



SCHOOL
SYNERGY

FINAL REPORT

Jefferson Elementary School

On-Site School Review

October 2009

Prepared and conducted for:

Jefferson Elementary School

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The **On-site School Review** provides schools with an in-depth analysis of areas strongly tied to increasing student learning and achievement. The review team extends its appreciation to Jefferson Elementary administrators, staff members, students, and parents for the opportunity to work together on this on-site school review, which took place in September 2009.

Section I: The Process

Effectiveness Indicators

The center of the school review process is the Effectiveness Indicators. These research-based indicators provide the organizational structure for the on-site school review. A synthesis of this research is found in *The High-Performing School: Benchmarking the 10 Indicators of Effectiveness*, © Solution Tree Press, 2009. The effectiveness indicators that Jefferson selected for benchmarking were:

- Effectiveness Indicator 2: Instructional Program
- Effectiveness Indicator 3: Student Assessment
- Effectiveness Indicator 4: School Leadership
- Effectiveness Indicator 7: Student Connectedness, Engagement, and Readiness

Tools and Processes

The effectiveness indicators are used to compare current school performance to that which is found in effective schools. Each effectiveness indicator is broken down into components called “characteristics” and “traits.” To determine where on the effectiveness continuum a school is currently performing, the review team collects evidence from various sources, including surveys, documents, and observations conducted during the on-site review. The different sources yield information about different characteristics and traits of the effectiveness indicators. For example, each question on a survey is tied to a specific trait.

Document Review

Documents from which data were drawn include:

- State School Reports (2007 and 2008)
- Techno – Technology based Mathematics and Reading Assessment reports
- Textbooks and supplemental material
- Parent Handbook
- School Board minutes
- Attendance data
- Grant applications
- School, Community, and Student Profile (draft)
- Apogee Curriculum maps

- Administrative policies
- Report cards
- Afterschool Program Calendar
- Expected Schoolwide Learning Results
- Samples of student work
- Strategic Plan

Student Work

Student work provides valuable insights into the school’s instructional program. Prior to the on-site portion of the review, all teachers were asked to collect and score written student work (both in class and homework) over a one-week period. Student work was received from 16 regular education classroom teachers and one special education teacher. A total of 158 assignments were reviewed. This work was then analyzed to determine its level of cognitive demand and its rigor in relation to state standards.

The Visit

Central to the review is the time the school review team spends at the school site. At Jefferson Elementary School two team members spent three full days on-site and four additional days in data analysis and writing of the final report. The team has an extensive background in school improvement, coupled with a deep knowledge of the effectiveness indicators and the on-site review processes.

During the on-site portion of the review, the team:

- Collected and analyzed surveys from:
 - 26 classified staff members
 - 112 parents
 - 28 teachers/administrators
 - 63 students (5th and 6th grade)
- Conducted structured interviews with:
 - 21 teachers
 - 8 administrator/specialists
 - 16 students during classroom observations
- Held 2 focus groups with classified staff (instructional and non-instructional)
- Conducted 16 classroom observations, allowing team members to observe 15 to 30 minutes of instruction in each classroom. Observations focused primarily on mathematics lessons.
- Held 2 parent focus groups attended by 19 parents of 33 students currently attending Jefferson.

Evidence and Commentary for Effectiveness Indicator 2: Instructional Program

The instructional program is the reason for which the school exists – its core mission. In this area, the team looked at the instructional program as a whole including its rigor (providing access, challenge, and support for all students), its flexibility (providing individualized tools, strategies, and assessments for all students), and its supportive teaching components (providing curricular cohesion, professional collaboration, and instructional leadership).

Central to an effective instructional program is a commitment to all children making substantial learning gains in every grade. At Jefferson, administrators, staff, parents and students strongly share this belief as shown by surveys of parents (90%), teachers (100%), and students (94%). This was affirmed in focus groups and interviews.

Learning targets were clearly communicated to students and parents. When asked about the rigor of those instructional targets, teachers strongly believe (96%) that students find their classes “rigorous and challenging.” Parents and students however were split in their assessment of the degree of challenge in schoolwork with 58% of parents responding positively to the survey question “My child's schoolwork is challenging,” and 64% of 5th and 6th grade students responding that they found their schoolwork “challenging.”

In classroom observations instruction overall was found to be of high quality. Seventy seven percent (77%) of observed instruction was judged as rigorous in relation to state standards. Questions of students were frequently aimed at higher order thinking skills as defined by Bloom’s Taxonomy. The analysis of written assignments completed in-class or as homework showed that 90% of the student work was aimed at grade level appropriate or higher content, only 9% of that work targeted higher order thinking skills.

Research has identified tight coordination of instruction and frequent communication between specialists and general education teachers as an important component in ensuring all children learn to high levels. Jefferson teachers, specialists, and educational assistants indicated in interviews that in many cases this coordination should be strengthened. Teachers in interviews and surveys commented on their desire for time to meet with other teachers for shared planning and collaboration. While 46% of the teachers said it was always or most often true that, “I have time to meet with other teachers” in interviews, teachers described this collaboration as limited to within grade level teams and rarely between grade levels. In interviews several staff members mentioned a lack of coordination and collaboration between specialists and general education teachers as a problem. While some teachers mentioned weekly early release occasionally being used for instructional collaboration, teachers stated that rarely was this time used for instructional planning and coordination. This aspect includes the special education program where teachers mentioned that there is “no specific time for special education planning” between general education teachers and teachers serving special education students.

In several instances, the times in which students were receiving pull-out remediation coincided with the time the rest of the class was receiving primary instruction in the same subject. Research has demonstrated that pull-out intensive interventions are most effective when they are provided *in addition to, not in lieu of* instruction occurring in the general education classroom. In the research based model, the remediation works to both help children catch up with their peers and additionally to prepare them, such as through the use of advance organizers, to more successfully take part in upcoming general classroom instruction in that subject. In order for these effective practices to be in place, communication and tight coordination is essential.

In effective schools, teachers have organized instruction to support clearly articulated and communication learning targets. This can be seen when students know why what they are learning is important and can explain where they are in the progression of steps to meet those learning targets. This characteristic was present to a high degree at Jefferson. Students know why what they are learning is important and during interviews were able to explain how what they were studying could be useful outside of school. Said one student about her mathematics lessons, “I already use it to figure things out at home – like how to divide pizza so everyone gets the same number of pieces.”

The more engaged in their learning students are, the more they will profit from the lesson. When coupled with the high degree of rigor, this is a powerful combination. Classroom instruction at Jefferson in all classes was typified by a high degree of student engagement. In classroom observations, nearly all observed students (92%) were attentive to their teachers and involved in their work assignments. Students were well behaved and classroom environments conducive to student learning. In observations, students knew the classroom routines and with few exceptions needed little prodding to move seamlessly from one activity to another. During classroom observations, interviews with those few students who were not “on-task,” showed that these students had almost always already mastered the instructional content of the daily lesson and were waiting for the rest of the class to catch up. Differentiated instruction is a research based strategy to engage all students in their learning regardless of their current level of learning. In some classes evidence of differentiated learning was seen, while in others this was not observed.

A well defined and enacted written curriculum ensures that students at every grade level receives just the right instruction, in just the right sequence with what is needed to learn to their highest potentials. Jefferson is in the process of, but has not yet completed laying out its written curriculum using Apogee Curriculum Mapping tools. That this work is as yet incomplete may explain why 55% of the teachers reported in surveys that school administrators observe their teaching and provide feedback on whether what was taught matches the written curriculum and 45% of the teachers disagreed. When the curriculum is complete, research shows that schools administrators in the most effective school ensure that the taught curriculum matches the written curriculum and pacing charts through frequent informal classroom observations.

During 13 of the 16 classroom observations team members recorded measures of instructional rigor, high expectations of all students, student engagement, use of varied instructional strategies, content knowledge, meeting the needs of diverse learners, use of instructional time, and effective classroom management. **The consistent presence of most of these characteristics was very high and is illustrative of the identified strengths of the Jefferson instructional program.** The results are summarized in the chart below. *Note: When a characteristic was “not observed,” the characteristic was not scored.*

Classroom Observations			
Characteristic	Number of observations in which the characteristic was consistently present	Number of observations in which the characteristic was <u>not</u> consistently present	Percentage of classes in which the characteristic was consistently present
Students answer questions from both higher and lower orders of cognitive demand	7	2	78%
Teachers convey high expectations of all students	11	1	92%
Students are actively engaged in classroom activities	12	1	92%
Class work is rigorous	10	3	77%
Teachers demonstrate strong content knowledge	11	0	100%
The needs of diverse learners are met through varied instructional strategies	6	5	55%
Class time is used effectively	10	3	77%
Classrooms are orderly and behavior is well-managed	12	1	92%
Percentage Overall 83%			

Evidence and Commentary for Effectiveness Indicator 3: Student Assessment

Student assessment is used to determine the specific knowledge and skills attained by individual students, to improve classroom instruction, to adapt instruction or prescribe interventions for individuals or group of students, for the evaluation and improvement of larger instructional programs, and in measuring and comparing schools, districts, and states for broad public accountability.

In effective schools formative and summative assessments are used improve the schoolwide instructional program and to provide teachers with the data they need to differentiate instruction for groups of students and to pinpoint problem areas for students experiencing difficulties. Using the data to place students into small and flexible work groups, each having the same instructional goals but with differences in the time allotted, the materials being used, the amount of individual work demanded, or the time devoted to a particular task.

High quality assessments are powerful tools for improving instruction and learning. In the survey of teachers, 92% responded that it was always or most often true that they “use formative and summative assessments in each unit” they teach. During interviews teachers commonly referenced daily skill checks and weekly exams as formative assessments, and unit exams and end of chapter tests as summative assessments. While most teachers acknowledged that the mathematics textbook did not exactly match the standards, they typically used the textbook driven assessments. Teachers also acknowledged that these measures do not provide the systematic data set that could be shared from one grade to another and between special and general education to provide information as students move from one program or grade to another. This makes administration and analysis of school wide diagnostic measures essential. To meet this need, Jefferson has adopted Techno’s diagnostic on-line mathematics and reading assessment programs. While these assessments are administered quarterly for all students, the results are not used by teachers to determine needed intervention or remediation nor to place, group, or regroup students.

Many teachers mentioned they did not trust the accuracy of the Techno results. It was common to hear that student scores derived from the tests were often quite different from the teacher’s assessment of students’ skills. In those cases in which differences were noted, it was believed that the teacher assessment was the more accurate measure. Several teachers said that they believed students were “guessing” or “randomly clicking” leading to the perceived inaccuracies. Teachers remarked that individually selected reading ability assessments and teacher determination are more commonly used to group students for Literature Circles or Novatime. Math grouping was not mentioned as a frequently used strategy by teachers.

Statewide assessment data provide valuable information for schools allowing them to compare their own performance with that of similar schools. Generally speaking, school staff members said that they did not use aggregated and disaggregated data from state assessments to improve the school’s curriculum and instructional program. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of the teachers

surveyed and 67% of the classified staff reported that it was sometimes or never true that staff review and analyze state assessment data. When asked how the staff uses disaggregated data in deciding whether it needs to review or update the school's curriculum and instruction program, one teacher said that "this conversation does not really take place" and many variations of this sentiment were heard. While individual teachers talked about using data to refine their classroom instructional program, the use of statewide data would provide an additional tool in Jefferson's assessment toolbox.

While state assessment reports are provided to parents of children tested on the statewide assessment, when asked if "achievement data for your child is presented in a way that is understandable," parents overwhelmingly said that the variety of report cards and grading scales were confusing. They stated that they were unable to understand if, or the degree to which, their children had made progress when quarter and semester reports used different scales. They felt the standard-based "ME and MP" marks were unclear and they couldn't tell how these marks connected with State Assessments. One parent said that she received a note last week that her son was failing math and was recommended for summer school, but had not been able to tell from previous reports that he was struggling. Parents requested clear and consistent communication regarding the progress of their children.

Evidence and Commentary for Effectiveness Indicator 4: School Leadership

Effective leaders create a school climate where academic achievement is the primary goal and ensure that policies, procedures, and resources support that goal. The role of the school leader in setting and maintaining this priority is pivotal. These leaders have an unwavering focus on student learning. They work to put the supports in place so that teachers can focus on learning with minimal distractions, and ensure that their instruction is aligned with the written curriculum and of high quality. This indicator focuses on school leadership and examines the role of school administrators in developing, implementing, and maintaining improvement efforts that are focused on student learning.

The clearly communicated belief that all children can do well in school, making substantial learning gains each year is the foundation of effective school leadership. Jefferson administrators explicitly convey this belief. Teachers (92%) and classified staff (88%) in surveys agreed that the principal believes all students can do well at Jefferson. When asked if "school administrators believe all students can meet the standards, one teacher reflected back on staff meetings and noted that the principal frequently states that "students should be thought of first." Seventy eight percent (78%) of parents surveyed specifically on what school administrators believe about their child felt that school administrators believe that their child can do well in school.

A coherent and strategic plan that describes how the school will work toward its learning goals is a key in ensuring a schoolwide focus on excellence. The current school strategic plan is outdated. In interviews, surveys and focus groups, the principal, teachers, and classified staff

concurred that the existing plan is not a working document used for planning and budgeting decisions. The staff and leadership are working toward accreditation this year and a revised plan will be required as part of that effort. School administrators have indicated their interest in using the results of the On-site School Review as a key part of that plan.

Principals of high achieving schools make a point of recognizing achievement. Such recognition, when public and formalized, is one of the symbolic rituals that enhance affiliation with the school and help to fortify its identity (Cotton, 2003). In surveys, teachers (29%) and classified staff (39%) believed that they were acknowledged for their accomplishments. Teachers also reported in surveys (61%) and interviews that there was no formal process in place at the school to identify staff members' expertise. Such a process could be as straightforward as asking staff to list their areas of accomplishment, expertise, and interest. This information could assist administrators and staff in knowing where within the staff (and perhaps extended to the community) such expertise exists.

Shared leadership is an area of strength at Jefferson. In fact, the core beliefs of this school is steeped in shared leadership. While survey data found that only 36% of teachers agreed that school leadership is shared among staff members, other evidence such as interviews, school board member minutes, and other school documents clearly portray an organizational system where staff members are involved in a variety of formalized leadership roles. Some of these leadership roles include: grade level chairs, school board members, and school board committee members. When asked, "Who are the leaders at Jefferson?" typically three to five people were mentioned. One teacher said, "You can be a leader here if you want to." In a focus group a classified staff member shared the following, "We are free to serve on committees, both voluntary, and sometimes we're assigned. If you want to be involved in leadership it is available."

Conflict emerged as a significant theme in this review. In interviews and focus groups, repeated references were made to tensions and conflict between staff members, between general and special education, between staff and administrators, between staff and the board, and between staff and parents. Staff reported that while efforts to resolve these conflicts (such as work with Zenith Learning) had sometimes resulted in temporarily improving the situation, the same or similar conflicts tended to re-emerge over time. All parties when asked indicated that the current situation was detrimental to the work environment and that they were anxious to resolve the conflicts. However, in no interview or focus group was responsibility for the situation or the solution seen as shared – rather the situations were always the result of someone's else's unreasonableness and that someone else needed to work to alleviate the problem. In nearly all interviews and in all focus groups, when asked if there was "anything you think we should know about, but have not asked," we heard a common theme of adult conflict often referred to as "drama" or "hurtful gossip" and even "sabotage." One staff member said, "It costs our school in

moving forward.” Another said, “There are a lot of rumors, it’s simply part of the culture.” Parents too are aware of the discord, and in some cases have been drawn in, providing another reason that this conflict should be addressed. On a positive note, students are generally unaware of adult conflict. In surveys, 89% of 5th and 6th graders responded that it was always or most often true that, “My teachers respect one another.”

Conflict that extends over time has detrimental effects to the school community. Rather than simply “alternate viewpoints,” conflict may harden into “opposing sides.” Leaders may send or appear to send confusing or conflicting messages to staff in their attempts to address thorny issues. When clear and consistent communication is lacking, decisions may be seen as biased, lacking integrity, or fairness.

In effective schools, no matter what the source of the conflict, once all sides have been heard and an agreement reached, school administrators take the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that all staff members enact the agreement consistently and positively. This does not mean that the administrator bears this burden alone. It is the responsibility of all members of the school community, especially those who participate in school leadership in any of its many forms, to support the implementation of those agreements.

In our data collection around Characteristic 4J: *School administrators are adaptable and encourage innovation*, the data was split which made a definitive rating inappropriate in our model of Data². For example, 50% of teachers agreed with each of the three traits of this characteristic and 50% disagreed. Some teachers gave examples of the principal being “very on top of things,” and informed by research giving examples such as pursuing the school review and accreditation, while others were disappointed that newsletters from the principal to the staff were no longer produced. In the areas of new and innovative ideas, one teacher said, “He forwards information and sends email, but it’s up to me to follow through,” while another said, “He brought in Techno and Apogee.” In interviews, it was shared that new ideas are discussed at staff meetings and input is sound. Teachers also mentioned last year’s retreat focused on team building.

Teachers in surveys and interviews acknowledged that formal staff evaluations are conducted by the principal on a timely basis and as prescribed by state law and contract wording. Informal classroom observations of all teachers, followed by structured feedback and coaching is an area that the principal has set as a goal for himself in the 2009-2010 school year.

While staff acknowledged that peer observation is encouraged by the administrator, and several teachers mentioned going to other schools to observe teachers, no formal requirement or program exists for all instructional staff, including educational assistants, to participate in frequent, well-planned peer observation and structured feedback, coaching, or lesson study. Several staff

members indicated interest in working to develop some or all of these research based practices at Jefferson.

Evidence and Commentary for Effectiveness Indicator 7: Student Engagement, Connectedness, & Readiness

Readiness to learn is closely associated with subsequent performance in school. It is also important that students feel they are a part of the school community in order to learn effectively. This rubric identifies the level to which students feel connected to the school and identifies the systems in place to support students who are at-risk of underachieving or dropping out.

There is strong empirical evidence that school connectedness contributes to a variety of important positive educational outcomes, including increased motivation, classroom engagement, attendance, academic achievement, and school completion rates. Two indicators of connectedness are whether or not students “like” their school and how well they feel they “fit in” with the school and their peers. In surveys, 84% of 5th and 6th grade students at Jefferson indicated they “enjoyed attending the school” and felt they “fit in at the school.” Sixth graders were the more positive of the two groups with 94% of student enjoying attending Jefferson and 91% feeling they fit in. Fifth graders were a little less sure with 75% enjoying attending and 71% feeling they fit in. When asked, “What do you have to do to be successful here?” one student responded “Be yourself and do your best.”

Students who forge positive school relationships with adults and peers in schools are also more connected to their schools. In looking at the degree to which students had positive, trusting and caring relationships with adults and peers in the school, 92% of 5th and 6th grade students surveyed indicated that “there is at least one adult in this school that I can trust and who cares about me” Ninety percent (90%) said that they “had friends at this school.” In focus groups with parents, one parent said, “Every day there’s someone else my daughter has played with. Everyone seems to be friends.” Parents also felt, for the most part, their children had good relationships with adults at the school. One parent said, “My son’s classroom teacher is his primary support, but he also connects with the counselor and likes the principal.”

An important function of the school’s counseling and behavior management program is to ensure that students stay in and succeed in school. An effective counseling and behavior management system includes a system of schoolwide, targeted and intensive interventions to address those behaviors and other factors that put a child at risk of lower achievement levels and not completing school. These include excessive absences, low reading skills, low grades overall, retention in a grade level, disciplinary issues, high mobility, and poverty. Teachers in surveys and interviews indicated concern that a systematic approach to addressing at-risk factors and behaviors was not in place. Just 52% of teachers agreed with the statement that “The school has an effective program in place to help students avoid at-risk behaviors.” While teachers recommend students who may need additional support for special services screening, and a team

is in turn assigned to determine services, one staff member said “There is nothing really structured. In reality the counselor is the program.” In interviews, staff and administrators said that they believed additional work needed to be done in the area of targeted interventions and coordination.

An area of exceptional achievement at Jefferson is in helping students develop positive trusting relationships. While a variety of programs have been used over the past, the entire staff was recently trained in Zenith Learning and many staff members mentioned that strategies learned through this program have been successful in relationship building among students. Another program frequently mentioned was the Responsive Classroom. One teacher mentioned that these strategies have “helped to build schoolwide community.” In addition, activities like the fun fair, movie nights, concert under the stars, and field day were mentioned as outside of school community building activities.

In effective schools students transition seamlessly from grade to grade and a system is in place to ensure curriculum alignment, communication and coordination. Jefferson staff indicated they believed the coordination between grade level teachers was not as strong as it could be. They cited as an example, ensuring all teachers understood (and then assisted students in understanding), what to expect in terms of academic and behavioral expectations as students move from one grade level to another. When interviewed, very few teachers outside of the 5/6 team routinely planned with or provided performance data to the next grade level teachers except informally. When asked “How do you prepare students for what will be required of them at the next grade level?” one teacher responded, “I feel my kids are prepared for the XX grade, but there’s not a lot of communication.” Another teacher responded, “I have taught at several grade levels so I feel I know the standards.”

Transitions are more difficult when students move from one school to another, particularly those leaving small, personalized elementary learning environments and entering typically larger and more impersonal middle and high schools. Even students who have had few or no problems in one environment may experience dramatic changes in attendance and performance when making the transition between schools. One way to address these transitions is coordination between feeder pattern schools to ensure students are prepared for these transitions. Jefferson staff indicated that communication with middle schools into which Jefferson students transition could be improved to ensure articulation.

As with many components of school improvement, the areas of connectedness, engagement, and readiness are complex and interrelated. Students who feel a connection to and engaged in their school, their peers and the adults within their school have great advantages over their peers in less affirming schools.

Section III: Conclusions and Recommendations

In this section, we identify the school's strengths and offer our recommendations. The recommendations focus on actions that have the promise to result in the greatest gains in student learning and achievement, or that will need to be in place before other improvement efforts can be successfully undertaken.

Prior to the on-site portion of the review, the review team analyzed student achievement data and other documents. Following the three-day on-site portion of the review, the team sifted through the data, reviewed evidence from interviews and observations, and followed up on data collection in the preparation of this report. The meticulous evidence-gathering and -corroboration processes give us confidence in the validity of both the findings we reported in the previous section and the conclusions and recommendations we will offer in this section.

Strengths Identified at Jefferson Elementary School

- Classroom instruction
- Student engagement
- Student behavior
- Student achievement on statewide assessments
- High expectations for students
- Shared leadership
- Parent involvement and support
- Student connectedness to school
- Positive, caring, trusting relationships between students and adults at the school

Recommendations for Jefferson Elementary School:

1. Develop a schoolwide strategic plan focused on student learning including the following components:

- Involve all stakeholders in creation of the plan;
- Disaggregate student achievement data analysis;
- Identify measurable student achievement goals for each grade level in at least reading, writing, and mathematics;
- Identify other school improvement goals necessary to improve collaboration, communication, leadership, work environment or other research-based areas;
- Identify strategies to reach the goals;
- Gain commitment from all stakeholders to use the plan to guide decision making; and
- Develop a monitoring process to track attainment of goals and to adjust the plan as necessary.

2. Develop a schoolwide instruction, intervention and enrichment system in reading/writing and mathematics including the following components:

- Complete the curriculum mapping project undertaken as part of the work with Apogee, ensuring grade alignment with state and national standards Jr. K through Grade 6
- Determine whether the school will continue to use Techno diagnostic assessments in mathematics and reading. If so, key interventions and enrichment to those results. If not, select, adopt and fully implement another diagnostic assessment for reading and mathematics that is aligned to the curriculum mapping;
- Establish a frequent principal and curriculum director informal observation and feedback schedule; and
- Implement a formal program for lesson study, peer observation, and coaching focused on student learning that includes both special and general education staff.

3. Build collaborative and supportive relationships among all adults in the school system, including the following components:

- A clear focus on student learning, rather than adult issues;
- Strong, committed, collaborative leadership;
- Supportive, committed, collaborative staff;
- Commitment to professional integrity and positive work environment; and
- Establish a conflict resolution process at all levels, and adhere to that plan.

Recommendations for Northern School District Board:

1. Improve communication processes including the following components:

- Define the roles and decisions making authority of the board, the principal, curriculum director, teachers, classified staff, parents and students; and
- Design student progress and grade reporting forms and metrics to align among reporting periods and to state standards.

Acknowledgments

The members of the review team extend their sincere thanks to the district administrators and the school administrators, faculty, staff, students, and parents at Jefferson for generously giving of their time to answer our sometimes difficult questions; graciously inviting us into their offices and classrooms; and cheerfully attending meetings, completing surveys, and collecting and providing student work for our review.

Next Steps

This report and its recommendations will be the focus of a full day in-service on October 16, 2009. At that time the staff will carefully review the content of this report and develop a plan of action.