative* of the district as a whole.

With ESE’s guidance and with input from a district official, researchers used the following criteria to select schools to be included in the focus groups:

* School performance levels (high-performing schools and low-performing schools)
* School grade levels (elementary, middle, and high schools)
* Preference to schools based on features of the LPS turnaround plan (e.g., a school that will be operated by an external partner as part of the turnaround effort)
* Geographical location within the city (schools located on the same campus or in close proximity)

Prioritizing schools in close proximity enabled researchers to conduct the 15 school-based focus groups in one day. The school administrator focus groups occurred at the LPS district central office the following week.

### 

### Selection of Focus Group and Interview Participants

The purpose of the focus groups was to collect detailed data on a wide range of viewpoints in the schools about the conditions in LPS as it entered receivership. To ensure this, researchers held the following:

* A student focus group at each of the six schools in the sample serving middle and high school grades
* A teacher focus group at each of the nine schools in the sample
* Three school administrator focus groups—one of principals and two of assistant principals of the schools in the sample

In addition to the focus groups, researchers conducted interviews with district officials who were included in the baseline data collection activities at the suggestion of an ESE staff member.

#### Student focus groups. To identify the sample of students at each middle school and high school in the sample, researchers contacted principals and requested that they send a parent/guardian consent form (in English and Spanish) describing the study to parents/guardians of a random group of 25 to 30 students distributed evenly across grade levels and, if possible, including at least a few students in special education and English language learners (ELLs). The researchers asked that principals send the names of the first eight students who submitted their signed parent/guardian consent forms (students over the age of 18 could submit their own consent forms) on a first-come, first-served basis (regardless of grade level). Principals in schools serving middle grades were asked to include students in Grades 7 and higher. The study did not include high school seniors because graduation ceremonies occurred prior to the focus groups. In all, 48 middle and high school students participated in the focus groups.

#### Teacher focus groups. A district official distributed an e-mail to all teachers at the nine sample schools on behalf of AIR. The message explained the scope of the study, described the teacher focus groups, and included a link to an online survey for interested volunteers to complete. The survey included questions on grades taught, experience in the school and in LPS, and subjects taught. Researchers requested this information in case the number of teachers interested in participating totaled more than 10 volunteers, which the team determined was the upper limit of participation in a single focus group. In one case, 15 teachers from one school volunteered to participate in a focus group. To ensure diversity across the teacher focus groups, researchers preferred to gather representatives with a range of characteristics (e.g., experience in the school, grade levels taught, subject areas taught).

In cases where 11 or fewer teachers volunteered, all teachers were invited to participate in the focus groups. The district official sent multiple e-mails to potential participants at several schools that had not met the desired minimum threshold of six participants. On the day of data collection, all focus groups had a minimum of six participants. In total, 77 individuals (including one school psychologist) participated in the focus groups, which ranged in size from six to 11 participants. In addition to the information researchers collected on-site, they also received supplemental written information from two teachers who participated in two focus groups.

#### School administrator focus groups. Like the teacher focus groups, a district official invited assistant principals and principals at the nine sample schools to participate in focus groups of school administrators, distributing an e-mail developed by AIR researchers. The e-mail included information on the scope of the study and described the focus groups for principals and assistant principals. Researchers held one focus group with three principals and conducted two focus groups with four assistant principals in each group, representing eight of the nine schools in the study.

#### District official interviews. Researchers conducted individual interviews of members of the district leadership team identified by ESE. An ESE staff member assisted in scheduling the interviews with the district officials.

## Data Collection

Three teams of two researchers conducted all of the focus groups and interviews, with one researcher serving as the lead and the other as a notetaker. In addition to on-site note-taking, researchers recorded the audio from the focus groups and interviews. A professional transcription service transcribed the audio files into separate documents. All but two of the focus groups lasted from 50 to 75 minutes (two student focus groups were 30 and 44 minutes), while the district official interviews lasted from 42 to 104 minutes.

Researchers collected all of the focus group and interview data in two weeks in June 2012 (see Exhibit 1), two weeks after the release of the LPS turnaround plan. Researchers held student and teacher focus groups at the schools, and held the school administrator focus groups and district official interviews at the LPS district central office.

**Exhibit 1. Schedule of Data Collection**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| June 13, 2012 | * Nine teacher focus groups, consisting of a total of 77 teachers * Six student focus groups, consisting of a total of 48 middle and high school students |
| June 18, 2012 | * Interviews with several LPS district officials |
| June 19, 2012 | * Interview with one LPS district official * One principal focus group, consisting of three principals * Two assistant principal focus groups, consisting of a total of eight assistant principals |

# 

# Data Analysis

Two researchers reviewed each of the transcripts for the focus groups and interviews and coded the text according to one (or more) thematic topic areas. To develop the list of topical codes, one researcher read a sample of the transcripts and created an initial list of topics that were mentioned by multiple participants (students, teachers, school administrators, and district officials). A second researcher read a different sample of the transcripts and added to the initial list of topical codes. Then the two researchers met to establish consistent interpretations of the codes and streamlined the code book by eliminating any codes that captured the same ideas using different terminology. This resulted in 43 unique topical codes (see Appendix D). To help organize the topical findings, the researchers assigned each topical code to one of five main themes (Context; Time, Data, and Expectations; People and Partners; Support and Engagement; Autonomy and Accountability). With the exception of Context, the themes were taken directly from the LPS turnaround plan. Though not explicitly part of the LPS turnaround plan, the Context theme was used to group overarching topics about the state of the schools and district preceding and immediately following the announcement of the plan, including morale among staff and the external media attention Lawrence had received. The number of topical codes within each theme ranged from three for Autonomy and Accountability to 15 for People and Partners.

The researchers began coding the data by reading through the full transcripts and identifying segments of text that addressed a single, primary topic. Segments of text occasionally addressed other topic areas, secondarily, and in those cases, segments were assigned a secondary topical code. All sorting and analysis, however, was conducted according to primary topical code. For each excerpt of coded text, researchers also noted the participant group, whether the topic was deemed a challenge or strength, whether the issue pertained to the district or school, and whether the participant held a particular group responsible for the issue mentioned (if applicable).

For example, the following text was excerpted from the transcript of a focus group with school administrators: “I also think we have a tremendous shortage of English language learner training in the district where we have significant [non-native English language speakers].” Researchers coded this text as shown in Exhibit 2, using Microsoft Excel. Because the text pertained to ELLs, researchers coded the text as “ELL,” which is one of the topic areas within the Support and Engagement theme. The text was from one of three school administrator focus groups, and as a result, also was coded as “Admin.” Researchers coded the text as “Challenge” because the text specifically addressed a challenge related to ELLs. The text also specifically noted the challenge as one for the district, not just the school, and is therefore coded as “District.” Lastly, the responsible party column for this section of text is left blank because the participant did not clearly indicate who is to be held responsible for the lack of sufficient ELL training. All substantive pieces of text were coded for topic and theme, but not all pieces of coded text could be coded for challenge/strength, district/school, and/or responsible party.

**Exhibit 2. Sample Codebook Entry**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Theme** | **Topic** | **Text** | **Participant** | **Challenge/ Strength** | **District/ School** | **Responsible Party** |
| Support and Engagement | ELL | I also think we have a tremendous shortage of English language learner training in the district where we have significant [non-native English language speakers]. | Admin | Challenge | District | N/A |

Within the five large themes, coded sections of text from interviews and focus groups were sorted for analysis by code, by whether they were about a challenge or strength, and/or by participant group. The ability to sort the data in multiple ways allowed the researchers to answer a variety of questions, including the following:

* What were the most common perceived challenges and strengths cited across all participants?
* What were the most common perceived challenges and strengths associated with a given topic area?
* Which topics elicited similar responses from multiple members of the same participant group?
* Which topics elicited similar responses from different types of participants?
* Which topics elicited differing responses from different types of participants?

This report summarizes the coded text from the initial transcripts into findings that demonstrate those topics—related to the five original themes—that arose in at least two of the focus groups and/or interviews. For each finding, the text indicates which participant group or groups contributed supporting data and includes quotations that support the general finding. Not all focus groups covered the same topic areas, and as a result, the findings represent only the perspectives of the individuals in groups that discussed a particular topic area. Assumptions *cannot* be made about the perspectives of individuals in groups that did *not* discuss a particular topic area.

Researchers took two specific measures to increase the reliability and validity of the coding and analysis because none of the transcripts were completely coded by both researchers. First, the researchers frequently discussed their interpretations of the topical codes to ensure consistent interpretation and application. Second, the researchers randomly divided the initial transcripts for coding and then divided the coded text by theme for further analysis. As a result, each researcher reviewed and analyzed a significant amount of data that had been originally coded by the other researcher, and the researchers consulted each other throughout the analysis process to resolve any coding discrepancies.

# Findings

Focus groups and interviews with four groups of stakeholders in LPS—students, teachers, school administrators, and district officials—centered on the state of the schools in LPS during the period leading up to and in the months immediately following the beginning of the state receivership. The findings are based on participants’ responses to questions, and thus represent participants’ *perceptions* and should not be interpreted as *facts*. Themes presented in the findings have been identified through coding of focus group and interview transcripts and are based on the perceptions of multiple participants.

## Core Questions of Focus Group Protocols

To gather the most salient and pressing issues facing focus group participants in LPS, the focus group protocols opened with broad questions designed to solicit information on perspectives about strengths and challenges faced by schools and the LPS district central office. Exhibits 3 and 4 show the most common responses to these opening questions. A “mention,” when used in the exhibits, refers to each instance that a topic was raised, either by a new individual within the group or by the same individual in a new way. The findings here summarize responses to the core questions asked of all focus groups. (Exhibits 3 and 4 do not include mentions in responses to questions in the second half of the protocol, which focused on specific focus areas of the LPS turnaround plan, even if they were related to similar topics.)

**Strengths**

* Teachers and school administrators in the focus groups perceived teacher camaraderie and commitment to students as the top strengths in the schools, followed by connection to parents and community.
* Teachers perceived one of the district’s most important strengths to be professional development and support for continuing education.
* Students in the focus groups reported their perceptions that teachers worked with students to meet individual needs, schools provided additional student supports such as afterschool programs or summer enrichment opportunities, and schools prepared students for college and careers.
* Some participants also described an overall commitment from teachers to helping students succeed.

**Challenges and Areas Needing Improvement**

* According to teachers, the top challenges for schools were meeting the needs of ELLs and the social and emotional learning (SEL) needs of students. School administrator focus groups identified the same challenges but placed SEL needs and challenges related to poverty above ELL needs and challenges.
* The district’s most important challenges, as perceived by the teachers, were lack of communication between the LPS district central office and the schools, problematic student assessment and teacher accountability systems, and lack of appropriate supports for special education students.
* Across the school administrator focus groups, no specific challenges were noted by more than one focus group although lack of consistent leadership and negative media attention were mentioned multiple times within one specific focus group.
* Students suggested that raising expectations for student achievement and behavior is an area in which schools could improve.

**Exhibit 3. Most Frequent Responses to Core Questions by Teacher and School Administrator Focus Groups**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Teacher Focus Groups (*n* = 9)** | **Administrator Focus Groups (*n* = 3)** |
| School’s most important perceived strengths | 1. Teacher camaraderie and commitment to students (7 groups, 20 mentions)  2. Connection to parents/community  (4 groups, 7 mentions)  3. Student support programs, including community-based partnerships, language/literacy programs, enrichment, etc. (4 groups, 6 mentions) | 1. Teacher camaraderie and commitment to students (2 groups, 6 mentions)  2. Connection to parents/community  (2 groups, 3 mentions) |
| School’s most important perceived challenges | 1. ELL needs and resources (3 groups,  7 mentions)  2. SEL needs and resources; Socioeconomic status-related challenges (3 groups, 7 mentions)  Other challenges cited include lack of support for special education students, student behavior, resources/facilities, and lack of autonomy. | 1. SEL needs and resources; Socioeconomic status-related challenges (2 groups, 10 mentions)  2. ELL needs and resources (2 groups,  5 mentions) |
| District’s most important perceived strengths | 1. Professional development and support for continuing education (4 groups,  11 mentions)  2. Resources (2 groups, 4 mentions)  Other strengths cited include afterschool/enrichment programs and family involvement. | 1. Professional development and support for continuing education  (1 group, 1 mention)  2. Staff responsiveness and commitment  (1 group, 1 mention) |
| District’s most important perceived challenges | 1. Lack of communication between district/Receiver and schools (3 groups,  5 mentions)  2. Problematic assessment/accountability system (2 groups, 6 mentions)  3. Lack of appropriate supports for special education students (3 groups,  4 mentions) | 1. Lack of consistent leadership  (1 group, 2 mentions)  2. Negative media attention (1 group,  2 mentions)  Other challenges cited include high student transiency, high SEL needs, and a culture of low expectations. |

**Exhibit 4. Most Frequent Responses to Core Questions by Student Focus Groups**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Student Focus Groups (*n* = 6)** |
| What the school does well | 1. Teachers work with students to meet individual needs (3 groups, 12 mentions)  2. School provides additional student supports (3 groups, 7 mentions)  3. School prepares students for college and careers (3 groups, 3 mentions) |
| What the school could do better | 1. Raise expectations for student achievement and behavior (4 groups, 4 mentions)  2. Provide additional afterschool/enrichment opportunities (2 groups, 2 mentions) |

## Topic Areas of the LPS Turnaround Plan

In addition to gathering information on the core questions, researchers asked questions of participants regarding the topic areas of the LPS turnaround plan. Researchers organized the findings from these conversations into five main themes, including the four focus areas of the LPS turnaround plan and the topics associated with those focus areas (excerpts in quotes and italics below are from the LPS turnaround plan):

* ***Context*** describes various issues reported by participants in the focus groups and interviews that related to overall conditions in the district and in the community, such as student home environments, negative perceptions of the city of Lawrence, and constant changes in the district.
* ***Time, Data, and Expectations*** includes findings on the LPS turnaround plan’s call for “extended time, strategic use of data, and high expectations for academic achievement.” Findings in this section cover time devoted to instruction and collaboration, availability of classroom resources, effective data use, expectations for students and staff members, and school discipline and policies.
* In ***People and Partners*,** findings are related to the LPS turnaround plan’s focus on “recruitment, retention, and cultivation of great people and proven partners.” Topics include coaches and specialized support staff, school leadership, communication between the LPS district central office and teachers, and efforts in support of professional development, recruitment, and retention.
* ***Support and Engagement*** highlights findings on the LPS turnaround plan’s third strategy, which emphasizes “strengthened support and engagement for students beyond academics.” Findings focus on academic and enrichment supports both during and after school, supports for ELLs and students with disabilities, and support from parents and the community.
* Findings in ***Autonomy and Accountability*** are related to “increased autonomy and accountability for schools to promote student success,” as indicated in the LPS turnaround plan. Topics include teacher autonomy, evaluation methods, and the Receiver’s review process, which was conducted as part of the Receiver’s turnaround activities and led to teacher dismissals.

Many of the findings presented here are consistent with findings from the 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review* and were cited as challenges in the LPS turnaround plan, including low expectations, insufficient data access and use, inconsistent quality of instruction, lack of stable and experienced leadership, and lack of supportive programming for high-need students. For reference, some of these similarities have been noted throughout this report.

The data collection activities for this report were designed to gather information on the state of LPS *prior* to receivership. Each section begins with an overview of the findings, followed by further descriptions. In the following sections, we have indicated where the finding focuses in large part on the receivership or the turnaround plan.

## Context

Participants in the focus groups perceived that the context in which LPS operates poses many challenges in terms of the needs of the students who the district serves, the disruptive external environment, a limited sense of collective responsibility among stakeholders within LPS, and a lack of coherence of programs and initiatives.

* In five focus groups and two interviews, participants noted that the majority of LPS students come from high-poverty, low-education homes, and many families struggle to provide children adequate support both for academic and nonacademic challenges. Teachers and school administrators reported perceptions that many families move frequently, resulting in high mobility rates for students and additional educational challenges for teachers.
* Participants at each level reported their perceptions that the environment external to LPS has contributed to the erosion of morale among teachers and administrators. Each group reported that it perceived the media’s representation of Lawrence has created a feeling of having to constantly defend the city and that some of the recent changes associated with the receivership process have further decreased morale among teachers and students.
* According to teachers’ perceptions, there is evidence of a persistent lack of coherence in LPS, particularly regarding LPS programs and initiatives.

**Student Backgrounds**

**Teachers, school administrators, and district officials noted that many of their students come from homes in deep poverty and with limited support from parents and guardians.**

Staff members at all levels of LPS mentioned the difficult home situations from which many students in Lawrence hail. One district official stated:

We’ve got kids that live in deep poverty, kids that often are second language learners, kids that have special needs, kids that on the whole need more supports and more quality than we’re giving them currently.

A school administrator reported:

By the time our kids get to high school, they’re likely a primary caregiver in their house. I mean, they have a lot of family responsibilities by that point. And what that gets at is that the education of that student is not necessarily the first priority in that household, not because of… [a] terrible attitude of the family.... It’s survival.

One high school teacher noted:

We’re not trying to blame and pass the buck…. We can’t stop 16-year-olds from having babies and living on welfare. We can’t go home with the kids and do their homework. The controllable forces that we can manage can only be here in the building, and that’s frustrating to us because they are coming to the building not prepared to do what we’re asking them to do, so then it becomes systemic.

Despite these challenging circumstances, district officials, teachers from three schools, and participants in one of the groups of school administrators remarked that, overall, LPS students are not the problem, with one participant praising, “[T]he kids [are] unbelievable.”

**School administrators and teachers cited student transiency as a frequent concern in schools.**

Teachers at all grade levels, as well as school administrators, discussed problems with students who transfer in and out of schools and classrooms throughout the year. One elementary school teacher noted:

We have a high transiency rate. During the school year too, but a lot in the beginning, the first two weeks, we transfer in and out so many kids. We can’t even get our list right for the first couple of weeks.

A middle school teacher also reported, “There are a lot of children who come and go. They don’t come until December. Or come for a month and leave for two and then come back. Or even are here but have high absences.” School administrators said that the volume of moving takes its toll on the students, with one administrator reporting that some students will attend three or more schools in a single year. One participant noted:

You start building that relationship, and just when you’re on the path of making things happen, they move. So now they have to start over with someone else that they have to learn to trust. And I think that’s really hard. It’s hard on the kids.

Teachers reported that the frequent transiency of the students also makes it difficult to plan classes, since many students are not present for the earlier building-block topics, covered material in a different order in their previous school, or may never have attended school before coming to LPS.

**External Perceptions**

**Participants reported that negative perspectives of and in the city of Lawrence have become the norm, with media coverage advancing the poor reputation of the district and making staff members feel constantly on the defense.**

Some interviewees and participants from six different focus groups, including teachers and school administrators, discussed regularly having to defend the city against the stigma and public perception of Lawrence. One district official described the negativity present in the city, noting:

The political and social culture is very negative and bloody. I would describe it like drowning people, taking down other people with them. So, it’s just a really negative culture where if somebody assumes a position, they try to take him down.

Students at one school referred to a recent article calling Lawrence “The City of the Damned”[[5]](#footnote-5) and participated in class discussions about what they could do as a community to disprove the accusations, such as raising their MCAS scores and showing that they can be successful. All six of the high school graduation speeches were reported to have referenced the same article. One school administrator described the media coverage of Lawrence, saying:

I always say [Lawrence is] the Lindsay Lohan of the Merrimack Valley, like people love to hear bad news about it. And they love to talk about terrible things that are happening, and they don’t like to talk about good things that are happening…. We get kicked constantly and it’s exhausting.

Participants in school administrator groups complained about the lack of attention paid to any positive efforts or outcomes in Lawrence. One school administrator noted that LPS has done very little to publicize schools that are thriving, explaining that “we don’t make public enough the good work that’s happening [in high-performing schools] and what’s brought them to those high levels of success.”Another school administrator explained:

One of the things I always say to people is you need to come to Lawrence and work in Lawrence to experience it because I think it’s a pretty amazing place. I think our students are amazing, and I know that there are many things that need to be done in regards to our school and our district and stuff. But I think there are many amazing things going on inside the school that people don’t hear about or people don’t see.

**District officials, school administrators, and teachers reported that the recent changes in Lawrence associated with the receivership have resulted in low morale among teachers and students.** [Finding related to receivership and/or LPS turnaround plan.]

In nearly all focus groups of school administrators and teachers, participants described low morale as palpable. As one school administrator noted:

When you work in Lawrence…you’re kind of used to taking your hits and your punches and all of that…. But right now everything [is] being kind of transitioned…. I’m trying to think of words to describe how morale is. Kind of tenuous, nervous, fragile, unsure of what’s happening.

The changes impact more than just school administrators and teachers. Said one school administrator:

There’s a big effect on kids when you’re labeled Level 4 or Level 5. They know it. They think people are looking at them differently. They were angry about teachers leaving, the teachers that they liked, and new people coming on board.

Teachers at one of the schools agreed with the assessment of low morale among their colleagues and noted that they believe there is a trickle-down effect of negativity moving from the staff and affecting the students. District officials noted agitation and anxiety among teachers when the Receiver’s review process was announced, but felt that the teachers’ union was overestimating the level of low morale among teachers.

**Lack of Coherence**

**Teachers perceived there to be a constant flux of new initiatives at the school and district level.**

Teachers in four different schools expressed frustration over what they felt was a constant flux of new initiatives year after year. Some teachers in those schools reported that they no longer invested time and effort into embracing and implementing new initiatives because they questioned whether the initiative would last. One teacher said, “When you’ve been here a while, you kind of go, ‘All right, I’ll write it down. I’ll put it on the board next to the [initiative] from last year but I’m not going to bother.’” According to teachers in these schools and school administrators, the district has been saturated with initiatives, but few initiatives were implemented for long enough to be effective. This perspective echoed the 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review,* which noted that documents and procedures were put in place, but more direction from the LPS district central office was needed to ensure these took hold at the school level (p. 17). The district review also acknowledged that support programs and services were rarely evaluated, and in focus groups, the efficacy of these programs was debated (p. 40). One teacher in a focus group noted, “I think we have a strong staff, but…if we’re forced to use programs that we know don’t work,…I think the people who put those programs into place should be culpable as well.” Teachers at all grades also noted the inconsistency in the support that schools received from the LPS district central office, with one going so far as to call inconsistency its biggest weakness.

## Time, Data, and Expectations

The findings in this section describe the perspectives of stakeholders on the use of instructional time, the use of data to improve instruction, the relation of time and data to student outcomes, and consistent expectations for students, teachers, and school administrators. This section also describes the availability of resources and expectations for teaching and learning within LPS.

* School administrators and teachers identified actions that may improve educator morale and working conditions as well as student learning conditions, such as building additional time into the school day, reserving that time for instruction and collaboration, and providing adequate classroom resources.
* School administrators and teachers agreed that it is possible to improve the use of data at the school and district levels to improve teaching, learning and, ultimately, student outcomes. However, teachers and administrators suggested that they need additional training and support from the district to do so.
* Participants in all focus groups and interviews described inconsistent and often low expectations for students, teachers, and school administrators. Participants reported perceptions that expectations for student achievement varied across schools and, in some cases, across classrooms within a school.
* Teachers expressed concerns about the perceived lack of student motivation that may be resulting from these low expectations. In many cases, teachers and administrators recognized the need for “tough love” and higher expectations for both students and teachers themselves.

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### School Time and Classroom Resources

**Teachers and students cited a need for additional time for academic instruction.**

Teachers in focus groups at two schools indicated that they like the idea of an extended day or longer class periods, and students in another school said that some classes are too short to get things done and recalled school projects that they never finished because of insufficient class time. An elementary school teacher commented that she would like to have an “extended day, more money, time. We have an afterschool program, but I would just love to see structured time with ELLs, just more time.” One high school student also noted that it would be helpful“if it were ever possible to have at least a little bit of time in the day to…ask any teacher the questions that you have about the classes that you had that day.” Students and teachers said they would like additional time in the school day for students to ask teachers questions about class work although both parties say most teachers are willing to give up their lunch time or stay after school to give them help they need. A middle school student noted:

If you don’t understand it, you do have [an] afterschool program in math. You can stay during recess [or lunch] to understand the session. They do a lot of things just to help us out in things that we don’t understand.

**Class planning, collaboration with colleagues, and meetings with parents are among the many activities that school administrators and teachers in five of the six focus groups reported to be constrained by limited time.**

Teachers indicated that they need more time to fit in activities outside of instruction, including planning, collaboration, and meetings. Although time was carved out at the beginning of each school year for planning and collaboration, teachers reported that as school got underway, these meetings were often among the first casualties of the limited hours in a day. A middle school teacher noted:

I don’t think we have anywhere near enough time to work collegially, to share ideas, to share practices, to develop skills around assessing student work. We don’t have anywhere near enough time because it’s all focused about instruction and kids’ instruction and the kids. I think we would build and grow a lot as a school, because I do think we have a great staff, if we could do more of legitimate sharing and planning together.

Teachers discussed that team planning meetings often were displaced by other pressing activities, including individualized education program (IEP) meetings, student discipline, and parent phone calls. Teachers noted that many of these activities had to take place outside of working hours, either with morning coffee or in the postdinner hours. A school administrator noted:

There is [structured time for planning], but what [consumes] that is the outside things that need to take place, like the IEP meetings or parent meetings that sometimes have to supersede because there’s such difficulty with the children and stuff like that.

Teachers said that they continue to meet with coaches regularly to discuss strengths and weaknesses shown in their students’ data, but they also indicated that there is not enough time to plan for these issues, much less take follow-up action on them.

**School administrators, teachers, and students reported that classroom resources, including books and technology, are often inadequate.**

School administrators and teachers cited a need for more classroom computers, especially to facilitate the use of programs supporting core academics such as the Odyssey mathematics software. Although teachers appreciated the updated technology that many have received recently, they reported issues with the ancillary resources, such as being unable to get replacement bulbs for Mimeo machines or having good projectors coupled with cheap resonance machines. Middle school students expressed frustration as well. One student explained:

In some classes, we have books that are old and missing pages and stuff, and sometimes we can’t really do the work.... And if a class is bigger than others…there will probably be like two kids that don’t have a book.

According to these students, classes can devolve into chaos when not everyone has the necessary resources.

### Data Availability and Use

**Several years ago, the LPS district central office mandated that data rooms be established in each school. However, district officials and school administrators reported that guidance to schools stopped there, leaving schools with a place to house data but without direction as to how to use data to inform instruction.**

School administrators echoed the sentiment of district officials saying teachers receive data, but do not know what to do with the information. One school administrator noted in a focus group, “We started with these data meetings, so we got feedback from the teachers that they were getting all this data, but they didn’t really [know and] we’ve never talked about where to go with it.” The challenge of “insufficient data access and use” also is noted as a key pillar in the LPS turnaround plan, alongside concerns about availability of student assessment data, and a lack of training for teachers in how to analyze data to be able to use it for improving instruction (p. 5).

Meanwhile, teachers in one school reported being unsure what level of growth would constitute success and how this would be measured from year to year, feeling unclear about both the goals and metrics of data-based improvement efforts. According to one district official, the LPS district central office has tried to clear up some of the confusion with a framework to help teachers interpret and make connections between demographic survey data and student learning data. As noted in the 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review*, LPS maintains a “comprehensive and balanced assessment system.” However, “the varying capacity of instructional staff at different levels to use assessment data to monitor student progress and modify instruction” remains an issue (p. 27).

**School administrators and teachers reported a general need for increased efficacy of data use in LPS to address and act on essential issues, and teachers offered specific ideas for doing so.**

Although many of the data sources available may have provided useful information to district officials and school staff, teachers and school administrators reported that they were uncertain about how to interpret data and the appropriate next steps or actions to take based on these data. For example, as one district official noted, LPS data revealed that the highest performing elementary school currently feeds into the lowest performing middle school. No steps were taken by school or district staff members, however, to try to understand the reason for this significant drop-off in the performance of the students as they made the transition from elementary to middle school or to address the problem.

Another example that teachers pointed to is the adaptive Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment, which is intended to provide students the opportunity to work at their individual levels and to demonstrate what they know and can do. However, according to one district official, some teachers felt that the MAP results left them without information about the needs of their class as a whole or specific skills on which to focus. One middle school teacher who had seen some change in recent years said:

I think that as a school district, we’ve come to the realization that we were not as effective as we could be at the data that we looked at and how we used it. And especially here, we have become very focused on data and data-driven instruction [in the past two years].

Teachers in the same school described using common assessments, for example, to guide regular data-driven discussions about student progress and instructional needs.

As LPS has expanded its collection of data, there is evidence that teachers are thinking about potential benefits that could be reaped from this information. In the 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review,* it also was recommended that the district should “build teachers’ and leaders’ capacity to use data to improve curriculum and instruction” (p. 58).However, because of the currently limited utilization of data in the district, school administrators and teachers are developing their own suggestions for moving beyond traditional ways to use data. One teacher, for example, suggested using data to identify students who might benefit from summer or vacation school. Others pointed to the potential for using data as an early identification and intervention tool for students needing special education services. A middle school teacher suggested data collected across multiple years also might be used to identify students who may be at risk of turning into bullies. The teacher explained:

If the teacher before me were to say, or I had some data saying this kid, keep him off the computer or keep him away from Johnny, or something so that I know that student coming in has a bullying behavior, I could pick it up right away and know that it’s not just he had a bad day because he was the same way last year.

**Despite concerns about overall access to and use of data, school administrators and teachers indicated that common assessments and discussions between district staff members and teachers, as well as among school teaching teams, aided in making some data-guided decisions.**

According to the staff members in three different schools, teachers and coaches regularly used common assessments to guide team meetings and discuss what the data told them about specific students’ strengths and weaknesses. Teachers in one of those schools also reported being able to easily compare test scores as the year progressed to monitor both student learning and how they were doing as a teacher. One elementary school teacher reported*:*

We meet with the instructional coaches…twice a month, and data [are] on the table often there. And, one-on-one meetings or those kinds of things where it’s always on the agenda to talk about any children that have issues that might not have popped up in the data. There are lots of conversations about it.

According to one district official, meetings were held with teachers each fall to discuss the previous year’s MCAS and MAP scores, and they used these data as a guide to plan for the coming year. These meetings are expected to continue into the next school year even during the receivership. School staff members and district officials also reported that they documented and tracked classroom issues observed during walk-through evaluations to aid in the detection of patterns or connections. School administrators, teachers, and students cited PowerSchool and perceived it as a good tool for keeping track of basic data, including grades, attendance, and parent meetings. It should be noted, however, that participants also registered pleas for additional technology use in conjunction with data.

### Expectations

**District officials, school administrators, and teachers reported that inconsistent expectations exist for both staff members and students in LPS.**

Although all participants spoke positively about LPS teachers’ commitment to helping their students succeed, district officials, school administrators, and teachers expressed concerns about school administrators’ and teachers’ low expectations for both staff members and students in some schools and classrooms. The LPS turnaround plan also identified this as a challenge   
(p. 5). Still, it should be noted that district officials, school administrators, and teachers repeatedly praised LPS teachers’ willingness to go above and beyond and to do a job that requires much more than just teaching. Teachers in four focus groups and a district official noted that many teachers have high expectations for students and that most are sensitive to both students’ academic and nonacademic needs. According to one teacher, “Our [student] population is very challenged and very neglected, and we all go above and beyond in terms of helping these kids grow and develop academically and otherwise to be successful in life.”

Study participants, however, noted a lack of consistency and accountability for expectations across schools and classrooms. According to district officials, school administrators, and teachers, LPS students are not consistently challenged in all classrooms. District officials reported perceptions that over recent years, LPS district central office staff members lowered their expectations of LPS. Over time, they perceived that this sentiment has cascaded down to school leadership and classroom teachers. One district official noted, “I feel like over the last several years, we’ve continually lowered our expectations, the expectations of what teachers think students can do, principals’ expectations of what teachers can do, our expectations of what principals can do.”Teachers at one school agreed that they do not always feel as though they are held to high standards by their school administrators and pointed to different expectations for different people although many teachers said they do have high expectations for themselves. One teacher stated, “I think a lot of us put those high expectations on ourselves. I think if you look at teachers, they’re usually people who have put a lot of pressure on themselves to succeed and they pass that around.”

Students may not always have high expectations for themselves either. Students and teachers alike noted a lack of drive among many students, evidenced by their demeanor and actions in school. As one high school teacher described, “I see kids walking into school with no book bags and no books in their hand. And if they are late, they are not running. They’re just walking slowly, talking, chewing bubblegum; there is no urgency.”One middle school student noted, “Some students, they would call themselves stupid and just give up on things…. They tell themselves that they can’t do things, and it’s terrible because they can—they have the potential to do a lot of things.” Another high school student reported, “Even though [the teachers] work really hard in the classes to teach you, you learn that sometimes you’re not prepared enough, that you couldn’t get a high score.”

**Teachers reported the need to show more “tough love” toward students, despite the difficult circumstances from which many of them hail.**

School administrators and teachers acknowledged that expectations of students were often too low, and teachers and students alike echoed the need to push students harder and employ “tough love.” Teachers in two different schools attributed their sometimes lax expectations of the students to their own empathy and feeling sorry for the difficult situations in which many LPS students live. One teacher observed:

I think some people who don’t hold kids to high expectations it’s not because they’re tired of it or whatever, but I think...kids come with a lot of baggage, and so I think it’s easy for some people to feel sorry for them and to have that overwhelm their expectations for the kids. And so I don’t necessarily think it’s for lack of caring or for being fed up, but I think [for] a lot of people it’s hard to hear the things that our kids go through and then to say, “Okay, but you still need to have your homework today and you still need to be prepared for the test.” I think that’s the majority of what it is*.*

Both middle and high school students discussed classmates who call themselves “stupid” and give up without trying, stating that teachers should push them all harder to succeed. More than one student in five of the six focus groups, however, said that teachers do expect them to turn in their work on time and do well, and offer extra help to make that happen. According to students, teachers also discuss the benefits of college, which most students in the middle and high school focus groups said they plan on attending.

**One focus group of school administrators and one focus group of teachers reported their perceptions that some of the students’ parents did not reinforce expectations for students that were set by staff members. In addition, teachers in another focus group mentioned that in some instances teachers’ and parents’ expectations of students were at odds.**

Teachers and school administrators discussed the differences between expectations some parents have for students at home and the expectations teachers and school administrators have for students in school. For example, the teachers from one school believed that student behavior in school is an issue in part because students have no consequences for bad behavior at home. As one of those teachers explained, “It doesn’t matter if they have detention,…they need the follow-through at home, and sometimes that’s not happening.” A teacher from another school explained:

Public schools are generally…set up more on middle-class social norms and expectations. People line up; people walk in the classroom; people sit down; you will not leave. But, this is not a middle-class setting and so the expectations [both in and out of the classroom] are different.

School administrators indicated a need to better communicate to parents and to develop in them the belief that education is vital and school attendance is necessary to school success. One school administrator said it is a challenge“getting parents to understand that it’s not okay to pull your kids to go to vacation or as much as you can, not take an extra week on both ends of the school vacation.”Even high school students noted of some of their classmates appear to be influenced by external expectations. One student stated, “I guess, it comes from their household and the person, like outside of school, like they have no motivation to do better.” There also were differences in what is expected in terms of student behavior at school and what is expected at home. School administrators and teachers recall having to communicate to students that just because certain behaviors are accepted at home does not mean they are acceptable in school. Teachers at one middle school attributed this disconnect to “competing cultures.”

**Students and teachers reported that student behavioral issues disrupt learning time and expressed a need for more consistent student behavior management practices.**

Teachers and students at all grade levels reported that many students do not take school seriously, often creating distractions during classes. A middle school teacher said:

Discipline [is] a challenge.... Behavior [is] distracting. It takes away from learning for the students. The disruption in the classroom and the hallway is something [that] really is difficult to work with. And some of the emotional social needs that…our students [have] and don’t get [addressed] cause disruption in the classroom that affects learning. So, that’s a major issue.

Teachers in one school explained that they initially valued the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program but noted its waning effectiveness over time as previously expected behaviors were rewarded under the program. Several students advocated for teachers to be stricter with students who misbehaved and disrupted the classroom, and many more cited the ability to manage a classroom and minimize disruption as part of what makes a good teacher. Both middle and high school students in four of the six student focus groups noted inconsistency in classroom management practices across classrooms, and teachers who were able to minimize disruptions were the exception rather than the rule. One student valued teachers who “make students respect them, because some of the teachers, it’s not like they are bad, but they don’t have the same control in the class as the other ones.”

## People and Partners

This section focuses on the staff and the instructional, administrative, and support roles staff members and partners play throughout the district.

* Participants expressed concerns about the overall quality of instruction in LPS, including inconsistency across and within schools.
* Participants acknowledged the importance of coaches and specialized support staff, along with highly qualified teachers and administrators at both the school and district levels, but they expressed some dissatisfaction with the number and availability of these staff members to offer support.
* According to teachers, some school administrators lack leadership skills, while both teachers and school administrators perceived that they have limited opportunities to develop these skills.
* According to school administrators and teachers, the working relationship between schools and the LPS district central office staff is complicated and tenuous. Teachers and district officials reported impressions of a similar relationship between the LPS district central office and the teachers’ union.
* Although having cited professional development opportunities from the LPS district central office as readily available and an area of strength for the district, participants also indicated that oftentimes these opportunities were generic and not tailored to specific needs.
* District officials perceived that many young teachers are interested in working LPS, but also mentioned that it was difficult to retain high-quality teachers in areas like science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); English as a second language (ESL); and special education.

### Quality of Instruction

**Participants observed that the quality of instruction varies widely among teachers within and across schools in LPS.**

District officials, school administrators, and students all noted variation in the quality of instruction within and across schools. The LPS turnaround plan also cited inconsistent instructional quality as a core issue at the root of many central problems, including “achievement gaps and a lack of growth” (p. 5). As one district official explained, “The reality is that in any given school, there’s a great teacher teaching next to a terrible teacher, teaching next to a mediocre teacher.” School administrators and students shared this perspective and noted that the quality of instruction could vary substantially from one teacher to the next, even within the same school. The 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review* reported a strong, shared understanding of what constitutes “high-quality standards-based instruction” among school staff but found a gap in implementation, as there was a range of high- and low-quality instruction taking place in classrooms (p. 22). According to district officials, although there are pockets of highly effective staff and promising leaders within LPS, the Receiver’s review process helped identify underperforming teachers.

**Students reported that many teachers used a range of instructional strategies to help students succeed.**

Both middle and high school students reported that many of their teachers used a variety of instructional strategies to help students who learn in different ways. For example, they may lecture one day and use a hands-on activity the next day. According to one student, “Teachers are very accepting of who we are and how we learn.” In two schools, students and teachers also reported classes separated into groups by learning pace. In one middle school, teachers reported regularly using data—between twice a week and once a month—to restructure these reading and mathematics groups based on student performance. Students in all of the middle school focus groups also described instances in which the teacher worked one-on-one with a student to be sure he or she understood the concept before moving on. Many students noted this attention to helping all students succeed as one quality that makes a “good teacher.” Students also appreciated teachers who made learning fun and allowed students to ask questions as needed during class.

**Participants reported that time for collaboration contributed to improved quality of instruction. However, teachers and school administrators indicated there were limited opportunities for meaningful collaboration within and across schools, thus hindering improvements to teaching and learning.**

Participants in all of the teacher and school administrator focus groups described examples of effective collaboration and how they believed collaboration contributed to improved teaching and learning. According to one school administrator, “When they’re able to,…[teachers] collaborate fantastically and they love working together.” Participants also described some collaboration between elementary and middle schools that share a single building although the collaboration was not necessarily focused on teaching and learning.

Teachers in seven of the nine schools, as well as some school administrators who participated in focus groups, expressed overall dissatisfaction with the amount of time available to collaborate with colleagues. Focus group participants reported inconsistency within and across schools regarding the amount of time set aside for collaboration and mentioned that this often limited opportunities for teachers to discuss challenges and strategies regularly and systematically. One teacher also noted that with all the changes and uncertainty this year, including the appointment of the Receiver, there seemed to be even less focus on collaboration.

Teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels expressed concern about the lack of structured collaboration time, explaining that not enough time is spent discussing individual student needs and that collaborative planning time often is taken up with meetings. According to one teacher, there is little to no collaboration among the special education teachers. School administrators at the high school level identified another barrier to collaboration: a “closed-door mentality” that discouraged collaboration among teachers.

District officials indicated that the LPS district central office spearheaded additional collaboration efforts aimed at improving instruction across schools within the district to eliminate silos and to increase the sharing of best practices. For example, the district paired some high-performing veteran principals with new principals at other schools to help them succeed, paired high- and low-performing schools together, and encouraged staff members to conduct learning walks at other schools. However, teachers at two different schools suggested that the LPS district central office could still do more to provide a structure for sharing instructional best practices and lesson plans across schools.

### Coaches and Support Staff

**Although teachers and school administrators said they value the support that coaches provide in terms of improving instruction, they believed there was a shortage of high-quality coaches in LPS and a lack of clarity regarding their roles.**

Both school administrators and elementary school teachers perceived that coaches provided valuable support and in many instances were very good fits for the school. According to one school administrator who dealt with struggling teachers last year, “My coaches were really essential to assist them in raising the bar.” Elementary school teachers described ongoing collaboration between teachers and coaches and praised the support and resources that coaches provide. According to district officials, all struggling Level 4 schools had coaches to help support instruction in the content areas of mathematics, science, and/or English language arts.

Despite a widespread belief in the potential effectiveness of coaching, both middle and high school teachers and school administrators perceived a severe shortage of coaches in LPS. As a result, according to focus group participants, coaches could not always provide support for teachers in terms of improving instruction. Participants believed that many coaches also had administrative and evaluative duties that took time away from coaching and sometimes interfered with the teacher-coach relationship. According to several middle school teachers, coaches as teacher evaluators created tension between coaches and teachers, which detracted from potentially positive teacher-coach relationships. As one teacher pointed out, “It’s hard for the coaches to do their jobs if they’re also trying to be evaluators.”

**Teachers and school administrators reported a shortage of specialized support staff in LPS.**

Both teachers and school administrators pointed to a shortage of support staff as one major challenge facing schools in LPS. According to one school administrator:

Over a period of time, the past three years, our resources have lessened. The support personnel have lessened. And, most of our support staff are bilingual…. Those things have been taken away over time. That makes it a little difficult for us.

Another school administrator echoed that sentiment, noting that given the number of ELLs who needed differentiated instruction, schools needed more specialists. Participants from two of the school administrator focus groups expressed concern that more staff members were needed to implement tiered instruction effectively to provide students with adequate social and emotional supports and to make better use of available data. The teachers in one elementary school, when asked what one thing their school needed to offer better services to students, cited this need for more specialized support staff members, including teachers working with students in special education and ELLs. Teachers from another school indicated that although some grades have full-time support staff members to provide small-group instruction and to differentiate new instruction, others do not. One school administrator added,“We need more people to target instruction, and we don’t have the analyzed data. It’s trying to put the things into action that we want to put into action. We just don’t have enough staff.”

### Leadership

**Teachers and district officials indicated that some school administrators lack leadership skills and are unable to prioritize effectively.**

Teachers from three different schools in which focus group participants perceived a high rate of principal turnover expressed concerns about the lack of leadership skills demonstrated by their respective principals. One teacher admitted that the lack of leadership is the only reason she would even consider leaving LPS, and another deemed it “the biggest challenge we face.” This perspective also was cited in the LPS turnaround plan that stated there is a “lack of experienced leadership at the school level” (p. 5). District officials noted that high-quality principals are hard to recruit and retain and noted that LPS pays administrators much less than surrounding districts.

Teachers also observed that principals often spent a great deal of time focused on administrative duties and not enough time supporting teaching and learning. According to one high school teacher, “[Principals] cannot be instructional leaders when they are being pulled [into] meetings or restructuring.... Whatever it is, they are being constantly pulled in all different directions.” School administrators perceived that they often have very little time to focus on teaching and learning. In addition to administrative duties, school administrators reported being burdened recently with finding professional development opportunities for staff members because the new district leadership no longer provides them sufficient support in the area of staff development.

**Teachers and school administrators reported having limited or inconsistent opportunities to develop leadership skills. In addition, there was some disagreement about what constitutes meaningful leadership opportunities.**

Some teachers believed that school and district officials provided ample leadership opportunities for teachers, including opportunities to serve on curriculum planning teams, behavioral teams, or as grade-level team leaders. However, according to school administrators and district officials, teachers and school administrators do not necessarily recognize and value leadership opportunities in the same way. According to one school administrator, “I feel like teachers have multiple opportunities for leadership within the school, but we recently had a survey that sort of told me otherwise.” In response to these perceptions and a desire to nurture talented staff members and promising future leaders, many school administrators saw the need to create more formal opportunities for teachers to influence aspects of school such as curriculum and evaluation. At the same time, some school administrators indicated they would rather limit additional leadership responsibilities and instead encourage teachers to focus solely on high-quality teaching. Some school administrators also noted that, aside from the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL), leadership development opportunities for school administrators have been limited in recent years. According to one district official, until now,“if you were a principal who knew how to make things happen, things were happening. But if you were a principal who waited for direction, you didn’t get any.”

**Teachers indicated that district and school administrators do not always communicate important information in a timely and effective manner.**

According to teachers at three schools, communication from school administrators and district officials about curriculum and scheduling issues was often last minute and disorganized. For example, the teachers in one school described afterschool meetings that were “announced” at the end of the day by word of mouth. The teachers in another school reported that one year, because of a change in leadership, they did not find out what classes they would be teaching until school started that fall. In another school, teachers were not informed that their school would have an ESL program until the fall, at which point registration for an ESL training and certification course had already closed. The high school teachers also described issues that arose around scheduling and registration. One teacher exclaimed, because of a perceived lack of communication, “We didn’t know our start date!”

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### LPS District Central Office

**School administrators and teachers questioned whether the LPS district central office staff members understand the day-to-day needs of students and the demands of working in schools.**

One of the most often frequently described sentiments from school administrators and teachers was that the LPS district central office staff members do not understand what happens in schools, they do not grasp what goes on day-to-day in the classrooms, and they do not know what the schools need. One school administrator stated:

I think the district, they definitely have an eye on data, so they understand where you need to go as far as your CPI [Composite Performance Index] and student growth model and your dropout rate and your attendance. But do they understand? I don’t want to say they don’t understand what we go through every day, but I do think that in order to understand what we experience every day, you need to be in the schools and asking the right questions.

School administrators specifically referred to the fact that although each school was different and was dealing with its own unique situation, they felt there was an expectation that everyone in the district would do things the same way. School administrators also reported that despite successes they have had, they felt “stonewalled by the system” and unable to make changes because they could not be implemented in every school. Teachers from two schools and multiple school administrators advocated for the LPS district central office staff members spending more time in schools, in classrooms, in hallways, getting to know the students, seeing how classes run and the work school staff members do to augment their understanding of LPS schools. One school administrator noted, “I’ve always felt a real disconnect between central office and the schools, and there’s always been an inherent disconnect between people who are with kids every day and people who aren’t.”

In multiple cases, teachers interpreted the lack of understanding from the LPS district central office staff members as a lack of respect and trust for them and their work. Teachers reported feeling that they were not treated as professionals and wanted to be trusted. As one teacher put it, “We need to be valued as decision makers, as competent to do what’s best for our kids.”Working under a spirit of approval rather than criticism, teachers reported, could improve both performance and morale.

**Teachers, school administrators, and district officials reported a lack of communication between the LPS district central office and the schools, particularly with regard to receivership.** [Finding related to receivership and/or LPS turnaround plan.]

District officials and school staff members, including both teachers and school administrators, cited concerns about the nature of communication between the LPS district central office and the schools in LPS. For example, teachers said they had many levels of frustration regarding communication from the LPS district central office surrounding the receivership in general. Teachers perceived that confusion reigned, with one teacher stating, “It’s still unclear—who is in charge of what? Who is accountable for what?… Who is making the rules? Who is doing what?” Unanswered questions and a lack of transparency were common complaints from teachers at all grade levels regarding the LPS district central office, both prior to and during receivership. The 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review* discussed documents and procedures endorsed by the LPS district central office. It went on to report, however, that additional direction from the district is needed to effectively use these items in schools (p. 17). School administrators and teachers also reported feeling that, in the past, they received excessive amounts of directions coupled with expectations that schools will comply and meet standards, but these were followed up with little to no guidance or support in meeting these expectations.

**School administrators, teachers, and district officials described a shortage of staff members and lack of leadership in the LPS district central office.**

School staff members and district officials expressed concerns that lack of leadership in the LPS district central office and frequent changes in superintendents were problematic. This also was mentioned as a challenge in the LPS turnaround plan, where it was noted that LPS had been without a permanent superintendent for nearly three years prior to the Receiver’s appointment in January 2012 (p. 5). In the 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review,* it was recommended that hiring a superintendent with experience and skill should be one of the most urgent and important actions to be taken (p. 55). One teacher noted that there was “a complete lack of leadership, beginning from the top with the mayor to our former superintendent—complete lack of leadership. We haven’t had leadership in many, many years.” School administrators noted that every time the superintendent changed, the way things were done in the district also was realigned. Teachers at one school mentioned hearing that poorly performing school administrators were routinely moved to the LPS district central office. One teacher recalled:

I’ve seen it so many times, administrators that were close to retirement or hush-hush deemed ineffective end up working at central office. So it’s like, okay, these are the people that somehow got moved out of their school, but now they are the ones in charge of all these curriculum decisions.

Teachers at the same school also expressed a lack of understanding about what functions the LPS district central office staff members performed, suggested that there may be too many staff members in the LPS district central office, and indicated that they believed LPS would be better served with additional staff members in the schools instead. One district official, however, said the LPS district central office is understaffed, with people filling multiple roles because of replacements not being hired when others leave. The official also cited a need for restructuring to use district staff members more efficiently.

**Teachers and district officials described tensions between the LPS district central office and the Lawrence teachers’ union.** [Finding related to receivership and/or LPS turnaround plan.]

Both teachers and district officials noted a history of mistrust between the teachers’ union and district officials, caused, in part, by issues with the former LPS superintendent. They perceived that recent changes in LPS, in light of financial concerns, also have created tensions. Teachers from one school reported feeling that since the decision to place LPS into receivership, there was a lack of open communication between the Receiver and the union with regard to teacher evaluations and potential changes to teacher contract. Some teachers in that school were concerned that, under the LPS turnaround plan, they would be asked to do more than what is required in their contract. Teachers perceived there were no discussions about potential contract negotiations. According to one elementary school teacher,“The grievance is they’re not meeting with the union president and not negotiating the contract. So I don’t know what being unionized means.” Other teachers were concerned about the Receiver’s review and evaluation process that seemed to make it much easier than before to remove teachers who are underperforming. At the same time, teachers from another school appreciated that it may be less difficult now to remove failing teachers and school administrators.

### Professional Development

**Participants believed LPS offered many opportunities for professional development.**

According to teachers, school administrators, and district officials, the district offered many valuable professional development opportunities. One district official said, “I would think that over the last 10 to 15 years, our teachers probably have gotten the best and the most professional development to improve their teaching practices. We are, in a lot of ways, really far ahead of other systems.” An elementary school teacher perceived that there “has been a lot [of professional development]. It has been very effective and immediately applied to your day-to-day.” Also, according to one school administrator, “Lawrence offers so much professional development, whether it’s NISL for administrators, professional development for teachers, it feels like we’re miles and miles ahead of other districts when it comes to professional development.”Teachers in four schools reported that in addition to required training on any new initiatives, the district also offered a range of optional professional development. Along with traditional professional development in the form of face-to-face workshops and trainings, participants reported that the LPS district central office has started to provide online professional development opportunities and encourages learning walks as a form of professional development. One district official also noted that many teachers were able to receive ELL training for low or no cost because ELL staff members have been historically hard to recruit and retain. Some school administrators encouraged teachers to share their professional development experiences with teachers who were unable to attend, and in some instances, the district even compensated teachers who agreed to train other teachers on what they learned.

**Participants noted that professional development opportunities are rarely tailored to individual school or teacher needs and are seldom sustained or strategic.**

Teachers in four different schools indicated that the most valuable professional development opportunities were those that are tailored to student, teacher, and school needs. However, many teachers and school administrators felt that the professional development offered was often “one size fits all” and rarely tailored to individual or school needs. These teachers expressed interest in having an opportunity to weigh in on the professional development provided. School administrators and district officials also worried that professional development opportunities were not always sustained or in direct support of strategic school or district goals. According to one school administrator, “The fly-by-night flavor of the month professional development doesn’t work.” As one district official explained, “I think we need to scale back and keep it simple. Just focus on a few key initiatives and then dive deeper into them.” Although one district official noted that the LPS district central office may be good at tracking professional development, other district officials expressed concern about the quality of professional development provided and the fidelity of implementation at the school and classroom level. The 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review* recommended revisions to LPS’s professional development to improve alignment to key school and district goals(p. 61).

### Recruitment and Retention

**District officials perceived that many young teachers are interested in working in LPS.**

According to district officials, there were far more interested applicants than open positions in LPS for the 2012–13 school year. Many of these interested applicants, according to the perception of district officials, were young teachers who want to make a difference and were excited about the changes happening in LPS now. One district official, recalling a job fair, stated:

Many of the younger people who came said, “You know what? So much new is going to come. We want to be part of the innovation that’s going to happen in Lawrence because we think we’re going to learn a lot more through that process than if we just went to another district where they were just doing the same thing.”

In addition, a district official noted that LPS is one of the few districts to offer a licensure program for teachers who come in on a preliminary license, and new teachers receive a lot of ongoing support the first couple of years. District officials reported that they intend, in future years, to actively recruit Teach for America alumni and graduates from a wider network of colleges and universities, who may be similarly interested helping to improve LPS schools.

**School administrators and district officials reported that LPS consistently struggles to recruit and retain high-quality teachers in hard-to-staff areas like STEM, ESL, and special education.**

Although district officials expressed that many young, ambitious teachers want to work in LPS, there are some positions that remain difficult to fill. According to school administrators, year after year they struggle to recruit and retain good mathematics and science teachers, ELL specialists, and high school special education staff. Many schools reported being so consistently short staffed that, if one teacher is absent, another teacher (oftentimes one for ELL or special education) will lose his or her support staff. One middle school teacher explained, “I have a class of 19. I’m supposed to have a paraprofessional. Sixty-six percent of the time she’s pulled because of absenteeism in my department because she’s bilingual.” Teachers in one school pointed out that in addition to particular content area staff, there also is a shortage of minority teachers in most schools, especially given the high population of minority students in LPS. In addition, because of a recent onslaught of retirees, many schools have had a high rate of turnover and are just starting to rebuild a substantial veteran staff. This is part of the reason why teachers in one school expressed concern about relying heavily on Teach for America staff members, who they felt often put in their two years and then leave the district.

## Support and Engagement

A range of supports is critical to ensuring academic success and student engagement. This section begins with observations from participants about the social and emotional supports available to LPS students and goes on to discuss supports for ELLs and students receiving special education, along with enrichment opportunities and parent engagement.

* Although teachers and students described some social and emotional supports available in their schools, teachers also perceived a shortage in specialized staff members who can provide counseling and other academic and nonacademic supports to students.
* Although ELL and special education specialists may provide high-quality support, according to participants these specialized support staff members were in short supply. In addition, general education classroom teachers indicated that they did not necessarily have the skills or support to compensate for this shortage.
* Teachers perceived that the identification of students with learning disabilities was problematic. Teachers also noted there was a need for more staff members to provide support to these students.
* Participants described student supports that LPS provided, including making classroom resources available, helping students make the transition from middle to high school, and providing afterschool and summer enrichment activities. Participants perceived these supports as important and expressed concern that the level of support varies widely between schools and that many schools could still do more.
* Teachers and school administrators perceived a lack of opportunities for meaningful parent involvement in their schools and acknowledged that there was often no regular, positive communication between parents and schools. Barriers that teachers and school administrators believed contributed to the lack of parent and community engagement included high poverty, low education, and limited English proficiency.

### Social and Emotional Supports

**Teachers and students believed LPS provided some important social and emotional supports.**

According to participants’ perceptions, most schools in LPS have a school counselor on-site, and students in four of the six focus groups indicated that they could talk to the school counselor about personal issues if they needed to. A teacher from one school noted:

I think we do a really good job of identifying kids’ issues possibly because of the staff that we have…. We also have two school counselors compared to a lot of schools that only have one. We have a psychologist. We have…different intervention people who are really trying to focus.... A great nurse, that helps.

According to the 2012 ESE profile for LPS[[6]](#footnote-6), more than 85 percent of students participate in the free or reduced-price lunch program, which teachers recognized as important to learning. Teachers in one school described strong partnerships with local health clinics that ensure students can get health services quickly.

**Teachers indicated that schools often lacked sufficient staff members who can provide students with social and emotional supports.**

According to teachers in all of the focus groups, LPS students often needed substantial social and emotional supports to ensure they were physically and mentally ready to learn. As one teacher described, “We’ve got kids that live in deep poverty, kids that often are second language learners, kids that have special needs, kids that on the whole need more supports and more quality than we’re giving them currently.” Participants noted that although some schools do a good job identifying student needs and obtaining resources to meet those needs, many schools lack sufficient resources to address students’ social and emotional needs in a timely fashion. According to school administrators and teachers, staff members qualified to deal with the problems that many students bring with them to school, like counselors and mental health workers, were often unavailable or overworked, if they were present at all. Teachers in two different schools noted that there was usually only one counselor per school, but they would have liked at least one per grade. Students at one school also commented that they would appreciate having counselors more readily available. As one teacher pointed out, “We do have difficulty when kids need mental health counseling because often there’s a wait list to get in.” Teachers at one school also expressed concerns that many of their students appeared to lack basic health services like vaccinations and that not all schools were staffed to provide these services.

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### English Language Learners

**Some programs and initiatives for ELLs, like Rosetta Stone, were reported to be successful.**

Although high school teachers expressed frustration over a variety of constantly changing programs for ELLs and a lack of specialized support staff, the elementary and middle school teachers praised the success of one enduring program for ELLs: Rosetta Stone, a popular language learning software. One of the schools incorporated the use of Rosetta Stone into a reading program, and the other used Rosetta Stone during afterschool activities. A teacher involved with the afterschool Rosetta Stone program said:

I saw more growth with the kids who went to [the] Rosetta Stone [afterschool program]…than I did for the kids who did not go to the Rosetta Stone afterschool. The kids who went and got into the habit of going started to really enjoy it because they saw their progress.

Participants from both schools remarked that Rosetta Stone had been successful and indicated a desire to continue using it next year and beyond. High school students from one school also described afterschool programs other than Rosetta Stone that helped them improve their English language skills.

**Teachers and district officials suggested that the current system for supporting ELLs*,* particularly students who are new to the United States and students who are making the transition into general education classrooms, did not meet student needs.**

Teachers and district officials expressed concerns about supports available for specific types of ELLs. Teachers in two different schools described a lack of tailored support for ELLs new to the United States. In addition to basic language acquisition skills, teachers reported that these students often needed additional support to help them acclimate to school in the United States. Teachers at one school, as well as one of the district officials, also expressed concern about the supports in place for former ELLs who no longer qualify for ELL services. According to participants, these students often still needed some targeted teaching, which may vary widely from classroom to classroom. However, according to one teacher, “Once they’re in the mainstream, they don’t get as much support.” Many ELLs and former ELLs are unable to practice their English at home and continue to struggle since, according to one district official, 85 percent of LPS families speak Spanish at home. Several students who participated in the focus groups reported that they speak Spanish in their homes. This lack of sufficiently supportive programming for ELLs also was noted as a challenge in the LPS turnaround plan (p. 5). The 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review* also referenced a need to revisit hiring and training practices for ESL staff members to better meet student needs for quality and amount of ESL instruction (p. 62).

**Teachers and school administrators indicated that schools often lack sufficient staff dedicated to teaching ELLs. They also reported that schools lack ongoing support for *all* teachers who work with ELLs.**

School administrators and teachers described a lack of language skills as one of the primary barriers to student learning and achievement. Students were constantly struggling to catch up and often acquired the language at the expense of content. Teachers and school administrators also indicated a shortage of highly qualified ELL staff members and specialists (or trained coaches and paraprofessionals) who could meet these identified student needs. In addition, they noted a need for more training and ongoing support for *all* teachers regarding teaching ELLs. These needs echoed the 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review,* which states that “these insufficiencies are hindrances in raising the achievement of ELL students” (p. 46). According to one school administrator, “It’s like it’s either you’re teaching language development or you’re teaching mathematics. We have to merge the two, and that’s complicated.” Teachers specifically indicated wanting more training and support from the district on how to teach ELLs with varying levels of ability in the same classroom. They also reported a lack of cohesive supports for students with disabilities who also need ELL support.

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### Special Education

**Teachers noted that schools do not always identify learning disabilities and address student needs in a timely fashion.**

According to teachers at all grade levels, students with disabilities do not necessarily receive the learning supports they need in a timely fashion, if at all. Teachers at one school described their observation of a significant lag time between identifying student needs and getting students the services they need. Middle school teachers even reported that it is up to the student to tell their high school teachers that they have an IEP. One teacher explained:

The IEP is going to follow them, but you can’t wait until October and November to get it on their desk. You have to take the responsibility and ownership as the student. Tell them you’re on IEP right away. Don’t wait*.*

The high school teachers worried that some student needs were not identified until high school. According to the teachers at one middle school, teachers have occasionally been asked not to recommend students for special education, even when those students clearly needed services, because of the sheer number of existing special education students.

**Teachers and school administrators indicated that many schools lack sufficient staff dedicated to teaching students with disabilities. They also reported that schools lack ongoing support for *all* teachers who work with students with disabilities.**

School administrators and teachers at all grade levels perceived a lack of sufficient special education staff members. Participants in one of the teacher focus groups perceived that the district has a higher special education student-to-teacher ratio than many other districts. In addition, teachers noted a gross lack of resources, with one teacher explaining:

[I]f we were in Andover…no parent would stand [for] the fact that their child needed something you didn’t have if you were doing it on a regular basis. Here, parents don’t question the fact that there’s no money.

Teachers in two different schools noted significant gaps in the resource continuum. Given the wide range of student needs, teachers agreed that additional staff members would be needed to effectively address differentiated needs because it can be quite challenging to serve high- and low-performing students with disabilities in the same classroom. Teachers also described a lack of support for special education in the inclusion classrooms, particularly for non-MCAS subjects. According to the teachers at one school, “Special ed is not a priority at all.”

### Enrichment Opportunities and High School Transition

**School administrators indicated that the support provided to students to help them make a smooth transition from middle to high school varied across LPS.**

According to school administrators, at least one middle school in LPS has developed a strong relationship with one of the high schools and provided support for students as they made the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade. One high school administrator also described focusing significant efforts on incoming ninth graders to ensure they are prepared for the rigor and expectations of high school. As that principal explained, “[I]f we can really…make the ninth grade feel like they’re at home and this is their school,…if you can get them to really seriously think about that in ninth grade, [then] it has a real lasting effect.” However, participants perceived that the good strategies that were implemented in some schools were not shared across the district. As a result, teachers in two schools expressed concern that LPS students were not as prepared for high school as students in other districts. Although middle school students who participated in focus groups nearly all agreed that their school counselors helped with the high school admission process and that teachers provided advice and support, middle school teachers perceived that little else is done to help make the transition smooth for students. Students from one of the middle schools and one of the high schools echoed this sentiment, with one student explaining, “You’re kind of on your own and you have to adapt by yourself.”

**Participants noted that schools offered many afterschool enrichment programs, both academic and nonacademic.**

Teachers and school administrators described multiple afterschool programs available to students, including tutoring, music, athletics, and community service. They indicated that many of the nonacademic activities provided important social and emotional learning opportunities that could positively impact academic performance and behavior. One school administrator spoke to the importance of intramural sports, recalling:

I had kids that in the beginning of the year, no homework, no homework, you know, calling the parents. And, then, basketball starts, and guess what? All the homework gets [done]—you know what I mean? And, it’s sort of an extension of the day but if it’s going to keep the kid focused in doing what he’s supposed to be doing as a boy, then it is important.

In some cases, like intramurals and districtwide athletics, teachers indicated that these activities might motivate students to do better in school if eligibility depended on grades or behavior. Some middle school students remarked that clubs, such as the newspaper club, helped them do better in school. They appreciated the afterschool programs and summer enrichment opportunities offered by the schools and the district.

**Teachers described an opportunity gap they believed existed between students in LPS and students in other districts with regard to enrichment opportunities.**

Despite many existing enrichment opportunities, both teachers and students expressed a desire to have more opportunities for students both in school—through non-MCAS subjects like arts, music, and sports—and out of school. Students from three schools indicated a desire for these kinds of subjects. In addition, one teacher pointed out the inherent opportunity gap between students in LPS and students in wealthier suburbs:

There are some kids that need academic help, some kids who need ESL, and there are some kids that need to know how to play a game, be on a team, take a turn, just things that are missing, that aren’t always prevalent, and this is especially [true] in the city and in this community.

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### Parent and Community Engagement

**Teachers and students said parents at many schools participated in school-sponsored activities. However, teachers and school administrators observed a lack of opportunities for *meaningful* parent involvement.** [Finding related to receivership and/or LPS turnaround plan.]

Across all grade levels, teachers perceived that some schools focused on building relationships with families and, as a result, those schools witnessed increased parent and family involvement in school-sponsored activities. Teachers at one school described a wide range of successful family and community events, including family fun days, community service events, and fundraising activities. The district also has offered family literacy programs at some schools, which one teacher recognized as “a great thing that our district is doing to welcome new families to the country and teach them language and to help the kids.” Despite the high rate of transiency in LPS perceived by focus group participants, the participants also believed that there were many families that stay in LPS for a long time and build strong relationships with school staff members. According to middle school students, schools typically provided information in Spanish as needed, which may have encouraged parents to participate in school-hosted activities.

Although there was some parent engagement in school-sponsored activities, teachers and school administrators reported a lack of parent involvement in leadership opportunities or meaningful school governance. According to school administrators, they have difficulty finding parents who are willing to commit to leadership positions. According to one teacher, “I don’t think that the schools do a good enough job engaging parents. [Schools need to] engage them in terms of being decision-making stakeholders in changes that are happening in the school.”

**Teachers and school administrators perceived a lack of regular, positive communication between parents and schools.**

Both teachers and school administrators acknowledged that they felt it was not enough to let parents know when there was a problem with their student and that faculty and staff needed to engage in regular—and often positive—communications with parents. However, middle school students said that their parents were contacted only if there was a problem, rarely for praise or recognition. High school students agreed but did not indicate wanting additional parent-teacher contact.

Participants noted that these negative conversations can often be tough for both parents and teachers and do little to build positive parent-teacher relationships. One school administrator said:

I see that some parents [are] tired of us calling them. And, then, others say, “How come I never get a phone call?”… I want to strike a balance so that we not only just call the students when they are making a mistake but when they are doing something great or notable.

Although some teachers described attempts to tailor communications to individual parent needs and schedules as a way of improving communication, they also noted that this required a lot of time and effort. Despite these efforts, they perceived that many parents still could not come to the school for meetings or parent nights because they were working multiple jobs or had other obligations. One teacher suggested making better use of online tools that would allow parents to at least monitor student progress on their own terms.

**Teachers and school administrators believed high poverty, low levels of educational attainment, and limited English proficiency acted as significant barriers to parent and community engagement.**

According to teachers and school administrators, many LPS students lived in poverty with parents who spoke little to no English and who did not necessarily receive a quality education. The participants believed all of these factors inhibited parent and community engagement. Teachers from two schools indicated their perception that parents often worked multiple jobs and did not have time to help with homework or attend parent-teacher nights. When they did come in to speak with teachers, teachers often struggled to communicate unless a translator or ELL specialist was available. According to one school administrator:

Many of our kids come to school without a lot of support at home. Many of our students don’t have somebody to help them with homework because their parents may not be literate or they may not speak English or both.

Participants from both the teacher and school administrator focus groups perceived that many parents felt ill equipped to participate actively in their child’s education because they did not complete a formal education themselves. Instead, “they put their total trust into the school, into the teachers and their counselors.” In addition, teachers from one school and participants in one of the school administrator focus groups suggested that parents who were not from the United States may not have shared the same beliefs in the value of education and the importance of parent involvement as teachers and school administrators.

## Autonomy and Accountability

This section focuses first on findings related to teacher and school autonomy and then on findings related to accountability, namely teacher evaluations.

* With the exception of some recent and limited instances, teachers described a longstanding lack of autonomy over what they taught and how. District officials acknowledged this past lack of choice available to teachers. However, district officials discussed efforts prior to the receivership in which they attempted to give more control to school staff. In these instances, district officials perceived that the lack of school-level staff experience with autonomy created challenges.
* There is disagreement between teachers, school administrators, and district officials about whether methods of evaluation are fair, with a range of evaluation methods, from test scores and graduation rates to classroom walk-throughs, all prompting concern among school administrators and teachers.

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### Teacher Autonomy and Decision Making

**District officials perceived that a decade-long atmosphere of strictly dictated school operations could be blamed for the current lack of creative problem solving they reported being present in the schools.**

District officials reported that multiple years of a compliance-driven environment at the LPS district central office has led to lack of creative problem solving among school administrators and teachers. One school administrator noted:

Central office has been kind of a compliance factory over the past number of years. And, we get this real pressure to meet this particular standard, and there’s just so much work that has to be done to get there and there isn’t a lot of help [from the district] in getting there just because the needs are so great.

District officials perceived that prior to receivership there was a culture of emphasizing compliance over creativity as well as a lack of innovative and thoughtful direction coming from school administrators and teachers. A district official explained:

It was really hard because people were used to being told what to do…. In this latest round [of updating school improvement plans before the receivership], we really said, “It’s your job to think about the problem. I don’t know. You tell me.” And they can’t. They would call me daily, “What do you think we should put in this box?”

Despite some teachers’ perceptions that they are not valued as decision makers by district officials, district officials reported having asked teachers and principals to create school improvement plans to address the problems in their buildings. The district officials recalled, however, that these requests were met with bewildered responses from school staff members, suggesting that they did not know how to fulfill these requests on their own.

**Teachers praised having some flexibility in how to teach certain skills, but school administrators and teachers reported frustration with an overall lack of choice surrounding which curricula their school uses.**

Teachers and school administrators discussed the uniqueness of each school but lamented that despite this fact, every school is required to use the same classroom curricula. As one school administrator noted:

Each school is different, so it’s easy to say let everybody do it the same way, but you’re not dealing with the same situation. I mean, I think we try to mirror as much as we can, but then each school has their individual challenges.

Teachers from four schools expressed similar concerns surrounding this lack of choice, many citing a reading program that they perceive does not work but that they must use. Teachers from two schools further described frustration at being held responsible for student performance results while feeling that they had no say over the tools they used. The 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review* recommended developing“a full written curriculum aligned to the new Massachusetts Common Core framework” but did not reference increasing choice or flexibility for teachers in this new curriculum (p. 56).

Teachers complained about curricula that they were expected to follow and teach as though reading from a script. Participating teachers from two schools, however, acknowledged some opportunities for increased curricular flexibility in recent years. Teachers from one school, for example, noted increased flexibility available to them in the Balanced Literacy reading program, which allowed teachers to choose how to address the skills to be covered. School administrators also mentioned the new literacy program, which they believe makes teachers feel more empowered and autonomous in planning class instruction. One school administrator noted:

I think the literacy model that we brought on has been really helpful in facilitating…a very different way of thinking, very organic approach to planning instruction. I think that sort of empowered teachers to really be a little bit more autonomous in what they do. And, I think with that, they’ve really risen to the occasion.

Teachers at all grade levels appreciated opportunities to mold curricula and tailor class plans, though elementary school teachers felt that they had the least amount of freedom, because they are often compared with their peers who teach the same content. Focus group participants who had taught in both elementary and middle schools in LPS perceived that the middle school environment typically provides teachers with more freedom in their individual classrooms.

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### Teacher Evaluations

**District officials reported that the planning and vision of school walk-throughs (or *learning walks*) have created an effective classroom monitoring system.**

District officials emphasized the importance of school walk-throughs that they reported took place every Tuesday and Thursday in spring 2012. During these walk-throughs, district officials and school administrators visited classrooms throughout LPS and conducted short observations. District officials noted that staff members at the LPS district central office developed these walk-throughs using the SMARTS protocol (Standards-based instruction; Monitoring at all levels; Assessment and accountability for everyone, including our parents; Rigorous instructional practices; Twenty-first century skills; and Support services) and distributed the information to all school staff members in advance to ensure everyone was aware of the vision and mission of LPS as well as the criteria they would be looking for on the walks. As one district official noted:

Principals don’t want us on walk-throughs in their schools because they’ll say that we are very tough and that we have very high expectations of what we want to see teachers doing and students doing. And, primarily, what we want to see is the learning that’s happening.

**Teachers referred to classroom walk-throughs as disruptive and an unfair form of evaluation.**

Teachers at all grade levels perceived walk-throughs, when visitors entered their classroom to briefly observe while they taught, as disturbing to classroom instruction and uninformative to the observers. Teachers also reported that these walk-throughs were inconsistently implemented, with certain teachers experiencing them on a regular basis throughout the previous school year and others having had only one visit over the entire school year. Teachers often referred to these walk-throughs as forms of evaluation (though they were not teacher evaluation observations). One teacher recalled feeling that the outcome of the walk-through was essentially a report of “what was seen in 10 minutes, when 10 adults walked into a room and children were trying to learn.” Teachers voiced concerns about the level of fairness in walk-throughs and felt that observers from the district were not around often enough to fully understand what they were seeing in the classrooms.

Participants felt that having staff members who were more often present in the schools doing walk-throughs made the walk-throughs more effective and meaningful, and some teachers recalled having their principal conduct classroom observations. As one teacher suggested, “At least with our principal,…she knows what she’s looking at. She knows the instruction. She is not just looking at ‘number nine, reasoning,’ [or] ‘number ten,question,’ like from the state standards.”There was confusion over whether all walk-throughs were evaluative and what the expected outputs from these were, as demonstrated by the fact that teachers from two schools complained that they only received a copy of the feedback from the walk-throughs if it was submitted to the LPS district central office. As they perceived it, this further limited the usefulness of the observations as evaluations if they were in fact teacher evaluations at all.

**Teachers perceived teacher evaluations based largely on student test scores and failure rates to be unfair.**

Teachers from five schools across all grade levels described various methods of teacher evaluation[[7]](#footnote-7) as unfair because of many factors. As one elementary school teacher noted, “The merit of a teacher is sometimes based on that one test score of that one child during that session. There has got to be a more objective way to see if they are functioning well as a teacher.” School administrators feared that evaluating teachers’ effectiveness based on data alone may lead them to lose staff members they want to keep in the future. Teachers also perceived test score evaluations as unfair because of differences in the student body of each classroom, with some classrooms including special education students and others not. In one school, teachers reported that MAP test score rankings of all classes were posted together publicly without accounting for these variations in inclusion. Teachers perceived this type of public display as a contributing factor in lowering morale and encouraging undeserved inflation of student grades and promotion. According to the teachers at one high school, teacher evaluations based on failure rates put pressure on staff members to pass as many students as possible, even students who they felt did not demonstrate sufficient learning. One high school teacher noted:

The district looks at the school’s failure rates for each semester of each course. They look at the teacher failure rate and then they judge us. So it’s almost like, okay, we’re put on this pressure of we need to pass as many kids as possible because if we don’t, then we’re in a lot of trouble.

**School administrators and teachers expressed concerns about the amount of feedback received and the inability of teacher and school administrator evaluations to capture the nonmeasureable qualities that could make teachers effective.**

Teachers from two schools reported feeling that they received an inadequate amount of formal evaluation and feedback, and school administrators expressed frustration at the inability of evaluations to measure the collaboration efforts or leadership qualities of a teacher. One high school teacher reported:

As to the question of how we are evaluated now, how we feel accountable now, I think it’s kind of spotty and informal and it’s sort of no news is good news kind of thing. After you go through your first three years here where there are supposed to be formal evaluations based on observations, after that, if you pass the bar, it seems to be very informal.

Another teacher noted, “Do [I] want to be formally evaluated more often? Absolutely. Yes. Feedback please, because there is room for improvement in everyone. We all need mentors and coaches.” In the 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review*, improvements in the quality and speed of performance evaluations for teachers and school administrators also were cited as high priorities (p. 62).

Both school administrators and teachers discussed a forthcoming new evaluation system they had heard about but were unaware of the specifics of this system. This lack of knowledge, along with their lack of participation in the creation of and lack of training on the new system, appeared to create anxiety among the teachers. As one teacher noted, “People perform better under the spirit of approval than the spirit of criticism, and I think if we just had that throughout the district, you can see things get better morale-wise and self-esteem-wise.” Teachers from two schools expressed gratitude for the current evaluations and feedback done by their principals, citing that school administrators know what they are looking for during classroom monitoring, met with teachers in advance to discuss lesson plans, and gave useful feedback in a timely fashion. As a result, these teachers found this to be a fair process that offered them next steps they could use in future instruction.

**The decision to dismiss some teachers was validated in the eyes of district officials by the unsurprised reactions of other school staff members to those who were let go.** [Finding related to receivership and/or LPS turnaround plan.]

District officials described the Skill-Will matrix on which principals rated each of their teachers as part of the Receiver’s review process, along with the consideration of other data from the previous three years, including attendance and sick-day data, MCAS scores, and median student growth numbers. According to a district official, only teachers with three years of data available were included in the Receiver’s review process, and out of 994 teachers, 58 teachers were eligible for review. Teachers who rated low in two of four categories were placed on the list for possible review, resulting in roughly 18 resigning or retiring and 17 recommended for termination. District officials recounted that they believed they might end up going through “a lot of arbitration,” but they have been told by lawyers that their methods will hold up in court. Furthermore, they noted that fellow staff members working at the schools of dismissed teachers were not surprised at the people who were targeted and tended to agree with those who were on the list. One district official recalled:

I don’t think there was anybody on the list that the [principal] in their building [said], “What? I can’t believe they’re on it.” I really think that in every instance, people went, “It didn’t surprise me they’re on that list.” And, I think that built some validity into the process.

# Discussions and Connections

The findings presented in this report are suggestive of the circumstances and most prevalent challenges facing LPS as it entered into receivership, according to the perceptions of focus group and interview participants in June 2012. Given the nature of the sample selection and data collection processes, these findings cannot be viewed as representative of the views of *all* students, teachers, school administrators, and/or district officials in LPS. However, the qualitative data do provide meaningful insight into the perceptions of the circumstances and conditions that existed in LPS as the district began the process of receivership.

Each finding presented in this report was mentioned on at least two occasions—for example, in two focus groups, in a focus group and in an interview, or in two interviews. (As noted earlier, researchers did not ask each focus group the same set of questions.) In many cases, these findings echo the same challenges laid out in the 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review*.

A school’s or district’s capacity to meet student needs reflects its collective competency and internal resources, both human and material. On balance, the baseline data collected in LPS paint a picture of a district with limited capacity in some key areas and critical challenges as it embarks on the implementation of an extensive turnaround plan. However, although the findings indicate that there are fundamental challenges for LPS, the qualitative data also indicate that there are strengths in the district that can be harnessed—and in some cases redirected—to support efforts to improve outcomes for all children in LPS.

## A Framework for Understanding Capacity

The following components of capacity can help describe a school’s ability to improve student outcomes:

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| --- |
| • HUMAN CAPITAL: The knowledge, skills, commitment, disposition, and intellectual ability of the members of a school’s staff;  • SOCIAL CAPITAL: The intangible network of relationships that fosters unity and trust within a school’s staff;  • PROGRAM COHERENCE: The degree to which instruction, resources, and staff in the school are coordinated and integrated into a common framework; and,  • RESOURCES: The physical or organizational tools that a school has at its disposal to make its improvement goals a reality. |

*Source:* Beaver, J. K., & Weinbaum, E. H. (2012). *Measuring school capacity, maximizing school improvement*. Philadelphia, PA: Consortium for Policy Research in Education. Retrieved from <http://www.cpre.org/sites/default/files/policybrief/1344_1297cprenclbpolicybrieffinal.pdf>

We have adapted these components, normally applied to schools, to discuss district and school improvement efforts in LPS based on the turnaround plan’s emphasis on school-based improvement efforts. The following section includes findings from the baseline data collected in focus groups and interviews that highlight challenges related to these four capacities and also provide insight into the conditions in LPS just prior to implementation of the turnaround plan.

### Human Capital

Regarding *human capital*, focus group participants and interviewees identified inconsistency in the quality of teachers’ instructional capacities and school administrators’ leadership capabilities. Students, teachers, school administrators, and district officials all acknowledged the presence of some skilled teachers and principals. At the same time, they voiced concerns about a widespread lack of training in and use of effective teaching practices in the classroom—for ELLs and students with disabilities in particular—and an overall shortage of specialized staff members to meet the needs of students. They also perceived high rates of turnover among school and district leadership and a lack of a process to develop leaders within the system, resulting in instability in some schools. Some participants described recent efforts to remove ineffective staff members and ongoing efforts to recruit effective staff members, which may improve human capital. Some participants also described an overall commitment from teachers to helping students succeed.

### Social Capital

*Social capital* refers to relationships and trust among teachers and administrators. The data researchers collected suggest that in LPS, the media’s representation of the district and the city and some of the recent changes accompanying the beginning of the receivership—including new teacher evaluation systems and limited communication between district staff members and school-based staff members—have lowered morale and, thereby, at least temporarily, lowered district capacity in terms of social capital. In addition, participants described a historic lack of trust between school staff members and the LPS district central office caused, in part, by unstable district leadership and a belief that district staff members do not understand the day-to-day needs of students, teachers, and schools. However, focus group participants also repeatedly described the strong sense of community that exists among students, teachers, and community members in LPS, suggesting potential for building on existing social capital.

### Program Coherence

*Program coherence* reflects the extent to which improvement activities are aligned with each other and with perceived challenges, are implemented consistently, and are sustained long enough to determine if they are effective. Findings from the qualitative data gathered in this portion of the study, particularly responses from school-based staff members, suggest that LPS has lacked coherence in these respects. For example, focus group participants described a constant influx of new initiatives at the school and district levels and suggested an overall skepticism about the life spans and purposes of new programs. In addition, responses of participants on certain topics varied among schools and the district. For example, on one hand respondents touted the LPS district central office for offering professional development while on the other hand noted that the district did not tailor professional development to meet their needs. Such inconsistencies possibly suggest incoherence in practices and approaches across the district or indicate contrasting perceptions of the activities happening in LPS. According to research on other low-performing schools and districts, constant “reform churn” and incoherence often serve as barriers to sustainable achievement (Beaver & Weinbaum, 2012; Berends, 2000[[8]](#footnote-8); Datnow, Lasky, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2006[[9]](#footnote-9); O’Day & Bitter, 2003[[10]](#footnote-10)).

### Resources

The fourth component—*resources*—is broad and can include resources in the classroom as well as organizational factors. In LPS, the data collected from all teacher and school administrator focus groups suggested that participants believed that there is a lack of sufficient staff capacity tailored for and dedicated to special populations, including ELLs and students with disabilities, as well as students with social and emotional needs. Some participants also reported a lack of sufficient resources for all students, including books and technology. Though many school-based staff members also mentioned a recent implementation of new technology, including interactive whiteboards in many classrooms, others cited a lack of available resources to support updated technology, thus rendering these tools useless.

## Challenges and Approaches to Improvement

The findings included in this report, as well as the information from other sources such as the LPS turnaround plan and the 2011 *Lawrence Public Schools District Review*, indicate that LPS faces several significant challenges as it embarks on implementing its turnaround plan. Common themes that emerged include the following:

* **Increasing expectations across the district.** Focus group participants and interviewees perceived low levels of expectations at the district, school, classroom, and student levels. Specifically, all groups of respondents expressed perceptions of a need to hold themselves and others—district leaders, school administrators, teachers, and students—to higher performance expectations. For example, district administrators believed they could expect more of principals, and teachers believed they could expect more of themselves and students. In addition, some teachers mentioned feeling that they were not respected professionally. Teachers also voiced a desire to have more responsibility and flexibility to decide how best to meet the needs of their students.
* **Using time effectively.** Teachers in the focus groups indicated that they desired more time in the day to allow them to collaborate with colleagues to improve student outcomes. More collaboration, they noted, would help them better understand the individual needs of their students and design approaches to meet those needs. According to teachers’ perceptions, the amount of time designated for collaboration was inconsistent within and among schools.
* **Meeting the needs of special populations.** Across the focus groups, students, teachers, and school administrators shared concerns about the lack of targeted resources and expert support for students with special needs, most importantly for ELLs and students with disabilities. Participants perceived a lack of specialized training for general education teachers in meeting the needs of these students and they perceived a need for more specialized personnel dedicated to meeting these needs. Participants also mentioned that the LPS district central office and schools need to provide more assistance to students in poverty and students needing social and emotional support.
* **Clarifying roles of the LPS district central office and schools in supporting turnaround efforts.** According to the perceptions of respondents in the focus groups and interviews, different stakeholders have opposing ideas about what level of the system—school or district leadership—should provide guidance and support at the school level. For example, responses from teachers and school administrators seemed to suggest that they needed—and in some cases were waiting for—support from the LPS district central office to help meet the needs of students in their schools. In contrast, responses from district officials seemed to indicate that they believed school administrators and teachers should be making such decisions at the school level. Furthermore, district officials noted that in their view, recent attempts to empower schools to make decisions have not been successful.
* **Strengthening communication between district and school staff members.** Many of the comments related to the operation of LPS prior to the receivership suggested that inconsistent communication between the district and school-based staff members was common. In some cases, participants noted that there was no information shared around key issues such as the date for the first day of school or training dates for a new ESL program that was being implemented. In addition, many teachers and school administrators indicated that, more recently, they did not receive sufficient communication from the LPS district central office regarding the receivership.
* **Identifying school needs and distributing existing resources to meet those needs.** Some school-based participants perceived that supports provided to schools sometimes did not meet the needs of those particular schools. For instance, some students reported being forced to share books or use outdated editions with missing pages, while at the same time teachers and students praised recently updated technology in schools. In terms of professional development, teachers noted that the LPS district central office offered various activities but that the opportunities were not tailored to specific needs. For example, teachers mentioned having access to data but not knowing how to interpret those data.

# Conclusion

This analysis of focus group and interview responses is one of a series of three baseline reports designed to provide more information on the conditions that existed in LPS prior to and at the start of the receivership, as well as the early stages of the implementation of the LPS turnaround plan. In this report, we presented perspectives of students, teachers, school administrators, and district officials and identified several areas where respondents' perceptions appeared to be in agreement. We also uncovered some differences among and between groups of respondents on topics such as level of teacher autonomy and quality of professional development.

Two forthcoming baseline reports will provide additional data on LPS. For one of the reports, we observed 60 LPS classrooms in November and December 2012 using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tool. These observations enabled us to gather information on central conditions of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support in LPS classrooms at the beginning of the implementation of the LPS turnaround plan. For the third report, we conducted further analyses of TELL Mass data from spring 2012 to examine school-by-school results.

Taken as a whole, these reports may held provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex conditions in LPS at this critical juncture. For example, professional development was praised by some focus group participants as being plentiful and valuable while other participants noted that professional development was not targeted at their specific needs. In addition, results from the TELL Mass survey indicate that the majority of teachers say professional development is not differentiated or tailored to the needs of individual teachers. Gaining a fuller understanding of the conditions that existed in LPS prior to and at the beginning of receivership will provide insight into these complex situations and will help establish a baseline for evaluating the district’s turnaround efforts.

# Appendix A: Student Focus Group Protocol

**Lawrence Receivership Baseline Data Collection**

**Protocol: Student Focus Group**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| School: | Facilitator: |
| Participants: | Date/Time: |

Introduction

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and I am with an independent research organization called American Institutes for Research. Thanks for taking the time to speak with me today. Before we start, I’d like to provide a little background on our work, and answer any questions you might have for me.

We are doing this work as part of a study for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. However, being an independent research group means that all of the information we collect is confidential—that we can write reports but that we don’t tell anyone from the state, your district, your school, your teachers, or your friends about who said what during these conversations. We can only summarize what different groups of students in different schools have said. We are having conversations with groups of students, just like this one, with students in six different Lawrence schools to hear about what you think works well in your schools and what you think could be improved. You have volunteered to participate, and this means that you don’t have to answer any question you don’t want to and if you want to stop participating at any time, just let us know.

We want to repeat that anything discussed today will be kept confidential and only used for the research. For example, your name will never be used. Our reports may identify the schools that we visit, and will summarize findings across those schools, but will not mention the names of the students we met with in these schools. Since this meeting is private, I’d also like to ask that none of you share what you hear in this room with others outside the group, so everyone can feel safe being honest.

This session will give you a chance to express your opinions about your school. We want you to feel comfortable in saying what you really think and what you really feel. We hope all of you will give us your ideas since each of your opinions is important to us. It is a huge help to the research team to hear what students think since you know more about what is working and not working in your schools than anyone else. You really are the experts when it comes to what helps you learn the best and what could be done to help you learn better. There are no right or wrong answers. You might disagree with each other, and that’s okay since different people often have different experiences and different opinions. It will help me if you speak clearly and if you will speak one at a time. This group discussion should last about 60 minutes.

If you don’t mind, I would like to record this group simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our research team will hear or have access to the recording; it would just be so we can make sure we don’t miss anything or hear anything wrong from today’s conversation. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Do I have your permission to record our conversation? Do you have any questions before we start? [Note: If the respondents agree to be taped, turn on the tape recorder and note that you need to ask again, for the record, if you have their permission to tape the focus groups. If the respondents wish not to be recorded, take notes but do not proceed with recording.]

Now, I’d like to get started. There are several main areas that we will discuss today. First, I’d like to talk about what works and what doesn’t work in your school. Then, I’d like to discuss a couple of other topics. Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Lawrence Receivership Baseline Data Collection**

**Core Questions: Student Focus Group**

Introductions (5 minutes)

I’d like to start by having each person introduce themselves and tell me what grade you are in and how long you’ve been at this school. We can start with anyone. [Note: As an ice breaker, the facilitator can ask students to also share one thing they are excited to do this summer.]

Core Questions (20–25 minutes)

We’d like to know what you think about your school in general. How would you describe your school to a friend who goes to a different school?

What are some things your school does well to help students succeed?

What are some things your school could do better to help students succeed?

**Lawrence Receivership Baseline Data Collection**

**Specific Topic Area Questions: Student Focus Group**

Specific Topic Area Questions (30–35 minutes)

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| Educator Staffing Quality |
| 1. I would like you to think about one or two teachers who you think of as good teachers. What do you think makes them good teachers?   Probes, if necessary:   * What are some things your teachers do in class to help students learn? * What are some things you think the teachers in your school could do better to help students learn? * How would you describe the principal of your school?   Probes, if necessary:   * What are some things your principal does to help students learn or to make your school a good place to learn? * What are some things you think the principal in your school could do better?   Culture of High Expectations for Students and Staff   1. Do students at your school have high expectations for themselves? How do you know?   Probes, if necessary:   * + - Is there a sense of school pride at [school]?     - Do other people outside of [school] think it’s a good place to go? Why or why not?  1. Are you and your classmates challenged by your teachers to do well? Do you feel that your teachers set high expectations for you and other students?   Probes, if necessary:   * + - Do they expect you to do well in school academically?     - Do they expect you to behave well in school?     - (HS students only) Do they expect you to graduate from high school?     - (HS students only) Do you think teachers have different expectations for different kinds of students? |
| Student Supports |
| 1. What do you think are the most important supports or resources your school provides you as a student? These can be in-class or outside of class and can be things like tutors or mathematics/reading coaches, before-school or afterschool activities, extracurriculars, or anything else you can think of. Why are these supports or resources important to you? 2. Are there other resources or activities you think your school should provide? If yes, what are they and why should your school provide them? 3. How do you know if you’re doing well in school? How do you know what academic skills or topics (e.g., writing or addition or algebra) you need to improve on?   Probes, if necessary:   * + - Does your teacher or other school staff talk to you about how you are doing? * How are you tested? How often?   + - Do you think your tests are fair? Why or why not?  1. If you are having difficulty in your classes, who can you turn to for help (e.g., teacher, another student, parent or family member, etc.)? If you have turned to someone for this kind of school help, has this person been helpful? Why or why not?   Probes, if necessary:   * + - Do you have someone you can turn to for help?     - How about tutoring? |
| 1. If you are having difficulty at school that is NOT related to your schoolwork or classes, who can you turn to for help (e.g., teacher, counselor, another student, parent or family member, etc.)? If you have turned to someone for this kind of school help, has this person been helpful? Why or why not?   Probes, if necessary:   * Do you have someone you can turn to for help not related to academics?   Transition to High School (MS/HS students only) |
| 1. What does your school do to support students’ transition from middle to high school?   Probes, if necessary:   * (MS students only) Is anyone going to high school next year? If so, do you feel ready for high school in terms of the classes and schoolwork? Do you feel ready for high school in terms of how you will interact with other students and with your teachers? * (HS students only) Tell me about your transition from middle to high school. Was it hard for you or easy? Can you tell me why? * What are some ways your school could help/could have helped you make the transition to high school more easily or more smoothly?  1. What would you like to do after you graduate from high school? How do you think your experiences in high school will help you achieve your goals? |
| Parent Communication |
| 1. How often do your teachers contact your parents or guardian? And for what reasons? How often do your parents or guardians contact your teachers? And for what reasons? What kind of reaction do your parents or guardians get from your teachers when they reach them? 2. Does your family speak only a language other than English at home? If they do speak a language other than English at home, do you get letters from your school to take home that are in languages that your parents or guardians can read?   Conditions for Learning   1. Do you feel your school is a safe and comfortable place to learn? Why or why not?   Probes, if necessary:   * + - Are there many disruptions in your classes?     - Are there any problems associated with substance abuse or violence in your school? |

# Appendix B: Teacher Focus Group Protocol

**Lawrence Receivership Baseline Data Collection**

**Protocol: Teacher Focus Group**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| School: | Facilitator: |
| Participants: | Date/Time: |

Introduction

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and I am with an independent nonprofit research organization called American Institutes for Research. Thanks again for taking the time to speak with me this afternoon. Before we start, I’d like to provide a little background on our work, and answer any questions you might have for me.

As you know, in January of this year, Massachusetts Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester appointed Jeffrey C. Riley as receiver for the Lawrence Public School District, and on May 30, 2012, Mr. Riley released his plan for improving the district. To help evaluate the implementation and outcomes of the plan, we are collecting information from teachers, students and school leaders, as well as key district stakeholders, about what Lawrence Public Schools are currently like. We are conducting several teacher focus groups, like this one, to discuss topics related to successes and challenges at the school and district as well as some other areas of interest. I anticipate that the focus group will take about 60 minutes.

I want to assure you that all information obtained today will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, and will not attribute any quotes to individuals. Our study may identify the schools that we visit, and will summarize findings across those schools, but will not disclose the names of the staff we met with in these schools.

[Note: Pass out description of focus groups.] This document outlines some of the issues I’ve mentioned with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Please take a minute to read the description of the study and let me know if you have any questions.

If you don’t mind, I would like to record this group simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording; it would just be for the research team’s reference. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Do I have your permission to record our conversation? Do you have any questions before we start? [Note: If the respondents agree to be taped, turn on the tape recorder and note that you need to ask again, for the record, if you have their permission to tape the focus groups. If the respondents wish not to be recorded, take notes but do not proceed with recording.]

Now, I’d like to get started. There are several main areas that we will discuss today. First, I’d like to talk about successes and challenges at the school and district level. Second, I’d like to discuss a couple of additional topic areas related to Lawrence Public Schools.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Lawrence Receivership Baseline Data Collection**

**Core Questions: Teacher Focus Group**

Introductions (5 minutes)

I’d like to start by having each person introduce themselves and talk a little bit about your background, including how long you’ve been a teacher, how long you’ve worked at this school, and what your role(s) is at this school. We can start with anyone.

Core Questions (25–30 minutes)

1. I know that every school is unique. In a few sentences, can you describe this school to someone, like me, who has never visited the school before?
2. What are your school’s most important strengths (with regard to improving student academic performance)?
3. What are your school’s most important challenges (with regard to improving student academic performance)? (For lower performing schools) To what would you attribute your school’s (history of) low performance?
4. What are your district’s most important strengths (with regard to improving student academic performance)?
5. What are your district’s most important challenges (with regard to improving student academic performance)? To what would you attribute the district’s history of low performance?
6. What are two or three things your district should do to help schools improve student academic performance?

**Lawrence Receivership Baseline Data Collection**

**Specific Topic Area Questions: Teacher Focus Group**

Specific Topic Area Questions (30–35 minutes)

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| People and Partners—Who are the key players in LPS? |
| Educator Staffing Quality |
| 1. What are some of the key strengths you believe teachers in your school have? What are the main areas in need of improvement? 2. What are some of the key strengths you believe administrators in your school have? What are the main areas in need of improvement? 3. Are the working conditions in the district/individual schools supportive of educator effectiveness? If not, what is needed to improve working conditions? 4. Is there anything else that you feel is important for me to know about the teachers or administrators in your school? |
| Development of Existing Internal Capacity   1. How much and what kinds of professional development have you received that focus explicitly and concretely on instructional practices and skills? How much and how often does instructional professional development involve follow-up programs and support activities to support your use of new skills in the classroom? |
| 1. How much and what kind of guidance and support do you receive related to working with high-need students (e.g., referrals to available resources), including English language learners? Students with disabilities? Students with behavioral issues?   Probes, if necessary:   * + How relevant is this support to your needs and the needs of your students?   + What kind of support, if any, do you receive to apply what you learn in the classroom?   + What other types of support for working with high-need students would you like to have?  1. What kinds of leadership opportunities does your school offer? How are teachers identified for these roles? 2. Have you ever been involved in leadership development activities sponsored by the district? If yes, please describe. 3. What could the district provide you with, professional development or anything else, that would help you as a teacher improve student’s academic achievement? |
| District Leadership |
| 1. How well do you think leaders at the district level understand your school’s needs? 2. To what extent/in what ways are systems at the district level supporting or hindering your school? |
| Additional Comments |
| Is there anything else you would like to share? |

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| Autonomy and Accountability—Who is responsible for student outcomes and how are they evaluated? |
| Educator Evaluation and Accountability |
| 1. Overall, how much autonomy do you feel you have over the instructional strategies you use? Curriculum? Classroom management? 2. How important is it to you to have autonomy in any/all of those areas? 3. How do you assess if you’re doing a good job of teaching? What do you do if you determine you didn’t do a good job of teaching a lesson or a particular student? What do you wish you could do? 4. How well-informed are teachers about the process used to evaluate them? Do you think the evaluation system accurately and fairly measures your skills as a teacher?   Probes, if necessary:   * Does your principal use only formal classroom observations? Or both formal and informal? * What happens after the evaluations? Do you ever have direct conversations with your principal or any other building leaders about what they have observed in your classroom instruction and how you might make changes, for example, individualize instruction for particular students? |
| Coaching Quality and Accountability |
| 1. Does your school have academic coaches or other specialized support staff? If yes, describe how they support teachers. 2. Do you believe that the coaches are a good fit for your school in terms of the following:  * Expertise/experience of support providers? * Intensity of support (days/hours on-site)? * Aligned, targeted, and comprehensive?  1. How are coaches evaluated?   Probes, if necessary:   * Is there a system in place for teachers to provide feedback on coach quality? Coach performance? |
| Additional Comments |
| Is there anything else that you feel is important for me to know about the way in which your school (or the district) holds staff accountable? |

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| Student Supports—What resources are provided, both in and out of the classroom, to support student success? |
| Special Needs/High-Risk Students |
| 1. What do you think are the most important student supports your school provides? Your district? (These can be academic or nonacademic.) 2. What programs/supports does your school have in place for special needs and/or high/at-risk students?    * English language learners?    * Students with disabilities?    * Students who are new to the district? New to the United States?    * Students who are at risk for dropping out? Have already dropped out? 3. Overall, how well do you think these students are being served?What resources would you need to better serve these students? |
| Transition to High School (MS/HS Teacher FGs only) |
| 1. What programs/supports does your school have to support students’ transition from middle to high school? How well do you think these programs/supports meet students’ needs?   Probes, if necessary:   * Are students academically prepared for high school? Socially? Behaviorally? * What are the primary challenges students face when making the transition from middle to high school? |
| External Partners/Organizations |
| 1. What programs/supports are provided by external partners or organizations (e.g., Boys and Girls Club, mental health services, etc.)? How do teachers learn about these partners/organizations? How would you go about securing supports for your student(s)? 2. Do you believe that the partners/organizations are a good fit for your school in terms of the following:  * Expertise/experience of support providers? * Intensity of support (days/hours on-site)? |
| Parent Communication |
| 1. How would you characterize the relationship between your school and the parents or guardians of your students?   Probes, if necessary:   * How often do you as a teacher contact parents? * Has your principal expressed an expectation for how often and when parents should be contacted? * How often does your school hold parent and community events? * What kinds of opportunities are there for parent involvement at your school?  1. How would you characterize the communication from your school to parents and guardians?   Probes, if necessary:   * Do you have a method to determine if parents/guardian receive the information sent home? * Are you aware of how many families of children in your class speak only a language other than English at home? * Do you make available written information to parents in a language(s) they can read? * Do you have any translation services available to parents?   Conditions for Learning   1. What are the primary conditions at school that you perceive as supporting and/or hindering students’ readiness to learn?   Probes, if necessary:   * What does your school do to help students be ready to learn? * What could your school do to improve student readiness to learn? |
| Level of District and Building Strategic Focus |
| 1. Are the programs or initiatives that are currently being implemented in your school in line with a strategic plan for your school or district’s improvement?   Probes, if necessary:   * + Is it clear how various programs relate to one another? |
| Additional Comments |
| Is there anything else that you feel is important for me to know about the student supports your school provides? |

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| Time, Data and Culture—How do staff use time and data to measure outcomes and establish a culture of excellence? |
| Culture of High Expectations for Students and Staff |
| 1. In a sentence, how would you describe your school culture?    * Do students have high expectations for themselves? How do you know?    * Do staff have high expectations for students? How do you know?    * Do staff have high expectations for themselves? How do you know?    * Does the school leader have high expectations for the school staff and how do you know? 2. What are the primary conditions you perceive as supporting a culture of high expectations for students and staff? Hindering? |
| Formative Assessments and Data Use |
| 1. What kind of assessments do you use in your class to monitor student progress?   Probes, if necessary:   * + What is the nature of these assessments?   + How frequently are they used?   + Are there school- or district-level requirements for regular student assessment?  1. How if at all, are formative assessments used? (Note: Formative assessments are activities employed by teachers during the learning process in order to modify teaching and learning activities to improve student achievement.) 2. What, if any, resources do you receive to help develop useful formative assessments? 3. How, if at all, do you use data and performance management tools? What kind of training is provided? |
| Learning Time   1. Would you want extra time in the day or week with your students, and, if so, how would you use it? 2. What would the ideal daily schedule with your students look like, and in what ways is that different from the current schedule? 3. Do you currently use any increased learning time strategies (e.g. longer core blocks, Academic Leagues, Acceleration Academies, enrichment electives, Saturday sessions, etc.)?   School Structure and Reform |
| 1. Based on your school’s performance in past year or two, were any major changes made in 2011–12 to improve performance? If yes, can you describe the key changes? Were they effective? 2. (HS FGs only) How, if at all, do you think the restructuring of the high schools has affected student outcomes? |
| Additional Comments |
| Is there anything else that you feel is important for me know about any of the topics we have just discussed (learning time, data use, and/or culture)? |

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# Appendix C: School Administrator Focus Group Protocol

**Lawrence Receivership Baseline Data Collection**

**Protocol: School Administrator Focus Group**

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| Schools: | Facilitator: |
| Participants: | Date/Time: |

Introduction

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and I am with an independent nonprofit research organization called American Institutes for Research. Thanks again for taking the time to speak with me this afternoon. Before we start, I’d like to provide a little background on our work, and answer any questions you might have for me.

As you know, in January of this year, Massachusetts Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester appointed Jeffrey C. Riley as receiver for the Lawrence Public School District, and on May 30, 2012, Mr. Riley released his plan for improving the district. To help evaluate the implementation and outcomes of the plan, we are collecting information from teachers, students and school leaders, as well as key district stakeholders, about what Lawrence Public Schools are currently like. We have conducted teacher focus groups, student focus groups, and district administrator interviews to discuss topics related to successes and challenges at the school and district as well as some other areas of interest. I anticipate that this focus group will take about 60 minutes.

I want to assure you that all information obtained today will be kept confidential and will only be used for the purposes of this study. We will not use your name, and will not attribute any quotes to individuals. Our study may identify the schools that we visit, and will summarize findings across those schools, but will not disclose the names of the staff members we met with in these schools.

[Note: Pass out description of focus groups] This document outlines some of the issues I’ve mentioned with regard to anonymity and confidentiality. Please take a minute to read the description of the study and let me know if you have any questions.

If you don’t mind, I would like to record this group simply for note-taking purposes. No one outside of our data collection team will hear or have access to the recording; it would just be for the research team’s reference. If you would like me to turn off the recorder at any point, just let me know. Do I have your permission to record our conversation? Do you have any questions before we start? [Note: If the respondents agree to be taped, turn on the tape recorder and note that you need to ask again, for the record, if you have their permission to tape the focus groups. If the respondents wish not to be recorded, take notes but do not proceed with recording.]

Now, I’d like to get started. There are several main areas that we will discuss today. First, I’d like to talk about successes and challenges at the school and district level. Second, I’d like to discuss a couple of additional topic areas related to Lawrence Public Schools.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

**Lawrence Receivership Baseline Data Collection**

**Core Questions: School Administrator Focus Group**

Introductions (5 minutes)

I’d like to start by having each person introduce themselves and talk a little bit about your background, including what your role(s) is at this school and how long you’ve worked in that position, as well as how long you’ve worked in Lawrence. If you have worked in another school in Lawrence or in another school system in a similar role or another capacity, please share that, too. We can start with anyone.

Core Questions (20–25 minutes)

1. I know that every school is unique. In a few sentences, can you describe this school to someone, like me, who has never visited the school before?
2. What are your school’s most important strengths (with regard to improving student academic performance)?
3. What are your school’s most important challenges (with regard to improving student academic performance)? (For lower performing schools) To what would you attribute your school’s (history of) low performance?
4. What are your district’s most important strengths (with regard to improving student academic performance)?
5. What are your district’s most important challenges (with regard to improving student academic performance)? To what would you attribute the district’s history of low performance?
6. What are two or three things your district should do to help schools improve student academic performance?

**Lawrence Receivership Baseline Data Collection**

**Specific Topic Area Questions: School Administrator Focus Group**

Specific Topic Area Questions (30–35 minutes)

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| People and Partners—Who are the key players in LPS? |
| Educator Staffing Quality |
| 1. Overall, how would you describe teacher quality in your school?   Probes, if necessary:   * + - In what ways and why does teacher quality vary in your school? By experience in teaching? Experience in the district? Grade level or strength of the grade level team? Other factors? * What are some of the key strengths you believe teachers in your school have? * What are some of the areas you’d like to see teachers in your school improve?  1. What, if anything, does the district currently do to help you provide supportive school working conditions? What is needed to improve working conditions for your teachers and yourself as a building administrator? |
| Development of Existing Internal Capacity   1. How much and what kinds of professional development have you received that focus explicitly and concretely on instructional practices and skills? How much and how often does instructional professional development involve follow up and/or support activities to specifically facilitate use of new skills in the classroom or your daily work? |
| 1. How much and what kind of guidance and support does the district provide related to working with high-needs students (e.g., referrals to available resources), including English language learners? Students with disabilities? Students with behavioral issues?   Probes, if necessary:   * + How relevant is this support to your staff members’ needs and the needs of your students?   + What other types of support for working with high-needs students would you or your staff members like to have?  1. What kinds of leadership opportunities does your school offer teachers? How are teachers identified for these roles? 2. Have you ever been involved in leadership development activities sponsored by the district? If yes, please describe. 3. What could the district provide you with as a building administrator, professional development or anything else, that would help you improve student’s academic achievement? |
| District Leadership |
| 1. How well do you think leaders at the district level understand your school’s needs? 2. To what extent/in what ways are systems at the district level supporting or hindering your school? 3. Does the district allocate resources in a way that aligns with and supports the highest priority student needs? Staff members’ needs? |
| Staff Turnover |
| 1. Prior to the 2011–12 school year, what do you think were the most common reasons teachers left your school? Are these the same reasons teachers have left your school within the past year? If no, what are the differences? 2. Are there any strategies (e.g., incentives) you believe would help identify and retain high performing teachers? |

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| Autonomy and Accountability—Who is responsible for student outcomes and how are they evaluated? |
| Educator Evaluation and Accountability |
| 1. Overall, how much autonomy do teachers have over the instructional strategies they use? Curriculum? Classroom management? 2. As a school administrator, how important is it to you for teachers to have autonomy in any/all of those areas? 3. How well-informed are teachers about the process used to evaluate them? Do you think the evaluation system accurately and fairly measures their skills as a teacher?   Probes, if necessary:   * Do you use only formal classroom observations? Or both formal and informal? What happens after the evaluations? Do you ever have direct conversations with your staff members about what you have observed in their classroom instruction?  1. Overall, how much autonomy do you feel you have as a school administrator in decisions related to your school? In what areas? In what areas do you wish you had more autonomy? |
| Coaching Quality and Accountability |
| 1. Does your school have academic coaches or other specialized support staff? If yes, describe how they support teachers. 2. Do you believe that the coaches are a good fit for your school in terms of the following:  * Expertise/experience of support providers? * Intensity of support (days/hours on-site)? * Aligned, targeted, and comprehensive?  1. How are coaches evaluated?   Probes, if necessary:   * Is there a system in place for teachers to provide feedback on coach quality? Coach performance? |
| Additional Comments |
| Is there anything else that you feel is important for me to know about the way in which your school (or the district) holds staff members accountable? |

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| Student Supports—What resources are provided, both in and out of the classroom, to support student success? |
| Special Needs/High-Risk Students |
| 1. What do you think are the most important student supports your school provides? Your district? (These can be academic or nonacademic.) 2. What programs/supports does your school have in place for special needs and/or high/at-risk students?    * English language learners?    * Students with disabilities?    * Students who are new to the district? New to the United States?    * Students who are at-risk for dropping out? Have already dropped out? 3. Overall, how well do you think these students are being served?What resources would you need to better serve these students? |
| Transition to High School (mostly relevant for MS/HS administrators) |
| 1. What programs/supports does your school have to support students’ transition from middle to high school? How well do you think these programs/supports meet students’ needs?   Probes, if necessary:   * Are students academically prepared for high school? Socially? Behaviorally? * What are the primary challenges students face when making the transition from middle to high school? |
| External Partners/Organizations |
| 1. What programs/supports are provided by external partners or organizations (e.g., Boys and Girls Club, mental health services, etc.)? How do teachers learn about these partners/organizations and the services they provide? Are there clear systems in place for teachers to go about securing supports for their student(s)? Are these systems well communicated to teachers? 2. Do you believe that the partners/organizations are a good fit for your school in terms of the following:  * Expertise/experience of support providers? * Intensity of support (days/hours on-site)? |
| Parent Communication |
| 1. How would you characterize the relationship between your school and the parents or guardians of your students?   Probes, if necessary:   * How often do you contact parents? How often do teachers contact parents? * Do you have an expectation for how often and when parents should be contacted by teachers? By other staff, including yourself or assistant principals? * How often does your school hold parent and community events? * What kinds of opportunities are there for parent involvement at your school?  1. How would you characterize the communication from your school to parents and guardians?   Probes, if necessary:   * Do you have a method to determine if parents/guardians receive the information sent home? * Are you aware of how many families of children in your class speak only a language other than English at home? * Do you make available written information to parents in a language(s) they can read? In a timely fashion? * Do you have any translation services available to parents?   Conditions for Learning   1. What are the primary conditions at school that you perceive as supporting and/or hindering students’ readiness to learn?   Probes, if necessary:   * What does your school do to help students be ready to learn? * What could your school do to improve student readiness to learn? |
| Level of District and Building Strategic Focus |
| 1. Can you describe any additional programs or initiatives, which we haven’t already talked about, that are currently being implemented in your school?   Probes, if necessary:   * + Are the programs/initiatives in line with a strategic plan for your school or district’s improvement?   + Is it clear how various programs relate to one another? |
| Additional Comments |
| Is there anything else that you feel is important for me to know about the student supports your school provides? |

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| Time, Data and Culture—How do staff members use time and data to measure outcomes and establish a culture of excellence? |
| Culture of High Expectations for Students and Staff |
| 1. In a sentence, how would you describe your school culture?    * Do students have high expectations for themselves? How do you know?    * Do staff members have high expectations for students? How do you know?    * Do staff members have high expectations for themselves? How do you know? 2. What are the primary conditions you perceive as supporting a culture of high expectations for students and staff members? Hindering? 3. Does your school have a vision or mission statement? If yes, how well do the students and staff members embody that mission? |
| Formative Assessments and Data Use |
| 1. What kind of assessments do you use to monitor student progress?   Probes, if necessary:   * + What is the nature of these assessments?   + How frequently are they used?   + Are there school- or district-level requirements for regular student assessment?  1. How, if at all, do you (or your staff members) use data and performance management tools? What kind of training is provided? |
| Learning Time   1. Would you want extra time in the day or week with your students, and how would you use it? 2. What would the ideal daily schedule with your students look like, and in what ways is that different from the current schedule? 3. Do you currently use any increased learning time strategies (e.g., longer core blocks, Academic Leagues, Acceleration Academies, enrichment electives, Saturday sessions, etc.)?   School Structure and Reform |
| 1. Based on your school’s performance in past year or two, were any major changes made in 2011–12 to improve performance? If yes, can you describe the key changes? Were they effective? 2. How, if at all, do you think the restructuring of the high schools has affected student outcomes? |
| Additional Comments |
| Is there anything else that you feel is important for me know about any of the topics we have just discussed (learning time, data use, and/or culture)? |

# Appendix D: Focus Group and Interview Data Codebook

**Lawrence Receivership Baseline Data Codes**

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| **Major Topic Area** | **Topical Codes** |
| **Autonomy and Accountability** | Autonomy |
| Central Office |
| Evaluation (of teachers) |
| **People and Partners** | Coaching |
| Collaboration |
| Communication |
| Community |
| Competition |
| Continuing Ed |
| Leadership Opportunity |
| Parents |
| Partners |
| Principal |
| Professional Development |
| Programming |
| Staff |
| Teachers |
| Union |
| **Support and Engagement** | ELL |
| Extracurriculars |
| Health |
| High Risk Students |
| HS Transition |
| Nonacademic |
| SPED |
| **Time, Data, and Expectations** | Data |
| Discipline |
| Expectations |
| Helping Succeed |
| Monitoring Progress |
| Testing |
| Time |
| **Context** | Class Size |
| Curriculum |
| Facility |
| Funding |
| Instruction |
| Lawrence |
| Receivership |
| Resources |
| School Atmosphere |
| Stereotypes |
| Students |

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2. Bowles (Therriault), S., Churchill, C., Effrat, E., & McDermott, K. (2002). *School and district intervention: A decision-making framework for policymakers*. Amherst, MA: Center for Education Policy on behalf of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2012, May). *Lawrence Public Schools turnaround plan.* Malden, MA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/apa/sss/turnaround/level5/LawrencePlan.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Only schools operating in 2011–12 were considered for the sample. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Atkinson, J. (2012, March). Lawrence, MA: City of the damned. *Boston Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.bostonmagazine.com/articles/2012/02/city-of-the-damned-lawrence-massachusetts/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (n.d.). *District profile: Lawrence*. Retrieved March 1, 2013 from <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=01490000&orgtypecode=5&leftNavId=305&&fycode=2012> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Although teacher evaluation methods prior to the receivership did not involve data analysis, the Receiver’s review process did. At the time focus groups were conducted, there was a pending statewide teacher evaluation system that was designed to include data analysis, the nature of which was to be determined by each district. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
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