



# TAKING A MEASURE OF IMPACT

**2 COLORADO DISTRICTS CALIBRATE  
THE EFFECTS OF HIGH-QUALITY  
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

By Linda Jacobson

## Denver Public Schools

When Denver Public Schools joined the Redesign PD Community of Practice, leaders knew they needed to work on improving professional learning across the district. They had recently created a new Professional Learning Center and wanted to influence the learning delivered by central office departments and by instructional superintendents working with principals.

“Data showed that the professional learning from the central level was not that great,” says Theress Pidick, the district’s executive director of the Professional Learning Center. “We felt compelled to create this new role.”

That new role was the professional learning partner — a position that helps subject-matter experts and others provide educators with a high-quality learning experience. The first four professional learning partners hired planned to work with the central office experts as well as with the instructional superintendents who supervise principals. But that direction changed after Pidick realized that some administrators didn’t fully maximize the professional learning partners’ intended role.

“Initially there was some skepticism about why these roles were needed,” Pidick says, adding that now the professional learning partners are only working with the central office departments. “We went where we were needed and wanted the most.”

### CREATING A ‘ROBUST SERVICE MODEL’

And the demand for their services is growing. The team will expand from four to seven, and one department in particular — student services — has even allocated money for a professional learning partner position. The district also created a position for a professional learning analyst who will work as part of the evaluation team but will focus on trends among educators to better determine where they need more support.

Pidick’s team has created a service model that clearly describes what professional learning partners do, which is to introduce subject-matter experts to the district’s professional learning

resources, plan and design feedback, and observe practice and live sessions.

“We shifted from responding to requests to providing a real robust service model,” says Gabe DeMola, a professional learning partner.

Professional learning partners also collect and review feedback from participants in the actual sessions. While professional learning partners provide service to over a half-dozen departments, they have prioritized two areas for the district: training in early literacy for about 2,000 teachers and the roll-out of a new 9th- to 12th-grade English language arts curriculum that focuses on aligning Common Core literacy practices with Common Core resources. Roughly 150 teachers are part of that training, which will continue through the upcoming school year, says Lindsey Smith, director of K-12 literacy for the district.

The professional learning partner, Smith says, provided feedback on the professional development plan and “helped us to strengthen the PD sessions.”

### ‘MEETING THE DEMAND’

Pidick says it is an ongoing challenge to help departments understand how best to leverage the professional learning partner’s expertise and that they are there to support the design, delivery, and measurement of high-quality professional learning. The center is committed to implementing the new service model and is partnering with central departments to ensure the focus is on continuous improvement.

“Meeting the demand, even with the increased resources, will be a challenge,” she says, adding that her team is “constantly looking at how they spread their time.”

Compared to how professional learning took place before, professional learning partner Georgie Washington says the district has made significant progress.

“Before the creation of the center, there were many individuals and teams that had it on their radar to provide high-quality support for adults,” Washington says, adding that given

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competing priorities and tight timelines, many struggled to ensure that best practices in adult learning also remained at the forefront.

Now, the departments can call on expert consultants and are making use of the resources “on what a day of PD should look like,” she says. “They are taking our tools and running with them.”

## Jefferson County

Tina Christensen, a 7th-grade English language arts teacher at Falcon Bluffs Middle School in Littleton, Colorado, has been wanting to improve the way she structures minilessons for her students. So she pulls up the district professional learning dashboard on her computer and adds a new “professional goal.” Creating the goal offers Christensen a variety of resources, such as videos and articles, and captures the “action items” she chooses to improve her practice.

Giving teachers this flexibility to choose the resources that meet their needs has been a high priority for Jefferson County Public Schools in Colorado, one of 22 school systems participating in the Redesign PD Community of Practice. But the team has also decided that it’s equally important to ensure that professional learning meets specific standards of quality.

“How do we make sure we lift up and support our teachers, but also make sure that it is high quality?” explains Marna Messer, the district’s assistant director of Innovative Professional Development (iPD) initiative.

When the district team first looked at the wide variety of professional learning opportunities the district provides, they realized that there had probably been more emphasis on the quality of the offering and not enough on how teachers were implementing what they had learned and whether data was being used to determine the impact of the learning.

So the team had some honest conversations about how to shift away from just providing professional learning and move in the direction of making sure teachers receive ongoing support tied to that learning.

### BECOMING A ‘GROWTH-ORIENTED SYSTEM’

As part of the Cycle of Inquiry that the Community of Practice districts use to address challenges and make progress, the team first engaged a group of about 150 people at the central office level in studying the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) and discussing what the district was doing to meet those standards.

“We weren’t always in the same place,” Messer says, adding that the next step involved developing some key elements to look for related to professional learning.

Because they initially received such diverse opinions from the larger group of 150 on how to measure professional learn-

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— Marna Messer, Jefferson County Public Schools

ing, the team decided to scale back for the second cycle and test those “look-fors” with a smaller group. When the district holds its Launch, Learn and Lead summer institute in August, the smaller group of about 30 participants will apply those standards to the learning provided through the institute. The question, Messer says, is, “How do we become a growth-oriented system and help our professional learning get better and better?”

The district’s work with the standards will also guide those educators working to make the professional learning tool as useful for teachers as possible.

“We’re really excited about the standards because they will bring common language and common expectations around professional learning to our district,” says Lisa Summitt, an instructional specialist with Jefferson County. She adds that her team is especially focusing on one aspect of the Resources standard, which states: “Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning.”

“Since a good portion of our work on the professional learning module in the dashboard is finding and vetting excellent resources for teachers in order to constantly improve in the classroom,” she says, “we will use this standard to drive our work this coming year.”

Going forward, Messer says the challenge will be how to again spread understanding and ownership of the standards across schools. “If you go too big, you don’t get deep, you get compliance,” she says. “There’s not enough buy-in.”

Mary Beth Bazzanella, director of educational technology for the district, calls the dashboard “a foundational tool that complements the entire teaching-learning cycle.” She adds that she’s encouraged by the attention cabinet-level officials in the district are giving to professional learning. “We’re pushing into the classroom,” she says, “but we’re also pushing up to the district level.”

### REFERENCE

**Learning Forward. (2011).** *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.

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