

Evaluation Report Smart Schools Academies

Final Report

Prepared for
Fund for Colorado's Future
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Smart Schools Academies

Final Report

Overview

The Fund for Colorado's Future developed the Smart Schools Academies to assist leaders charged with improving student achievement in schools rated low or unsatisfactory on the School Accountability Report. The program brought together teams of leaders — superintendents, principals and board of education members — to develop a common framework and approach to school transformation. Each team committed to attending three one-and-a-half-day Smart Schools Academies over a six-month period of time. The Fund for Colorado's Future provided a fee-free program with nationally recognized speakers, team facilitators, overnight accommodations and meals.

Overall, the program successfully implemented the strategies proposed and met most of its stated goals. Participants reported a high degree of satisfaction with the quality of content and the presenters. They valued most the team building aspect of Smart Schools — time for various district leaders to meet, to have facilitated discussions about key issues and to develop strategies for school improvement. More than 90 percent of those surveyed indicated they would be interested in participating in future Smart Schools sessions should the program continue.

Methods

Observation and pre- and post-Academy surveys of participants were used to determine the effects of the Smart Schools Academies program. In addition, reports from the team facilitators were collected and analyzed. This evaluation is based on an understanding of the project goals, strategies and intended outcomes as outlined below.

Goals:

- ?? Build teams from each participating school / district consisting of principals, superintendents and school board members.
- ?? Develop a common sense of purpose and action among school/district teams.
- ?? Provide participants with a common framework, language and set of tools for understanding their roles in school transformation.
- ?? Develop skills in and an appreciation of the importance of data-driven decision-making.
- ?? Provide teams with mentors.
- ?? Develop strategies for school leadership development.

Strategies:

- ?? Bring leaders from low-performing schools together and provide a common sense of purpose: taking on practical issues of school reform.
- ?? Provide content
 - ?? School reform issues, best practices, research-based information
 - ?? Six components of school success: strong leadership, focused curriculum, teacher quality, discipline, assessments, parental involvement.

- ?? Team building, including understanding key roles
- ?? Data-driven decision making tools
- ?? Provide mentors and mentoring framework
- ?? Solicit ideas for school leadership development

Outcomes:

- ?? Participants gain understanding of their specific roles in school improvement.
- ?? Student achievement gains are accelerated in the low-performing schools that participants lead.
- ?? Participants develop and sustain effective internal leadership development practices.

These five questions guided the evaluation effort:

1. Are teams developing a common sense of purpose and a common approach to improving student achievement?
2. Are participants clear about the respective roles of various leaders in the improvement effort?
3. How have leaders' teaming and collaborating skills developed?
4. Have participants improved their ability to use data to inform their decisions?
5. What leadership development practices are being implemented as a result of the Smart Schools work?

The data portrayed in this report is derived from a survey of participants after the final session in Keystone, unless otherwise indicated. There were 45 respondents, out of a total pool of 94 participants, providing for a confidence interval of 95 percent. The statistical range of accuracy in 19 out of 20 cases is ± 10.5 percent for a sample of 45. Responses expressed in this survey should reflect the opinion of Smart Schools Academies participants within the margin of error. Sample tolerances for subgroups are larger.

Participation

The Smart Schools Academies served eight self-selected teams from a range of urban and rural districts. This included the second largest district in the state, Denver, as well as Weldon County, which serves 180 students. The participating districts were: Denver Public Schools; Center Consolidated Schools; Lake County; Pueblo 70; Rocky Ford; Colorado Springs District 11; and Weldon County. Aurora Public Schools withdrew after participating in the first session.

The first of three Academies was held September 28-29, 2001, in Broomfield, with 92 attendees. The second Academy took place in Colorado Springs on November 2-3, 2001, with 94 attendees. The third and final Academy in Keystone April 12-13, 2002, drew 73 participants. A date change for the Keystone event may have led to the drop in attendance for the final academy.

Of those attending, slightly more than half were school principals. School board members and superintendents each comprised approximately 10 percent of the participants. The remainder of participants was a mix of assistant principals, counselors, and district personnel. These percentages were consistent across the three Academies.

Content

The Academies focus on examining these six components of successful schools and school districts:

1. Strong leadership
2. Focused Curriculum
3. Teacher Quality
4. Discipline
5. Assessments
6. Parental Involvement

The first of the Smart Schools Academies brought together national and local educators to discuss strong leadership in low performing schools, as well as to focus on using CSAP data to inform instructional decision-making. Teams were provided blocks of time to meet and develop goals based on components of a smartly managed school/district.

The second of the Smart Schools Academies featured panels of local and national experts discussing at-risk populations and the types of curricula that best serve their needs. A morning session was devoted to understanding the link between poverty and student achievement. Again, teams met to refine goals and strategies in their improvement plans.

The third Smart Schools session focused on student discipline and community engagement. As with previous Academies, the agenda included time for teams to meet and advance their work together.

Participant Feedback

During the first Academy, participants were surveyed regarding their curriculum and staff development needs, as well as the challenges they face in transforming their schools. Participant comments show that leaders are facing many of the same issues. Based on an aggregation of all comments, the top 5 challenges facing leaders can be ranked as follows:

1. Limited time and resources
Time, money and materials constraints are a challenge common to each district.
2. Lack of specific, timely and decipherable data
These school and district leaders consistently call for accurate data that can point the way to school improvements. Moreover, they need data analysis tools and skill development.
3. Parental, student, and community apathy or lack of engagement

These educators perceive lack of support from and on behalf of students as an impediment to positive change.

4. Demographic challenges

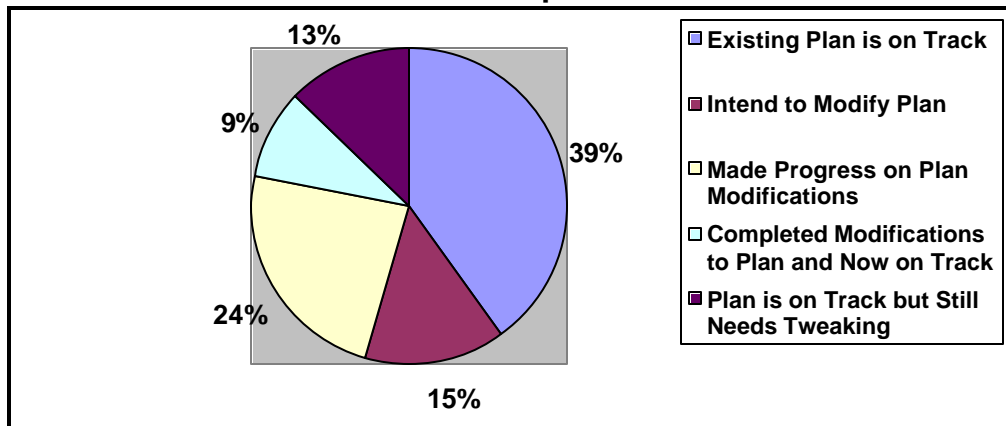
The socioeconomic status of the community, language barriers, and high rates of student mobility are among the demographic factors that affect education efforts.

5. Staff resistance to change

Participants are challenged to get staff support for school improvement efforts.

All participants indicated that they have a plan for school improvement in place. Nearly 40 percent of respondents believe their existing plan is on track and used the team time at Smart Schools Academies to actualize the plan. Others used their team time to work on modifying their plan.

Figure 1
Status of School Improvement Plan

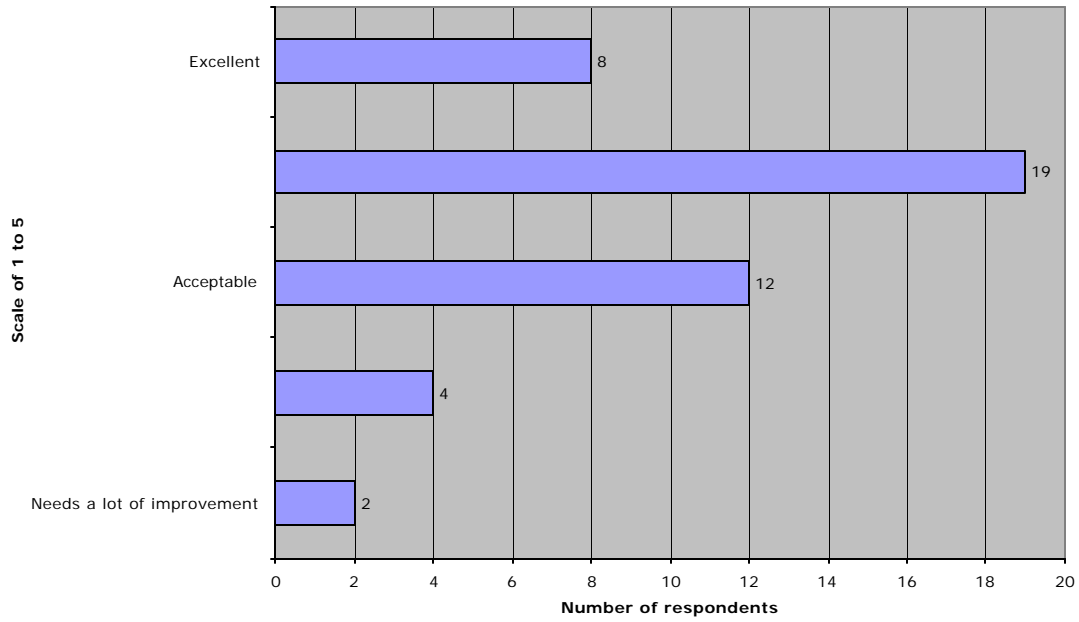


Participants valued the team planning and working time more than all other aspects of the Academies, including speakers and panel discussions. One participant commented, “Our district developed a collegial team and will continue to address” leadership development practices.” Another stated, “The time given to teams to hear excellent speakers and then discuss was very useful.”

Participants at the final Academy in Keystone were asked a series of questions related to the Smart Schools Academies as a whole. The responses were positive in general, with a high degree of interest in continuing the Smart Schools Academies.

Figure 2

Quality of Content

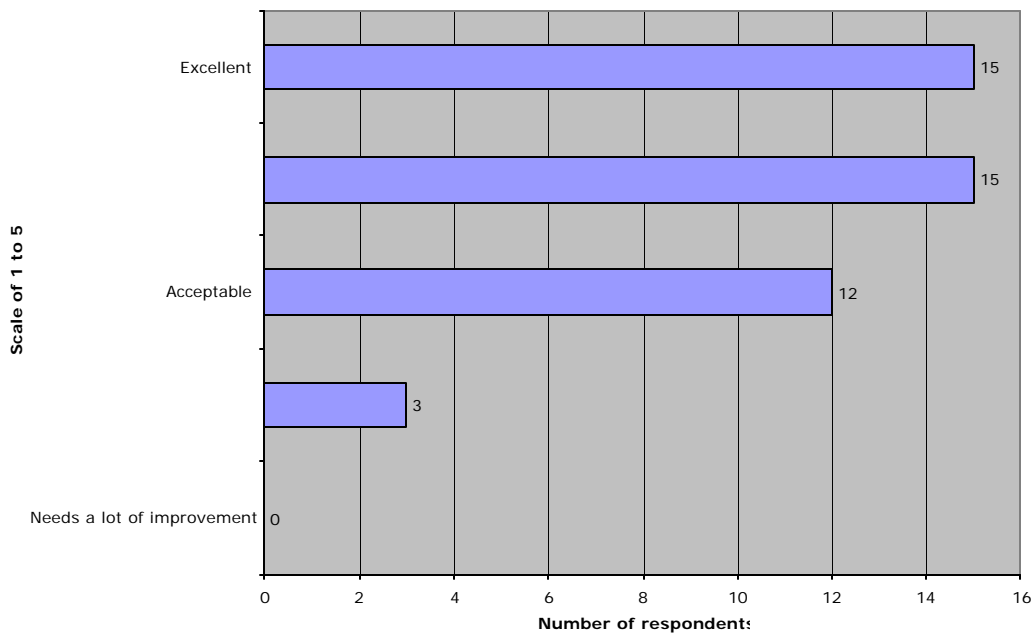


Q4a. Please rate the Smart Schools Academies (all three sessions) in terms of content quality.

Sixty percent of those surveyed found the content at Smart Schools Academies Very Good or Excellent (Fig. 2), while 66% gave presenters those high marks (Fig.3).

Figure 3

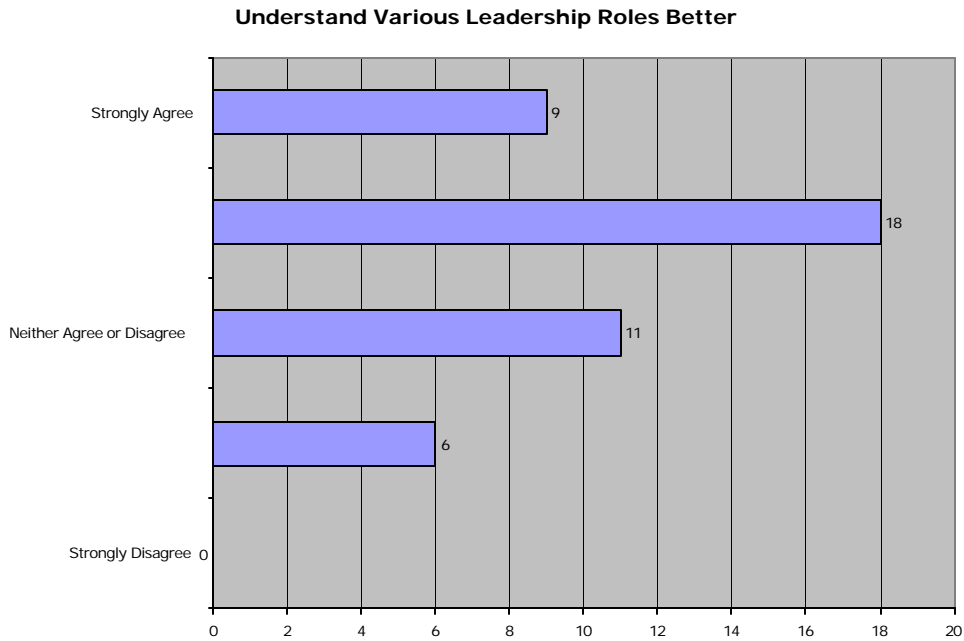
Quality of Presenter:



Q4b. Please rate the Smart Schools Academies (all three sessions) in terms of the quality of presenters.

One of the intended outcomes of the Academies was to help participants gain an understanding of their specific roles in school improvement. Most agreed that they came away with a clearer understanding of these leadership roles.

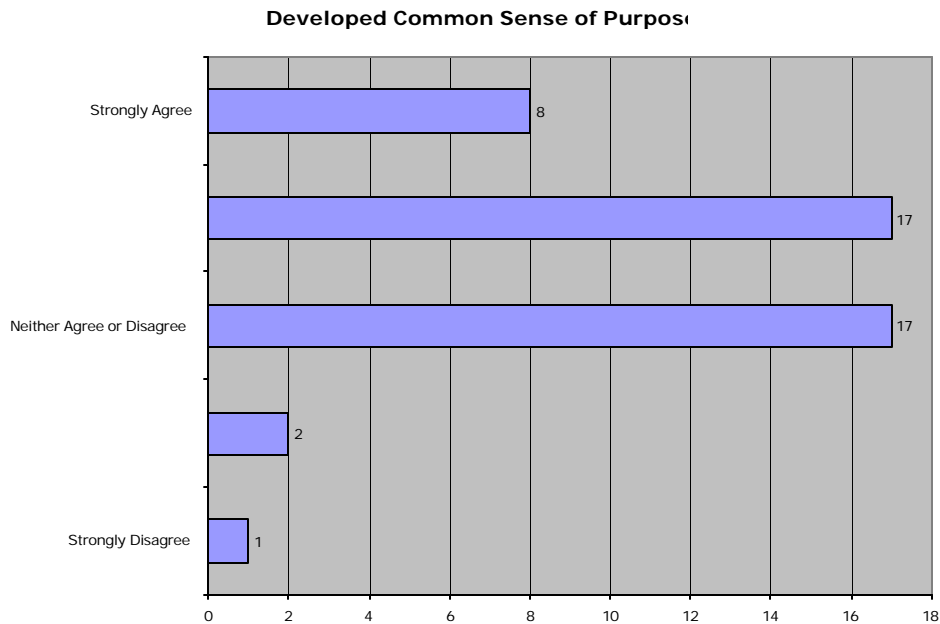
Figure 4



Q5. After attending the Smart Schools Academies, I have a clearer understanding of the roles of various leaders in school improvement.

While a majority agreed that they developed a common sense of purpose with team members, a significant percentage (37%) was noncommittal on this topic (Fig. 5).

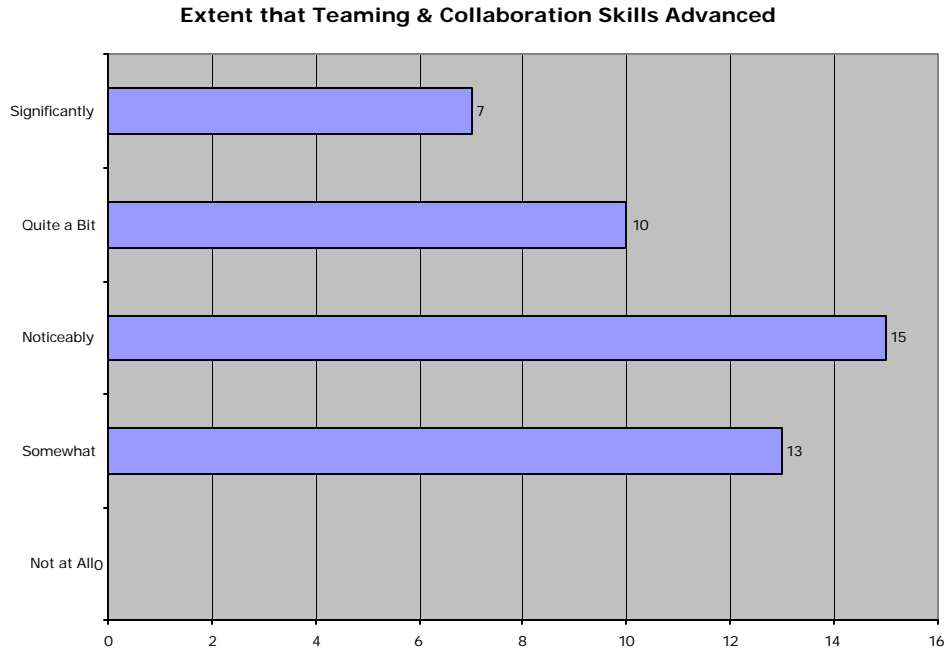
Figure 5



Q6. Our team developed a common sense of purpose with regard to improving student achievement.

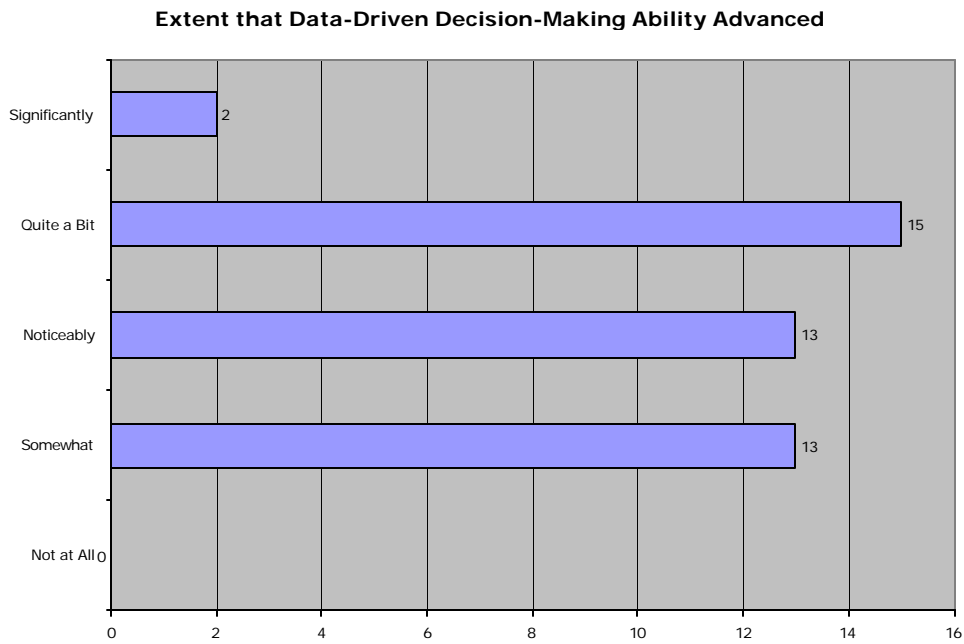
All participants surveyed reported advancement in their teaming and collaboration skills (Fig. 6) as well as their ability to use data to inform decision making (Fig. 7).

Figure 6



Q7. Describe how your teaming and collaboration skills advanced as a result of the Smart Schools Academies.

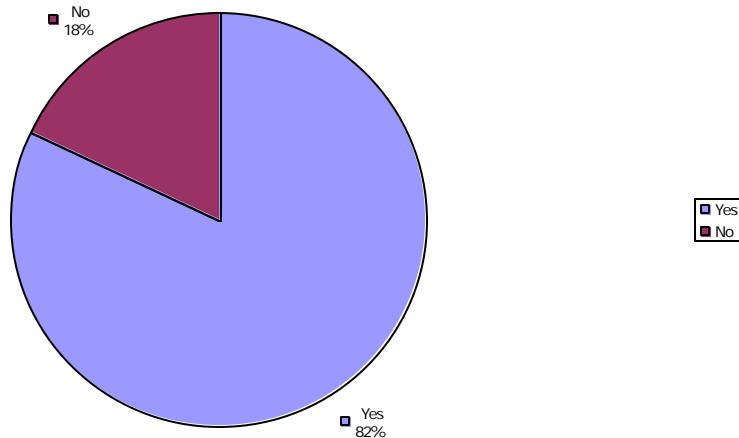
Figure 7



Q8. Describe how your ability to use data to inform decision-making advanced as a result of the Smart Schools Academies.

Figure 8

Implementing New Leadership Practices



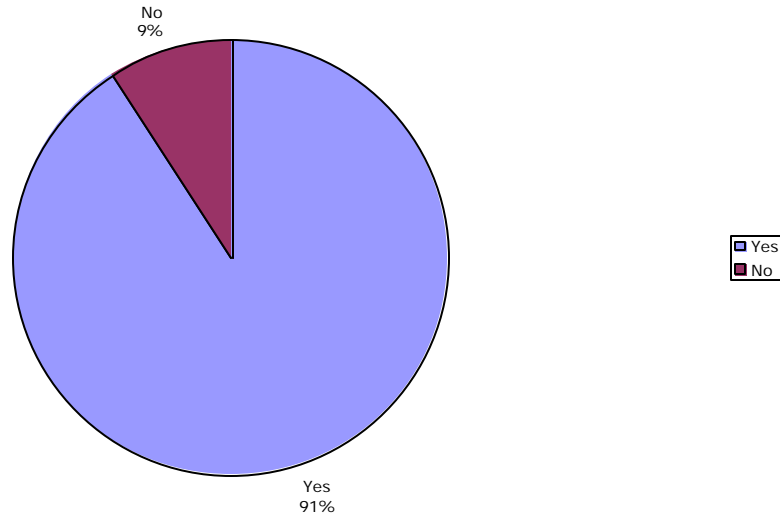
Q9. Are new leadership development practices being implemented in your district as a result of Smart Schools Academies?

Eighty-two percent of participants said their district is implementing new leadership development practices stemming from Smart Schools Academies. When asked to describe these efforts, respondents often discussed team building capacity and better communication between leaders. Others mentioned specific efforts to get parents and community members engaged in increasing student achievement. Here is a sample of responses.

- ✍ “Small group meetings with faculty have been effective in our school as a result of the academies.”*
- ✍ “Leadership team is more task oriented.*
- ✍ “We have become more focused and have aligned our goals.”*
- ✍ [We are] “holding staff accountable and sticking with changes we have implemented.”*
- ✍ “Stronger sense of direction — not new practices.”*
- ✍ [We have held] “a series of meetings with community members to discuss schools and what we need to improve. Administrators really trying to change certain behaviors to respect students more.”*
- ✍ “DPS is being reorganized and a new literacy and math focus is being introduced.”*

Figure 9

Would You Attend More Smart Schools in the Future



Q10. Would you be interested in attending additional Smart Schools Academies in the future?

More than 90 percent of respondents indicated an interest in continuing to participate in Smart Schools Academies. Those responding Yes were asked to rank the three topical areas of greatest interest for future Academies out of the following list: technology training, data mining / data-driven decision making, grant writing workshops, access to national experts, leadership development, parent / community engagement, demographic challenges (mobility, limited English, poverty), school safety and other. Two topics tied for third place. The areas of most interest were:

1. Parent / Community Engagement
2. Data Mining / Data-Driven Decision Making
3. Access to National Experts
Demographic Challenges (mobility, limited English, poverty)

When prompted for additional comments and suggestions, many respondents expressed appreciation for the program, several offered suggestions and a few voiced complaints about speakers. Here is a sampling of responses.

✍ “Please continue this model of academies for other districts in the future. Also a “year two” track would be awesome — I don’t want to lose the momentum or connection with Colorado Fund.”

✍ “It would be helpful if we had more notice on the last two sessions...”

✍ Fantastic opportunity and resources!...”

✍ “In a perfect world it would be great for each school represented to have a Smart Schools mentor to work with you and your building for a year. It would take grant money but the potential would be huge!”

✍ “Appreciated the focus on respect toward parents that today's speakers gave. Much discussion about the value of Ruby Payne's work and her trainers. Colorado Springs brought Ruby Payne into the district in August & instituted a Training of Trainers model. Each trainer or presenter that Smart Schools used gave a unique, helpful perspective.”

Conclusion

Of the three intended outcomes of the Smart Schools Academies, two were clearly met and one remains to be seen. First, a large majority (82 percent) of participants surveyed reported implementing new leadership development practices as a result of Smart Schools. Second, 60 percent reported having a clearer understanding of the roles of various leaders in school improvement.

It is beyond the scope of this report to evaluate the success of the third intended outcome of Smart Schools — to accelerate student achievement gains in the low-performing schools led by participants. An important research opportunity exists to collect trend data on student achievement in participating districts over the next several years to prove or disprove that this outcome was met, as well as to follow the efforts of school and district leaders to implement the plans developed at the Smart Schools Academies. Additional opportunities exist to extend the involvement of this cohort of participants into future Academies, and to offer the Academies to other low-performing school districts in Colorado.