Most Missouri schools typically give the state end-of-course exam to juniors, but at the Ewing Marion Kauffman School in Kansas City, students take it two years earlier, as freshmen.

When students enter the charter school in fifth grade, many arrive from Kansas City public schools that equipped them with the reading skills of a first-grader. And from the moment they step in the door, school founder Hannah Lofthus is focused on making sure Kauffman students can compete at any college they want. But that means making up for years in months and pushing students to take this end-of-course exam their freshman year so they can focus on what matters for their college dreams: the ACT and AP exams. Students may enter Kauffman among the bottom third of kids in the district, but by the time they leave, they’ll be among the top-performing in the entire state.

It’s not exactly a simple task, and on a November morning, Lofthus and her team are blowing up the plan for the rest of the quarter. The latest exit ticket data shows most of the students are ready and on target to pass the state test in two weeks, but about...
10 percent are not.

“It would be much easier and faster for us to teach to these EOCS (end-of-course exams), give it to our kids in 11th grade and pat ourselves on the back,” Lofthus says. But she finds the test low rigor. This approach “allows us to have the rest of freshman, sophomore and junior year focused on ACT and AP.” All coursework is aligned to Advanced Placement.

It will be a lot of work and stress, but Lofthus is blunt: “The ultimate reality is this is best for kids.”

When she opened the first school six years ago, Lofthus warned her board members that they wouldn’t see results at first, because she decided to focus her staff and students on the more rigorous Common Core standards right away.”It was a dark path for three years,” Lofthus says. They just had to put their heads down and keep at it.

When schools across the nation adopted Common Core, many saw test scores plummet the first year and education officials in many states had to explain to parents the drop was because of the more rigorous test.

Kauffman posted double-digit increases, with all grades and subjects seeing increases.

This high bar, rapid response to data, a nimble and growth-minded staff and Lofthus’ leadership have pushed Kauffman past the Kansas City public school district and the state. But the team wants to be sure that when Kauffman students apply to Harvard and elsewhere, they can compete alongside students from charter schools considered among the best performing in the country.

To gauge how they might fare, Kauffman hired Mathematica Policy Research to study the school for five years and provide an independent assessment. Mathematica compared Kauffman to top-performing charter cities, such as New York City and Boston, as well as the top 25 percent of KIPP schools nationally. Mathematica found that Kauffman students are getting 1.64 additional years in reading and 1.61 additional years in math, outperforming students in these other top schools and school systems.

Kauffman also had Mathematica quantify how the school was impacting the gap between black and white students, and wealthy and poor students. The study found Kauffman closed 84 percent of the black-white gap in three years. “Our kids are here seven (years). We still understand and recognize you can never fully close that gap because the way our society views black and brown bodies. and that’s a problem,” Lofthus says. “But what we can control is what we do inside these walls to close that gap.”

Lofthus also wants Kauffman to be a catalyst in Kansas City, where the public school district has operated at times without full state accreditation. “Part of what we are doing here is changing this city’s mindsets and beliefs about what is possible, so our kids’ sisters and brothers can hopefully have a better shot by us growing,” says Lofthus, the daughter of a teacher and a school principal, who attended Kansas City public schools.

Nita Daniels, a dean for the seventh and eighth grade, was drawn to Kauffman because, like many, she wanted to show what Kauffman students could do. “I came from the Kansas City public school system. I felt like even before I came here, it failed me. I had given up as an educator, thinking the impact I know is needed, I didn’t see it,” Daniels says.
Then Daniels was hired at Kauffman. "The first year was like, 'Wow look at these results! This is crazy.' Second year, I’m like, ‘Wow, maybe that was a fluke,’ and it was better. Third year, I was really scratching my head. I know what we do is amazing, I know the people we work with are incredible,” Daniels says. She convinced her daughter to move her children from California to Kauffman. "That’s how much I believe in this," she says.

The founding class of Kauffman students, now in 10th grade, was No. 1 in the state on the Biology end-of-course exam and No. 2 in the state for Algebra in 2016. This is a significantly different trajectory than peers attending district schools: only 5 percent of eighth-grade students in Kansas City Public Schools were proficient in math on the Common Core-aligned state exam in 2015-2016, compared to 83 percent of Kauffman eighth-graders. Kauffman earned a perfect score according to Missouri’s accountability rating system.

MEET Hannah Lofthus
Founder and CEO of the Ewing Marion Kauffman School

Hannah Lofthus is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of the Ewing Marion Kauffman School (EMKS) in Kansas City, MO. She believes all children are capable of meeting high academic expectations in the right educational environment. Growing up in Kansas City and attending local public schools, Ms. Lofthus is committed to offering students and families in her community an excellent education on par with the best schools nationwide. She founded EMKS in 2011 with a mission of creating college graduates. Today, EMKS is a three-school campus serving nearly 1,000 students in 5th-11th grade and will have its first graduating class in 2019.

Ms. Lofthus is a nationally-recognized talent developer. She was awarded the Ryan Award (given every year to an urban school principal who has demonstrated accelerated results in underserved schools) in 2016. She leads her students and staff to meet ambitious goals by engaging in daily observations, weekly coaching sessions, and weekly whole-staff professional development that creates an environment of adult learning to fuel student learning. Ms. Lofthus travels the country to deliver professional development, coach leaders of other high-performing schools, is a member of RELAY’s National Principals Academy Fellowship and Paul Bambrick’s Leverage Leadership Institute. Her outreach helps spread the success of Kauffman staff and students, as well as the movement for reform in Kansas City. In 2015, Ms. Lofthus was inducted into the Mid-America Education Hall of Fame.

Before founding EMKS, Ms. Lofthus was a founding teacher at Leadership Preparatory Charter School, part of the Uncommon Schools Network. She is a 2007 Teach for America New York City Corps Member, and is now deeply connected to the alumni movement in Kansas City. Ms. Lofthus received her B.S. from University of Missouri–Kansas City, a Master of Science in Teaching from Pace University, and a Master in Educational Leadership from National Louis University.

*Note: This chart, based on Mathematica Policy, shows the average additional years learning gained by students after three years attending Kauffman.

Credit: Mathematica Policy Research

And so, on this November day, when there are students who are not where they should be, principal fellow Ben Carman and instructional coach Annie Murphy are ripping up the plan, preparing to roll out a new one to staff and students for immediate implementation. It will mean revamping whole class lessons, push-ins, office hours, daily data tracking and logistics.
They know this could be taken negatively, by hard-working teachers and students, so they work to frame it in a more motivating way. They will work hard to have all the kids ready by Nov. 14, but if they can’t, they can still try it in December. Carman will talk to each individual student on Monday to light a fire in them.

“It was an ambitious goal of November,” Lofthus explains. “We always knew we could have 10 percent of kids not ready. 90 percent of kids are where they should be. We’ve got a plan to get all of them ready by Christmas.”

A speech by the education writer Jonathan Kozol knocked Lofthus off her pre-law path at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Inspired by his work to right inequalities in our educational system, she started a community service program with a local school in Kansas City, placing college student volunteers in the schools. “That program still exists, and those kids now come over to my school, and run clubs,” she says. After graduation, Lofthus went into Teach for America and was placed in New York City, at an Uncommon School in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

One of her mentors who worked for the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation’s education department approached her with the idea of the organization starting a school. Lofthus loved New York City and wasn’t sure if she was ready to return home. “I reconnected with some of the students in Kansas City I had previously taught and looked at where they were at,” she recalls. In some cases, Lofthus was excited by seeing where her students were, and in others, regretful that she couldn’t have helped them more. She saw the city was failing to provide opportunities to children in impoverished, minority neighborhoods and that she had a chance to make a bigger impact by returning to her home town and accepting this challenge.

Lofthus took a year to develop her plan for the Kauffman school, embedding herself in some of the best schools in the country “and living and breathing them.” She found they all had very similar core-driving philosophies and values. They didn’t run like typical schools, they embraced systems and structures of great organizations. But she understood that you couldn’t just copy parts of a successful school and expect the same results. “It’s dangerous unless you understand the rationale, the purpose and how to tailor that,” Lofthus says. “If something looked great in a school, I wouldn’t just say ‘we’re doing it, we’re putting that on the wall,’ I’d say ‘what’s behind this, what’s the rationale and purpose, and what would it look like for me to genuinely and authentically sell this?’”

While knocking on doors in the neighborhood to make her appeal to families, Lofthus would lay out the story of what she hoped the school could be in four to five years, acknowledging that it might be tough at times. But, she’d tell them: “What we are hearing from you all is we need to try something different. This is going to be a really different school, because we expect really different results.”

To make sure Kauffman sticks with the vision of

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Change Management

**OBJECTIVE**

Strategic planning is used to guide change management with an 80/20 focus.

**DRIVERS:**

- The main goal for the school and the plan to accomplish the goal have been clearly articulated.
- The entire staff is bought into the mission and vision for the school.
- Progress towards goals is monitored to determine effectiveness of strategies.
- Course correction occurs as necessary to ensure that the most effective plan and strategies are implemented.
- Staff time is appropriately focused on the annual goals and the key strategies, while managing urgent matters effectively.
serving the highest-need kids, the leadership put zip code parameters on enrollment to prioritize students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas that lack quality school options.

The school opened in an old warehouse while the team searched for the right property to construct the permanent building. The priorities of that first year were culture and building the habits, mindsets, systems and structures of a strong foundation. "It's great if you have all these strategies you want to do," Lofthus says. "But no strategy can outdo a bad-performing culture." Kauffman would also be a school built on outcomes. The team set many smaller benchmarks for the first two years.

Lofthus planned the school for the number of students Kauffman would ultimately have, not the number she had in the first year. They’ve grown by adding grade levels, expanding to three schools by 2016. Lofthus started every school herself. "I founded the schools because it’s make or break, if you don’t do 90 percent right in the first year, you’re never going to get to 100," she says. After three years, she handed off the initial school to its current principal, then founded the second. She led that school for a year, then handed it off before founding the third school and leading it for a year.

She replicated the systems and procedures across the schools, although they may look different according to the grade level. What works for a fifth-grader may not work for 10th-graders. For example, every meeting throughout the schools doesn’t look exactly the same, but they all will have the same underlying philosophy and core tenets. "You can get to excellence if you clearly define it, and know how to measure it, and can give people the bite-sized ways to get there," Lofthus says.

Rubrics leave zero room for interpretation around excellence, she says. The Kauffman Instructional Excellence Rubric describes in detail what teaching looks like at every level when it comes to lesson planning and execution, classroom culture and management, professionalism and team norms.

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**High-Performing Team**

**OBJECTIVE**

The team is committed to the vision, strategies, and tactics to accomplish the goals.

**DRIVERS:**

- Staff expectations and non-negotiables are clear.
- Staff is bought into the vision of the school and is free of blockers or resistors.
- A hiring process is conducted with clear alignment to staff expectations and non-negotiables and the school is staffed to meet the needs of the students.
- Onboarding and development of staff is systematic, fosters buy-in and trust, and results in high levels of teacher retention.
- Teachers are celebrated for their accomplishments and progress toward school goals.
- Performance levels are communicated directly and promptly to all staff.
- Staff is consistently held accountable to job expectations.

Every role has a scorecard. Meetings are kept on task with agendas that prompt participants to define the goal and what would make the meeting successful. Action items are assigned owners.

The people wanting to work at Kauffman already have a love for kids and a desire to make a difference, but to keep staff members motivated when the work inevitably gets hard, Lofthus uses three messages to enroll them in her mission. To start training every year, Lofthus employs a story from "Great by Choice" by Jim Collins, and Morten T. Hansen’s about “the 20-mile march,” which has become a defining theme for the team. According to the story, two leaders try to reach the South Pole. One presses farther on days that it’s sunny but stays in the tent when the weather is bad. The other leader maps out a consistent pace and
marches 20 miles on good days or bad, and is successful. Team members apply that approach daily, seeing themselves on a 20-mile march on good and bad days. Lofthus also pulls from Al Pacino’s speech from “Any Given Sunday” to fight for that inch. And the staff’s third mantra also comes from Collins and “The Stockdale Paradox,” which talks about the need to confront brutal realities while maintaining unwavering optimism to survive. “We’ve got to confront the brutal realities, and we have to maintain unwavering optimism that we can get there. We do that by looking at every day as an inch, by looking at every day as one day on the 20-mile march, because when you’re a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher, and year after year, you see small gains then kids leave you, it’s hard to remember what’s happening,” Lofthus says. “But when you’re a fifth-grade teacher and you can go up to the other building and see your kids in seventh, eighth, ninth and 10th and sit in front of our staffs and see these results, you’re with us, you know it’s a 20-mile march.”

Systems also have been crucial to getting relatively inexperienced staff members up to speed in as short an amount of time as possible. A teacher with just two years’ experience was able to hit the best scores in the state in her second year with Kauffman, and she had never taught the subject before. “If you’re going to grow this fast with this group of people in a city that doesn’t have human capital, you have to build systems inside,” Lofthus says.

Lofthus says one challenge they have is being “both on the floor and on the balcony.” “You have to be on the floor enough to be there and make good decisions, but you have to stop and be on the balcony,” she says. “How do we as leaders and teachers do both of those things simultaneously throughout the course of the day? That’s the most unique challenge across all three schools.”

Note to potential candidates: Don’t apply unless you are comfortable with feedback and coaching. A growth mindset that permeates the building has enabled Lofthus and her team to reach their goals, and train the teaching staff to get the best out of their students.

“We think about feedback and coaching as a way to show love, with kids and adults. Because I love you, it actually robs you of a critical opportunity to be your best when I don’t give you a piece of
information or feedback that could help you get there,” Lofthus says. “The challenge is how do you do that in love and in a way that is positive.”

The hiring process is designed to answer the question, “How are you going to respond to getting immense levels of feedback and coaching in a direct, live way? Are you going to view that as exciting, and are you going to be like, ‘let me understand that and try it,’ or are you going to be like ‘yeah I’ve always done it this way, and it’s worked for me, so I think I’m going to do it this way,” Lofthus says.

All interviews are conducted by partners. “I don’t trust words in the hiring process. I only trust actions of a person,” Lofthus says. “I don’t want to hear that you like feedback. I want to see that. Nobody in the interview is like, ‘I don’t like feedback and I’m not interested in receiving it.’ No one has ever said that.”

A job candidate will usually start with a tour, where staff will ask for the candidate’s observations. At every stage, the staff allows the candidate to opt in or opt out. After a phone interview and in-person interview, a sample teach would be the next step. Candidates will work with an instructional leader to practice their lesson, then go into a sample teach. During a debrief, the candidate would practice a key skill and be asked what he or she would do differently. Then based on how the debrief goes, the candidate may be asked to reteach the lesson in a couple hours. “You can tell from the second teach where things are going to go,” Lofthus says. Final steps include reference checks and having the candidate talk with a team member to learn about working at Kauffman.

If staffers quit or have to be let go, the leadership does an autopsy on that hiring process to determine what was missed during interviews and what changes need to be made. Hiring is one of the biggest challenges, because there are not enough teachers in Kansas City to keep up with demand. Kauffman wants a teaching staff that is reflective of the student body, but realizes the need to create better pipelines for candidates of color. The goal is to have 40 percent of the staff represent people of color. “Not because we think 40 percent is enough,” Lofthus says. “The demographics already in the city are tough, and the pipelines we use—such as TFA—are not typically super diverse, so what we’re going to try this year is to found our own residency, because typically we have to turn away a lot of people of color because they are not certified. They don’t have a path to certification.” Candidates need affordable programs that enable them to work while earning certification. So Kauffman is working on building out its own residency program to try to create pathways for the teachers they need.

All new hires come to the school before the year ends and teach the last two weeks that students are present, with a mentor. “If you are not in this building and physically feel how it should run, and
then we open the doors and you’ve never really felt that...you cannot get to a level of excellence as quickly as we need it,” Lofthus says. New hires will observe their mentor and get to know the kids, then by day three, teach their first lesson alongside a mentor. “What we’ve found is you cannot replace that feeling,” she says.

The staff stays for two weeks after school ends to work in content teams to tweak the curriculum while ideas are still fresh. The staff has four to six weeks away, then returns for three weeks of summer professional development that focuses on team culture, key routines and procedures. Experienced teachers lead these breakout groups.

When the school year starts, mentor teachers will push into the rooms of new teachers to support them for the first 30 to 60 days. The school leaders use planning periods and other scheduling tricks to make this possible.

“AGG MO”

“What’s holding up our vision?” Lofthus asks a group of eight instructional leaders, assistant principals and principals gathered for the weekly instructional leadership team meeting.

“Kids are topping out because we’ve topped out,” Lofthus says. “We have to push ourselves as learners.”

Aggressive monitoring — or “agg mo” — will be the priority for the staff. The team is prepping for a whole school professional development on aggressive monitoring, so they are brainstorming what it looks like to do aggressive monitoring well.

“The best time to know if students are learning something is right there in the moment, not after class when you’re grading,” Lofthus says. Then it’s an autopsy and less effective. “Our teaching staff is pretty young, pretty green; that’s a very hard skill, so we’ve set up aggressive monitoring where they take their clipboard and they have all the student work they’re going to teach that day already filled out. They’ve already done the thinking of the student, and they’ve said to themselves, ‘if a student has to master this by the end of the period, here is the checkpoint in the lesson, cognitively, that has to be on track for them to get to the end of the lesson.’”

Instructional coach Nick Burgmeier has prepared a math lesson that they will use to play this out. He starts walking through his math lesson as if he were delivering it to a room of eighth-graders. The team works to identify the place in the equation where the teacher should check if students are on track to understanding. As he starts, other instructional leaders jump in and try different ways of recognizing the misconception and connecting the whole class. The give and take is energizing, and the excitement builds as they get closer to understanding the answer.

Lofthus demonstrates what she would do if she noticed three kids getting it wrong, quickening her pace to do a fast loop around the room to see all the papers in about seven seconds. They continue to debate, and Lofthus pulls out of their answers how different methods might work best for different scenarios.

They put the problem up on the screen and diagram the steps, debating the order and when to give verbal prompts. They start role-playing again and work out different ways to check the student work and points to stop them. “Stamp it,” Lofthus says.
Practice and role-playing help teachers gain ground quickly. When she was a brand new teacher, Shelli Brown says she had no idea how to turn what she thought she wanted to see in the classroom into reality. “The thing I know revolutionized me as a teacher was practicing on myself and not on kids, which is what I find new teachers sometimes end up doing,” she says. For Brown, practice made all the difference. Her first year at Kauffman, she would meet with Lofthus as her coach once a week and plan what she wanted to practice, such as getting students to follow directions the first time. She’d watch other teachers and then bring methods back to practice with Lofthus. “We’d sit in the conference room. We’d be like ‘team, put your eyes on me and pencils down in 3, 2, 1,’ and I’d practice it like six times,” Brown says. As she’s grown in her teaching, the skills she’s practicing have become more sophisticated.

Also, “stamp your action step” is a crucial part of every coaching session and meeting. “We talk about a lot of new stuff in development, but essentially, we have a bite-sized action step,” Lofthus says. When managers have someone stamp their action step, they get data on whether they ran an effective meeting, and it allows the person to own it and internalize it, she says.

Lofthus also recognizes the need to give teachers a break. Every third Friday, the classes are all double blocked to free up teachers for most of the day so they can have time off until the professional development session.

Kauffman employs a merit/demerit system to manage student behavior. “But I don’t see that as our system,” says Nita Daniels, dean of students for the seventh and eighth grade. “That is one of our tools. The bigger picture to me is building the relationships and having a bigger vision as kids continue to grow, building strong relationships that are then cultivated into much greater things.”

All teachers start with a daily huddle at 7:30 a.m. where they celebrate the day, and are reminded about priorities for the day, such as uniform checks as students walk in. The middle school is split up in fifth/sixth grade and seventh/eighth grade because of the different developmental levels of the students at those ages. As the students walk through the large glass doors on a gloomy day, they are greeted by no fewer than five adults, then go into silent breakfast. The staff has purposefully constructed the day to give students five touchpoints with a positive adult before they enter the classroom.

Daniels knows the students who require extra touchpoints throughout the day to stay on course, such as a quick high five to make sure a student is connected. Staff members sweep the halls in the morning to gauge students’ moods and energy. Daniels also will do individual check-ins with students.

“We want kids to fail here and forget to turn in your homework here instead of failing at freshman year at college,” Lofthus says.

On Fridays, students can earn a spot in community meetings known as “fun days” if they have a certain number of points. Every Friday, students get their point tally reset to start fresh, with 100 points. Students accumulate points, or are docked points, based on how they behave according to the school’s PREP values of Perseverance, Results, Empathy and Passion. Those with 85 points or above can participate in the Friday fun. “Teachers put a lot of energy into planning it, kids love it and look forward to it, so they work hard,” says Daniels, who was a founding staff member. Fun days may incorporate outdoor play time, a kickball game or obstacle courses.
“The system works for 90 percent of students, the other 10 percent are mine,” Daniels says. “All kids are different. I want to make sure I’m supporting them individually.” For some, a meeting with their parents works. In her messaging, Daniels emphasizes that the behavior is a bad habit they need to break. “Let’s come up with strategies, a replacement behavior,” she says. Or students may be referred to speak with the school counselor. Daniels also engages the students in goal-setting: “What are you struggling with in that class? Tell me why. What can we do? It’s creating a safe place for them to have those conversations that can get to the root problem,” she says.

Students start the year with PREP week, to learn the ways of Kauffmann. For the first two days, the whole grade is together in the cafeteria learning the language of SLANT (Sit up. Listen. Ask and answer questions. Nod your head. Track the speaker.) They learn about lifework (homework), and routines such as how to walk in the halls, how to move to a table and how to clean up the classroom. Students learn how to get pencils and snacks and how to use an appropriate voice level when they’re talking to their team. “The first week really sets the foundation for teachers and kids where we all learn the same language, we can all execute things in the same way, so then I can use my mind for teaching content. And kids can use their mind for learning content instead of what should I do in math class, what should I do in science class, how is it going to be different?” says teacher Shelli Brown. Teachers and staff members norm on giving deductions to make sure they are consistent from class to class.

In fifth through eighth grade, students have a daily PREP class that covers social and emotional character traits. In high school, students have college seminar and office hours, to replicate what kids are going to see in college. Because of the foundation laid for behavior in earlier grades, the staff doesn’t have to fight students on things such as posture as much. “If we’ve done our job in fifth through eighth, in ninth grade it should be habit,“

Aspirational Environment

OBJECTIVE

A highly-aspirational learning environment exists that honors student experience while inspiring future accomplishments.

DRIVERS:

- Vision, values and goals for students are clear and inspiring.
- Students want to come to school because they feel known and cared for.
- Students are recognized for their growth and achievement.
- Social emotional learning curriculum helps students develop self-regulation, positive relationship-building and decision-making skills.
- Exposure to college, career, and enrichment experiences outside of the school community inspires student investment in learning.
- Families are valued for their contributions and offered opportunities to engage in the school community.

Lofthus says.

Kynnedy Johnson, who is in 10th grade, says she did not like the school when she started in fifth grade. “I had been used to strict behavior policies and all that, but when I got here and they were holding me accountable for things like SLANT, sitting up, my posture, tracking the speaker, looking at them, asking questions, that was different,” she says. Her grades dropped. “At my old school, they were teaching us but not at the pace that we needed to be learning,” she says. “When I came here and they were doing it at the pace we should be learning and teaching us the things we should be learning for our grade level, it was really hard for me.” The first year, she begged her mom to take her out. But “now I’m one of the top students in my grade because they worked
Layered Coaching

As the school has grown, Lofthus has gone from coaching teachers to coaching principals. It’s tricky moving through the layers. "What we find is principals are promoted because they’re really good at coaching teachers, but when they switch to principal, you are not coaching teachers solely anymore, you’re coaching leaders to coach teachers, which is a lot harder," she says.

Every principal gets a minimum of two hours of one-on-one coaching every week with Lofthus, then another hour of a principal meeting. Roughly once a month, depending on the school priorities, Lofthus and each principal audit all parts of the school. Lindsey Dolge, principal for fifth and sixth grade, has asked Lofthus to watch her coach the dean of students. "What the deans are good at, and what they love to do, is get in there with students and support students, and sometimes they miss the big picture of how to coach teachers or develop teachers in this moment so they sort of coach themselves out of a job," Dolge says. "That’s really what I want to make sure I’m doing — that we’re not just getting reactive systems around responding to kids, but more of the proactive systems around how am I coaching teachers in this moment to support students in the ways that deans support students."

Lofthus and Dolge want to help the deans understand what to do when there is an emergency behavior issue. To prepare for this, Lofthus and Dolge shadowed the dean to understand her day and workload. Dolge wrote a vision of what she’d like to see the dean do in an ideal world. In this session, Lofthus is live coaching Dolge, who may live coach the dean. A debrief will follow.

With the dean, they peek in the large glass windows of the classrooms to determine which class they would direct their attention. Outside one classroom, a second dean joins and the two deans pull out a fifth-grade student who is showing his frustration with a math test by making disruptive noises. They give him a warm pep talk with lots of eye contact and a hug. They talk about whether he should go back to class or the dean’s room for the remainder of the test.

Lofthus and Dolge pop into another room to debrief solo and identify where Dolge should be coaching. Dolge sees a lack of urgency. Lofthus agrees that the deans had a loving approach and tone, but the student lost 15 minutes of assessment time while they all talked with him in the hallway. She and Dolge decide the original dean should have coached the teacher to respond instead of pulling the kid out of class for so long, especially a student who is four years behind grade level.

They bring in the dean to ask for her thoughts on what’s going well ("calmness"). But she agrees two deans didn’t need to be working with that one student, adding that she likes working as a team. Lofthus and Dolge reinforce what she did well and then ask questions to help her articulate what she could have done differently to help the teacher own the situation. The dean says she could have done role-playing to help the teacher build the skill. They close out the meeting by Dolge "stamping" the dean’s action steps to try to keep both the student in the room and ownership with the teacher.

The dean leaves and Lofthus suggests Dolge needs to get the dean to vocalize how to move to excellence instead of telling her to be excellent. What is Dolge’s takeaway about her own coaching? "I’m good at identifying isolated moments that don’t reflect the vision I want to see," Dolge says. "My push is looking at the root of those things." Lofthus again points out things she did well, and helps Dolge find questions that could push her to that thinking.

“What mindset is this leader operating from? How did it feel?” Dolge says. Lofthus also says Dolge should be hip-to-hip with the person coaching, not following, to process decisions with the person she’s coaching so she can intervene proactively.
Johnson also appreciates teachers pushing students to advocate for their own learning, through office hours and college-like expectations. “Things like that are going to help us so much in college,” she says.

To enhance students’ coping skills, the staff has started mindfulness classes. Lofthus and the staff also rely on mindfulness to help them remember to take care of themselves. When students get upset, staff members encourage them to use mindfulness to decompress.

One recent day, a sixth-grader is angry after a teacher corrects her for laughing at work on the board. Lofthus uses the opportunity to work in mindfulness, facilitating a discussion between the teacher and girl. The teacher points out the positive and they give the girl a second to regroup, directing her to be mindful. The student later says doing so helped her calm down and reflect on how she should have been more respectful. Lofthus talks to her about the difference between “I am mad” versus “I am feeling mad right now,” to teach her skills she can use on her own. Lofthus closes out the interaction by asking the girl her GPA, then applauding her, which brings a smile to her face. She is ready to go back to class.

In the high school, students chat around café tables in a college-like lounge. This part of the morning is designed to make students more self-sufficient, to take care of their own business by turning in their homework. “We want kids to fail here and forget to turn in your homework here instead of failing at freshman year at college,” Lofthus says.

At the two-minute warning, 30-35 students clean up their garbage and stand on an orange duct-tape perimeter around the room with several teachers. They are tired because of a visit to Drake University the night before that got them home late. But teachers are talking about how great the kids were on the trip.

Lofthus goes to the middle of the room and starts rolling out two leadership opportunities, a high school student ambassador program and a summer abroad opportunity. High school ambassadors are responsible for sharing the story of the school. She shows pictures of students ambassadors with the CEO of Teach for America, underscoring that they get to connect with leaders. She flashes an excerpt from a college application on the screen to remind them that they will need experiences to fill in the blanks. “If you don’t have the requirements yet, advocate for yourself,” Lofthus says. Ambassadors get business cards and letters of recommendation for college. She also reminds them that if they feel unsure about their abilities, the way to become good at something is to do it.

Students also work internships in law offices, nonprofits and education organizations. These programs are aimed at expanding their world view and helping them connect why a college degree is essential to making their dreams reality. Jacob Esquivel, who is in 10th grade, has had a couple of jobs through the Kauffman School Job Corps. “I realized the rules I had in my job are literally the rules I have here,” he says.

“By the time you hit 12th grade, I want 100 percent of us to have an experience like this and implement ways to better our community,”
Lofthus tells the group.

Closing out the meeting, Lofthus yells: “Today is yours.”

Students respond: “Make it great!”

Each grade level starts the day with a daily morning meeting. This structured time that brings the school community together helps to build and sustain that community, Lofthus says. Even though the morning routines look different according to grade levels, there is a lot of similarity in the interactions with adults and expectations.

The walls throughout the bright, airy building feature students’ reflections on race by having them confront stereotypes in honest written statements. Through discussions about current events and projects like this, teachers and leaders work to actively affirm students’ racial, cultural and gender identities.

The idea of community is emphasized throughout, as students organize panels and events such as “Project Warmth,” where they made blankets and held a coat drive to present to a local organization. “They always say we know each other like family, but activities like that allow you to know each other like family,” Lofthus says.

During regular college visits, students sit in on lectures so they see what it’s like. At the last one, they were in a higher-level science class hearing a lecture about the cardiovascular system, and the professor remarked that he never saw a high school class take notes like they did. Lofthus says the staff actually changed up the format of some lessons because colleges are still using that lecture-style format, and kids noted they weren’t used to that.

In college seminar, they are debriefing from the Drake visit. Teachers ask what they do at Kauffman that makes them successful.

“SLANT,” answers one student reluctantly, as the enforced habits are something kids don’t always embrace with enthusiasm. The staff loves that this student has come to understand the point of the school emphasis on skills that help focus their attention on academics.

For fifth-grade “community,” all 225 kids are sitting on the floor in a large room, arranged into homeroom groups that are named after their teachers’ alma maters. They each deliver their own fight song about college and send supportive “sizzles” to their peers.

Students watch a clip from “Ellen” and news stories of people showing they care, and guess correctly that the word of the week is compassion. They share ideas about what this means, and teachers prompt one girl to read in a “college voice.”

We can show compassion by “being a friend to someone who’s different from you,” she says.

They recognize “PREP star” students who have shown compassion, perseverance and joy. Teachers read detailed descriptions of how the

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**Data-Driven Culture**

**OBJECTIVE**

Assessment data is used to drive differentiation.

**DRIVERS:**

- Purpose and expectations of schoolwide growth and interim assessment data processes are clear.
- Staff is bought into using data to differentiate instruction.
- Valid and reliable growth and interim assessments that match Common Core/College Readiness Standards for all grades and content have been adopted.
- Timely, leader- and teacher-owned processes are conducted to assess, analyze, and act on data at the schoolwide and individual student level.
- Teachers are held accountable to analyzing and using data.

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students exhibited these traits, such as one student who is known for telling the truth “even when it’s tough.”

“Look at this beautiful green,” teacher Keshia Greve says, waving her hand over a colorful spreadsheet on her laptop screen. The green indicates students are where they should be. Greve is leading a weekly data-driven instruction meeting with ninth-grade algebra teacher Margaret Perko. Teachers are paired with a coach and have weekly DDI meetings.

Their focus turns to one particular standard targeted in a recent lesson, which only 54 percent of students seemed to grasp. It calls for students to write a system of equations from a word problem and solve it. They work to develop the exemplar response, and examine the work of high-performing students to analyze how they solved it and the choices made. Then they move to the lower performing groups of students to try to determine their misconceptions. The majority used .5 instead of .05 to represent nickels.

“It sounds like the error is that students are not correctly writing equations when given real-world situations,” Greve says. “We have to make sure kids have the context because previous problems used a dime and quarters, not nickels.” Greve asks questions that aim to get Perko to articulate the problem and the solution herself. After a pause, she does so, and they decide they will need several “Do Nows” to give students a broader background.

They come up with the “Do Nows,” then review all the exit tickets from the previous week. Data is entered nightly, and they often do a daily reteach based on that data. Every week teachers take the lowest- and highest-leverage exit tickets and dive deep into the misconception. To close out the meeting, Perko and Greve detail the action steps and name an owner for each one, with a deadline.

This structure keeps teachers’ eyes constantly focused on exactly where their students are and what they may need. To supply the data the staff needs for this focus, exit tickets measure whether daily learning targets were met. New students take NWEA to provide a baseline of how students measure up nationally. STEP is used every eight to ten weeks to give teachers detailed information on what kids can and can’t do as readers. Quarterly assessments are used to see if kids are on track to the end-of-year goal. At the high school level, students take ACT Aspire.

Everything is tied to Common Core standards. The staff refines the curriculum yearly as teachers review data. If students clearly didn’t master a particular standard, they go back to the scope and sequence to look at how they’re teaching it and what kids are not understanding, Lofthus says. “By the end of 12th grade, we want kids to pass the Advanced Placement exam—that is the excellence that we define,” she says. All the teachers take the ACT and AP exams because “we need you to understand exactly what you’re going to be driving toward—even as a freshman teacher,” Lofthus says.

“It often kind of wakes you up. ‘Oh my gosh, I have

Black Belt Teaching

OBJECTIVE

Teachers effectively plan and implement the curriculum.

DRIVERS:

I Curriculum includes a vertical scope and sequence aligned to standards and guides teacher planning.

I Teacher and student schedules maximize student learning and teacher development.

I Whole group instruction is engaging, rigorous and aligned to standards.

I Students receive individualized or small-group instruction based on assessment outcomes.

I Data trends from assessments, observations, and walkthroughs are used to support teacher effectiveness through whole school professional development.

I Staff receive frequent coaching and valuable feedback on their teaching performance.
to drive toward this! I need to push my freshmen further!"

For struggling students, each grade level has a period where students can get extra help. In fifth and sixth grades, it’s called “focus” and students are given remediation. In seventh and eighth, its remediation plus independent work time. In high school, it comes in the form of office hours and students must sign up, as if they are in college. On a more daily level, teachers can call in learning support specialists to help break things down for those students who are low across all standards and differentiate for them.

The emphasis on data transforms teacher practice. “It really makes you get into the nitty gritty of what do fifth-graders need to know at an almost anatomical level, and that can be really exciting and it can be really powerful,” says teacher Spencer Hardwick, who grew up in the area and returned two years ago to teach here. “One of the reasons we had pretty good results last year is because we were able to do a lot of deep dives and put four brains together on how to correct or adjust our instruction.”

Each week, principals receive a 60-page packet of data, which includes information on students, teachers, certain behaviors as well as routines and procedures. They drill down into retention, homework, parents’ calls, attendance and GPA. They use all the data to identify weaknesses, tweak processes and steer a team or student back on course. “Our strategy at its core and its foundation has been the same, but the way in which we implement and execute changes rapidly based on data,” Lofthus says.

The quiet bustle in this classroom of 24 sixth-graders is a carefully coordinated dance, which guided reading teacher Shelli Brown choreographs using a voice that barely rises above a whisper. Some students work at individual desks, six are working in a small group at a table with the teacher. Brown calls three students over and talks softly to them about figurative language and character relationships, all while keeping her eye on the rest of the class. While the group of three reads, she informs group two that she’s coming to check their work, then she walks around to survey papers over their shoulders. Within a few seconds, she rejoins the first group to give positive feedback.

Students at each grade level always have access to extra help. Teachers may even call in learning support specialists for additional guidance.

The students starting in September came from 30 different schools across the city. They have been leveled in reading, and Brown and her team differentiate the instruction according to students’ levels. “What we typically find is students come in around kindergarten, first, second-grade levels and it typically takes them until the end of seventh or eighth grade (to catch up),” Lofthus says. “Students who come in at a third- or fourth-grade level, we can get them there in a year or two. That’s the purpose of a self-paced class like this.” Students advance to the next level group as soon as they are ready. In this 50-minute guided reading class, students receive material on their individual level every day. Altogether these students get three blocks of reading class every day—two hours of grade-level instruction learning fifth-grade material, and this class at their own reading level. “So even if I’m a first-grade reader, I’m reading fifth-grade material for 100 minutes a day, so we are meeting the need of the student while pushing them, because if you only meet the need while they’re three levels behind, they will never catch up,” Lofthus says.

The guided reading teachers write plans together. “Essentially, it’s a lot of practice of ‘how do I know
in the lesson when I should go check my other kids and when does Ms. Cooper (the other teacher in the class) check here,” Brown says. “When do I need to prompt a conversation? Throughout our Friday professional development session, we’ve practiced this. The first layer is just learning how to teach the lessons, then how do I monitor independent work and help kids? How do I respond at the table if kids are confused? It’s really practice that got me to know what happens with all those moving pieces.” With this flexible, ability-based grouping, kids move in and out of groups every six to 10 weeks.

To maximize instructional time, the leadership keeps tight routines and procedures. “Teachers who are not following the prescribed routine and procedure have to actually think about what they want to say next and have kids do next, and they often misstep,” Lofthus says. “On average, it takes two minutes longer than if you follow a prescribed routine that is muscle memory that your brain doesn’t even think about—and your kids’ brains don’t even think about.” With hundreds of routines and procedures, that time adds up: “It was pretty staggering. It was like hours a week,” she says. While some critics would argue too many routines can be robotic, the leadership team here says it enables teachers to put that part of their brain on autopilot and not think about how they want students to pass papers in, but rather, to put their creativity and energy into lessons.

Teachers have weekly professional development, on Fridays at 2 p.m., which always begins with shout-outs. For the most part, teachers have four class periods to teach and three planning periods. They will have a data and planning meeting during those planning periods, as well as a one-on-one meeting with a manager. The rest of the time, teachers can plan individually as they see fit.

Spencer Hardwick teaches as part of a team of four, handling 220 kids. The team strives to keep lessons tight and consistent. “If one of your teachers is out, the sub still needs to be able to pick it up, and be able to keep that lesson for those 60 kids,” Hardwick says. “It really made me think about: I know this works for me—how can this work for anybody who picks it up?’ That’s a different way of thinking.” Together the team builds the unit plan over the summer and refines it to make it stronger, he says. Every Monday he rolls out 10 more lessons to the team, then a week later, they give feedback on each one of those 10 lessons. A week later, the team rolls them out to kids.

The coaching model accelerates teacher performance quickly. “Kauffman teaches you the fundamentals really, really well. I knew even though I was a high-performing teacher in my...”
other network, I still had a ton of room for growth and development,” Hardwick says. “I knew this place would give me the core skillsets I would need, in terms of aggressively monitoring, in terms of handling and managing data, how to properly craft scope and sequence and curriculum all the way down to the lesson plan.” The regular feedback helped make him a more complete teacher.

Hannah Lofthus is making sure Kauffman students can compete at any college they want by making up for years in months and pushing students to be their best so they can focus on what matters: their college dreams.

“Kauffman very early on figured I was kind of relying on my personality (with the kids),” which will carry you only so far, Hardwick says. He started working with his coach on giving clear directions, narrating and scanning. “What that allowed me to do by year two was still be myself, still be my personality, but have much stronger command of not only the classroom, but of the instructional material I was given,” says Hardwick. “I could use what I’d been coached with as a platform to amplify the things I was really good at, and then work at the things I was not so good at.”