

AMBITIOUS INSTRUCTION

Ambitious instruction happens when teachers hold **high expectations for their students** while also meeting them where they are to **help them grow academically**.

Ambitious instruction is a schoolwide commitment to **pairing high expectations with high support**, where strong teaching is the standard in every classroom. Teachers carry the daily work of holding a high bar while meeting students where they are, and leaders are responsible for making the bar clear: establishing a **vision for instructional excellence**, **defining each person's role** in achieving it, **aligning high-quality curriculum**, and **building teacher capacity** to carry out that vision through coaching, professional development, and common goals. In learning environments where students have a **vast variety of interests, strengths, needs, and prior knowledge and experiences**, differentiating lesson content and instructional methods is deeply important. Ambitious instruction happens not only when students are presented with curriculum and learning opportunities that **appropriately support and challenge them**, but also when **teachers are given the training, resources, and support** to do so.

Further, ambitious instruction is only possible with **strong data practices**. Thriving schools use data to understand student's strengths and misunderstandings, set goals, track progress, and differentiate instruction so that every student can reach high expectations.

As an example of what this looks like in practice, one MNPS school spent two years narrowing its improvement work to **three priorities tied to student ownership of learning** — high-level questions, collaborative structures, and academic feedback. The school saw **gains in behavior, attendance, and classroom engagement**, and moved from a Level 1 to a Level 5 in TVAAS growth. In another classroom, a teacher builds the year around starting with very high support and gradually releasing it: building in **productive struggle**, making it okay to fail, and constantly asking students to **explain their thinking**.

*"We know when we have ambitious instruction in classrooms... you can see it in the student work on the walls. It's not just decorations — it's evidence of what kids are actually doing."
- MNPS principal*

Educator perspective:

What does this condition look like in practice?

- A **clear vision for instructional excellence** that is defined and shared, and supports productive conversations about teaching in coaching and team meetings
- **High academic expectations** paired with a **strong belief in students'** ability and desire to succeed
- **High-quality curriculum** that supports teachers in using strong, standards-aligned materials as the foundation for daily instruction
- Differentiated instruction for **diverse learning needs**
- Students have a variety of opportunities to **demonstrate mastery**
- **Student work is displayed** that reflects substantive, rigorous tasks
- Students can **articulate what they are learning**, why it matters, and how they will know they have mastered it
- **Student data is discussed regularly** in collaborative team meetings



How do other Thriving Schools conditions intersect with Ambitious Instruction?

Just as students need support to reach high expectations, teachers and leaders need support to provide it, which makes professional learning and a **Culture of Collaboration** essential to this condition. For example, planning vertically with same-subject teachers in other grade levels helps educators know what knowledge and skills students arrive with and what they need to be prepared for next. **Effective School Leadership** is critical as well: leaders protect time for collaboration, invest in coaching, and keep the school's instructional focus narrow enough to actually move practice. Ambitious instruction also depends on **Engaging and Relevant Educational Experiences**, because rigor lands when students find joy and meaning in the work. It also depends on an **Inclusive and Supportive School Culture**: students need to be mentally and emotionally regulated to engage academically, which is why supports like multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) and school counselors are such an important part of the instructional picture, not separate from it.

"We know that when teachers hold very high expectations for students and lead strong learning in the classroom, we really see students grow."
- MNPS principal

How do outside-of-school factors play a role?

aligned assessments, and instructional tools like standards-based documents that define what mastery looks like at each level, so that expectations are concrete and consistent across schools. Families strengthen this condition too: when schools share clear academic goals with parents and pair them with attainable ways to support learning at home, **high expectations extend beyond the school day**.

Ambitious instruction is supported by decisions made beyond the school. The district plays a key role by **providing high-quality curriculum,**

Measurement and evaluation:
How do schools know what's working?

- **TCAP proficiency data** indicates whether students are meeting, exceeding, or approaching grade-level expectations
- **TVAAS growth data** shows the state's measure of how much students grow academically in a year, regardless of where they start — providing the clearest evidence of high expectations paired with high support.
- **Benchmark academic data** indicates how students are progressing in key skills like reading, math, and English proficiency through short check-in assessments given several times a year. Thriving schools use these to set goals, track progress, and adjust or reteach when results fall short.
- **Student school culture and climate survey data** provide evidence of students' own experience of rigor: whether they feel academically challenged and well taught.
- **Ready Graduate rates** help indicate whether students leave high school prepared for college or career: the long-term payoff of ambitious instruction year after year.

Explore other Thriving Schools Conditions:

[CULTURE OF COLLABORATION](#) | [RESOURCE ALIGNMENT](#) | [INCLUSIVE AND SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL CULTURE](#)
[ENGAGING AND RELEVANT EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES](#) | [EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP](#) | [THRIVING SCHOOLS FRAMEWORK](#)