



REMOTE POSSIBILITIES

RURAL TEACHERS IN COLORADO HONE THEIR SKILLS AS THEY CONNECT WITH PEERS

BY BETH MELTON

When it comes to rural, this place is it. Spread over the vast northwest corner of Colorado, it takes over two hours (on a good day) to drive from one end of the region to the other. There's a 9,000-foot mountain pass in the middle. We get an average of 175 inches of snow each year. And one of our member districts is an area that's still officially designated as "frontier."

In 2014, we — the Northwest Colorado Board of Cooperative Educational Services (NW BOCES) — were awarded a U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation (i3) grant to address the challenges of providing high-quality professional

development to teachers in rural schools. Those challenges include inadequate access due to remoteness, limited resources available to individual school systems, and small school sizes leading to teacher isolation. With the support of this grant funding, we're developing a System for Educator Effectiveness Development (SEED).

OUR APPROACH

I'm one of the members on the SEED team that designed this project. Our team includes coaches, a project manager, and a project director working together to answer these three questions: How might professional learning influence teacher practice? How might rural educators connect with regional peers to reduce

isolation? And how might Colorado's teacher evaluation system be used as a meaningful opportunity for growth?

As with all professional learning, our ultimate goal is to improve student outcomes. We believe we can do so by:

- Using teacher evaluation data, teacher needs, and evidence-based practices to drive the content of professional learning;
- Addressing the needs of teachers by leveraging technology to engage them in professional learning opportunities;
- Embedding professional learning organically within the teacher evaluation process;
- Providing teachers options for professional learning; and
- Giving teachers the support



Lake Granby in Colorado is part of a vast region served by the Northwest Colorado Board of Cooperative Educational Services. Its remoteness presents unique challenges for professional learning.

they need to apply their learning in unique classroom settings over time.

By designing professional learning that meets these criteria, we expect that teachers' knowledge of best practices will increase, principals will become more engaged in the professional learning of those they supervise, teachers will regularly apply what they've learned in the classroom, and student engagement will increase, thus leading to improved student achievement.

KEY COMPONENTS

Our system has three key components: It leverages technology, aligns to the state teacher evaluation, and adapts Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (2011) to a multidistrict setting. Let's look at each of these in depth.

TECHNOLOGY

In our rural setting, teachers often need to travel long distances to attend

high-quality professional learning. In our mountainous region, weather can make traveling difficult throughout much of the school year.

Moreover, many of our teachers hold multiple responsibilities — from coaching track, to serving on a committee, to driving the school bus — that make it difficult to collaborate with peers routinely and make it almost impossible to attend professional development after school or on the weekend. As a result, most professional learning has historically been workshops provided by third parties during the summer.

Without follow-up and support, this is one of the least effective forms of professional learning, so we're trying to change the model in our region. We've now designed professional learning that teachers can complete on their own time with minimal travel.

By offering a menu of technology-supported professional learning options, we've found that teachers are able to connect with their regional colleagues

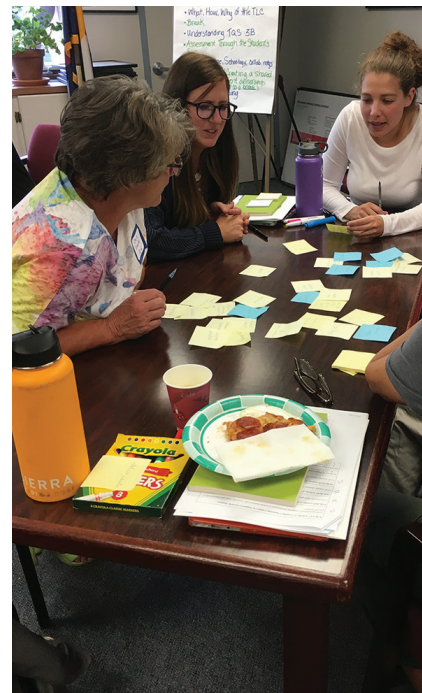


Photo by BETH MELTON
Educators work to define student ownership in August 2017. From left, Lauren Curcio (Steamboat Springs High School), Becca Chernin (East Grand Middle School), and Chris Tinkum (Granby Elementary School).

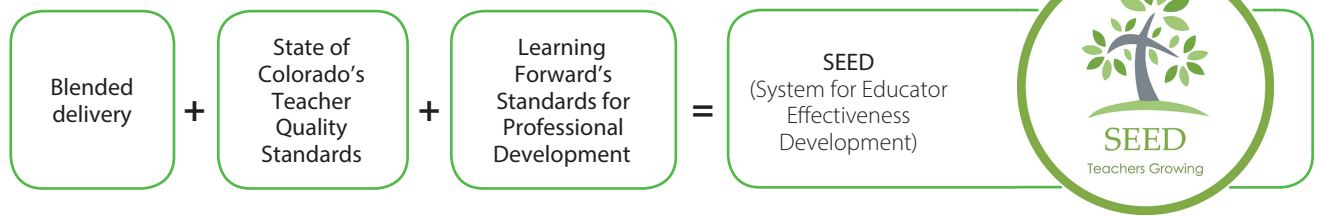
and learn together in meaningful ways throughout the school year. Each of the following options uses technology in a different way.

Personalized Accessible Knowledge (SEED PAK)

One of our largest undertakings has been creating an online resource library for teachers. Our team of coaches identifies resources that are evidence-based, high-quality, and relevant to teachers and aligns them to the standards in the Colorado teacher evaluation rubric.

Principals can assign various resources through the state's online evaluation system that align with goal areas in the teachers' evaluations. Teachers can also assign resources to themselves. Administrators can then monitor teachers' progress toward mastering the material and continue to have conversations with them

KEY COMPONENTS OF SEED



throughout the year. Teachers receive recertification hours after reviewing the material and answering a few questions.

This online library is a valuable resource for teachers who want to engage in professional learning on their own schedule. Although this form of professional learning is unlikely to suffice on its own to change a teacher’s practice, it’s important for teachers to have an option that enables them to work independently and that develops a habit of learning and reflection.

Teacher Learning Communities

The most in-depth professional learning we offer is a semester-long teacher learning community. These offerings are structured like a graduate course and enable teachers to earn continuing education graduate credits.

We run two to three teacher learning communities each semester, with anywhere from 10 to 30 participants in each.

To date, we’ve offered topics such as increasing student ownership of learning, developing classrooms of inquiry, thoughtful technology integration, and students as partners in creating a positive classroom environment.

The teacher learning communities use a blended learning model in which teachers meet with one another on two face-to-face days, engage in online discussions about the course content, and meet with a coach several times throughout the semester. This blended model enables our rural teachers to connect with one another while minimizing travel.

Professional Practice Study

For teachers who wanted to go into more depth than the SEED PAK could offer but who weren’t able to commit to a semester-long teacher learning community, we designed a third option — a six-week professional practice study.

In this shorter course, teachers engage with one another and a coach in a six-week, one-credit course that is 100% online. We typically have 10 to 20 teachers in each professional practice study. They have three virtual meetings, two virtual coaching sessions, and online work that includes reviewing resources and participating in a discussion board.

TEACHER EVALUATION RUBRIC

In 2011, the State of Colorado created a teacher evaluation system designed to ensure that all students have effective teachers. As part of this system, a rubric was developed (Colorado Department of Education, 2017) that member districts use for teacher evaluation. When we were identifying innovative ways to provide high-quality professional development to rural teachers, we looked to the rubric as a guide. Because all teachers in the region are evaluated on the same rubric, we structured professional learning using its criteria.

In the SEED PAK, resource links are searchable based on their alignment with the rubric, and administrators can assign resources to teachers according to the practices they’ve identified as goals. Teacher learning communities are always

aligned to one element of the rubric.

We can identify widely applicable professional development needs on the basis of regional rubric data, which include final evaluation scores from the teachers’ evaluators as well as self-assessment scores.

For example, we’ve seen a great need in the area of formative assessment, Element IIIB on the teacher evaluation rubric: *Teachers use formal and informal methods to assess student learning, provide feedback, and use results to inform planning and instruction (focus on increasing student ownership of learning)*. So we developed a teacher learning community that focuses on this practice, and we integrated the following learning targets:

- I will intentionally create an environment in which students take academic risks and demonstrate a growth mindset.
- I will engage students in practices for self-assessment that accelerate student learning.
- I will provide high-quality, academically actionable feedback to students.
- I will actively engage students in monitoring and reflecting on their learning.

Because of the small district sizes (ranging from about 200 to 2,000 students), it can be nearly impossible to create robust learning options for teachers within an individual school. Many teachers are the only one in their content area or grade level, and support resources are limited. By aligning professional learning to the state teacher

evaluation rubric, we're able to create a tool for meaningful collaborative learning across multiple districts.

STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The final component in the SEED model is use of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). Although the standards are written for professional learning in a single-school or single-district context, we've found that we're able to use the spirit of each standard to lead us to the best practices for professional learning. Here's how the SEED project exemplifies each standard.

Learning Designs. This standard is the primary focus of our work. We create professional learning that engages educators in constructing their own knowledge and respects them as adult learners. We view all teachers as ongoing learners and encourage teachers to embrace a growth mindset in their professional practice.

We use research on adult learning to guide our work and create professional learning that is discussion-based and appropriately paced (giving time for thinking and processing); allows teachers to create relevance to their own contexts; is embedded in daily classroom practice; and provides a high degree of autonomy to self-select learning experiences.

We give teachers authority to lead their own learning, and we draw on this authority by using teachers to develop professional learning opportunities. Each summer, we convene a content development team, and we pay a stipend to teachers to review a draft of the content developed and provide feedback to create a final product.

We recognize the inherently social nature of learning and strive to provide ample opportunity for teachers to connect with others, both virtually and

face to face. We balance collaborative work with extensive personal reflection through journaling and coaching. To overcome the challenges of providing high-quality professional learning to teachers who work in a rural context, we adapt these learning designs to a technology-enhanced environment.

Learning Communities. We strive to increase the opportunities that educators have to connect, collaborate, and learn together. When multiple teachers within a school participate in SEED professional learning together, we help support and facilitate conversations that lead to a shared commitment and goal.

Educators connect with one another and work together to tackle problems of practice through online and in-person conversations. We also seek to make the SEED PAK a place where teachers can come together and connect virtually through social media tools.

Leadership. The SEED team provides leaders at the regional level by developing resources, advocating for high-quality professional learning, and creating support systems through our offerings. In addition, we work closely with building- and district-level leaders to assist in supporting professional learning in their buildings, both through whole-staff learning and more individualized opportunities as part of the teacher evaluation process.

Data. We use data from teachers' evaluations to determine topics for professional learning. Teachers in teacher learning communities use student data and student work to evaluate the effectiveness of their new practices.

We also collect input from teachers and principals based on the needs they've identified within their schools so we can create professional learning that supports their school improvement efforts. Finally, we collect data on student achievement and engagement,

as well as teacher and principal perceptions of the professional learning we provide, which is formally evaluated by an external researcher annually.

Resources. By providing ongoing coaching support and resources for learning more about the professional practices in our teacher evaluation rubric, we're able to give our schools and districts opportunities for personalized professional learning. To make it easier for teachers to fit professional learning into their busy schedules, we try to create opportunities that are sensitive to the demands on a teacher's time and that offer flexibility.

Implementation. We regularly use a tool called Navigating Change (Colorado Education Initiative, 2014), which guides our thinking about helping educators navigate through changes in their practice. We provide ongoing support for teachers to improve their practice through coaching and opportunities to collaborate with regional peers.

We also focus on building administrator capacity to support teachers' growth. We have a regional principal learning community that supports principals with the challenges of their job — especially those particular to rural leadership. We work directly with principals in this setting to share strategies and tools we've found to be successful. We also partner with principals individually to identify content that might help support their building-level initiatives.

Outcomes. We believe that the teacher evaluation system can be a tool for change. However, we also recognize that it can easily become little more than a compliance measure. By aligning all SEED professional learning with the professional practices in the Colorado teacher evaluation rubric, including a direct integration of the evaluation tool with our online library and alignment of content to these professional practices,

we give teachers and administrators tools for using the evaluation cycle as an instrument for growth.

SO FAR, SO GOOD

Since receiving the grant, we’ve completed one year of development, a half-year pilot, and one year of full implementation, and the results are promising. Teachers who participated in our professional learning have told us that they valued the resources, the new teaching practices they learned, and the fact that they were able to immediately try out those practices in their classrooms. Others mentioned how valuable it was to connect with other educators.

After our pilot teacher learning community in spring 2016, in which 66 teachers participated, teacher and administrator surveys and interviews indicated that teachers who had participated were significantly more likely than other teachers to say:

- “PD increases my enthusiasm for teaching.”
- “PD encourages me to reflect on aspects of my teaching.”

- “I learn new and different ideas from my PD experiences.”
- “Knowledge gained from PD improves my teaching skills.”
- “PD content is up-to-date and evidence-based.”

Several participants attributed their students’ success on the state assessment to some of the new practices they had implemented in their classrooms. Teachers also reported increased student engagement in the learning process.

MAKING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING A PRIORITY

We’re grateful for this opportunity to explore new and innovative ways to provide high-quality professional learning experiences to rural teachers, but the work is not over. We continue to refine the systems that will help ensure all students have an effective teacher in their classrooms, and we’re already working on identifying how we might sustain this work after the grant funding period is over.

We think it’s possible, however, because we’re seeing that when teachers have the opportunity to engage in

learning that influences their practice, they’re hungry for more — and providing that learning becomes a priority for decision-makers, funders, and their communities.

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Middle school flips the script

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Microsoft, Dell, and superintendents from across the United States echoed the themes we hear from all who come to visit our school: They remark on the high level of student engagement with technology, teachers’ effective use of technology, and the school’s positive culture. Other teacher leaders regularly ask to visit our school to see how we incorporate technology in small-group instruction.

We’ve also seen growth in both math and reading, according to Measures of Academic Progress data. Schoolwide math scores have increased from 53% in 2015-16 to 63.9% in 2017-18,

and English language arts scores have increased from 54.5% to 58.4%.

THE WORK IN ACTION

“I’ll gather the resources for the microcredential on questioning,” I said at the end of the meeting with St. Germain and Park. Both teachers were in the AVID inquiry team, and higher-order questioning was part of their everyday tool kit. They would weave questioning and critical thinking into their lessons with beauty and ease.

I couldn’t wait to invite other teachers in for a Greenlight Learning Walk to see the work in action exactly where it should be happening — in the

classroom with each and every student.

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