
Case Study: Ewing Marion Kauffman School

Kansas City, MO | 839 students, grades 5-10

78% African-American | 12% Latino | 100% low-income

Profile: Laura Miguez Howarth, 2016 Ryan Award Winner

Most Missouri schools 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. 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 late fall 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."*

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.

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 her students 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. 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



Principal Hannah Lofthus accepts her 2016 Ryan Award for excellence from Pat Ryan (Founder) and Nora Ligurotis (CEO) of Accelerate Institute.



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,"* says Lofthus, the daughter of a teacher and a school principal, who attended Kansas City public schools.

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.

On this late fall 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.

"It was an ambitious goal," 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."*

Lofthus' systems 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.

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. 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.

To maximize instructional time, the leadership keeps to 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 dozens of routines and procedures needed throughout the school week, the potential for lost learning time adds up: *"It was pretty staggering. It was like hours a week,"* she says. The leadership team says Kauffman's approach 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 funnel all their creativity and energy into effective lessons.

Lofthus has always been frank about her plan. While knocking on doors in the neighborhood to recruit families years ago, Lofthus laid out the story of what she hoped the school could be in four to five years. She acknowledged that it might be tough at times. She would tell them, however: *"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."*