

OCTOBER 2011

Pioneering Districts

Eagle County School District

Implementing Educator Effectiveness Systems



Investing in Innovation
in our Public Schools

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 4 |
| District Context | 6 |
| District Mission, Vision and Values | 6 |
| The Instructional Program | 7 |
| Teacher Effectiveness System – The Early Years | 8 |
| Professional Excellence, Accountability and Recognition – The Eagle County School District Model Today | 9 |
| Teacher Effectiveness System – The Principal’s Perspective | 14 |
| Teacher Effectiveness System – The Master and Mentor Teacher’s Perspective | 15 |
| Teacher Effectiveness System – The Career Teacher’s Perspective | 16 |
| Enabling Factors | 17 |
| Inhibiting Factors | 18 |
| Lessons Learned | 19 |
| Outcomes | 21 |
| Next Steps | 22 |
| Acknowledgements | 23 |

Eagle County Teacher Effectiveness Case Study

Introduction

Almost ten years ago, Eagle County School District became the first district in the country to abandon the traditional teacher salary schedule. Instead of paying teachers solely for years of experience and additional degrees, pay would be based on performance.¹ Performance included two key areas—improving instruction and increasing student achievement.

Why? National research at the time linked quality teaching to higher student performance. Facing stagnant student achievement scores on state tests and greater competition from charter schools, the district’s innovative and business-minded board of education adopted a pay-for-performance plan for teachers.

While few district teachers and Eagle County Education Association members were involved in this decision, community support was clear. Thanks to a grassroots effort, Eagle County voters approved a \$3 million mill levy override in 2001 – requiring the school district to adopt a pay-for-performance plan. Supporters said the new plan would be a proactive strategy to recruit, retain and reward effective teachers in this mountain community. Part of this plan was to provide teachers with a cost-of-living allowance.

Colorado Legacy Foundation

District Demographics

Location

Eagle County School District is located 130 miles west of Denver.

School Statistics

Eagle is home to 18 schools: 9 elementary, 4 middle and 2 high schools; 1 alternative high school and 2 charter schools.

Teacher Statistics

Eagle employs 470 teachers.

- 19: Average elementary class size (grades K-5)
- 17: Average middle school class size (grades 6-8)
- 19: Average high school class size (grades 9-12)
- 8: 1: Average pupil: teacher ratio

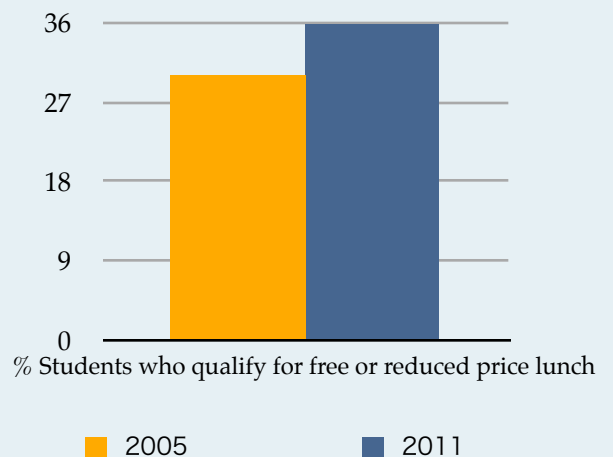
Student Statistics

Eagle educates 6,032 students.

Race and Ethnicity

- White: 46%
- Hispanic or Latino: 51%
- Other: 3%

Free and Reduced Lunch Population



Eagle County Teacher Effectiveness Case Study

The board of education charged a committee of stakeholders to investigate existing pay-for-performance plans across the country and recommend a plan to hold Eagle County’s teachers more accountable.

The committee selected the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP), citing it as the most comprehensive and well researched pay-for-performance plan. Developed in 1999 by Lowell Milken and the Milken Family Foundation, TAP (more recently promoted by the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching) offers four essential elements to support teachers and student achievement:

| ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF THE TEACHER ADVANCEMENT PROGRAM | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Multiple career paths for teachers. Teachers with proven expertise and a record of increasing student achievement have the opportunity to serve as master or mentor teachers. These teachers earn additional compensation and spend some of the school day outside their own classrooms to assist other teachers through school-based professional development and ongoing classroom support. Mentor teachers focus on coaching, while master teachers also conduct evaluations. |
| 2 | Ongoing, applied professional growth. Teachers participate in weekly professional development led by school-based master and mentor teachers during the contract day. In these “cluster groups,” teachers examine student data, engage in collaborative planning and learn research-based strategies to target their students’ needs. Importantly, these strategies have been tested by master teachers with students in the same school. |
| 3 | Instructionally focused accountability. Teachers’ classroom instruction is evaluated several times each year by multiple trained evaluators, including administrators and master teachers, using rubrics based on research and effective instructional practices. Evaluators are trained and certified, and leadership teams regularly monitor the reliability and consistency of evaluations in their schools. Data and technology tools support this analysis. |
| 4 | Performance-based compensation. Teachers have the opportunity to earn bonuses each year based on demonstrating skills and knowledge, taking on additional responsibilities, and improving their own students’ average growth in achievement as well as the entire school’s average growth in achievement. Master and mentor teachers receive extra compensation based on additional roles and responsibilities. |

The Eagle County School District adopted with fidelity the first three TAP components, but developed its own “performance-based compensation” component that abandoned the traditional step-and-lane salary schedule. (“Steps” are years of service; “lanes” are educational degrees and credits.)

District Context

The Eagle County School District educates 6,000 students in a mountain community of 54,000 residents.² The valley, perhaps best known for the Vail and Beaver Creek international ski resorts, serves large resort communities as well as the smaller towns of Minturn, Red Cliff, Edwards, Eagle and Gypsum.

The county’s population is diverse. Thirty-four percent of students speak little or no English; 37 percent are learning English; and 36 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The majority (51 percent) of students are Hispanic. Forty-seven percent are White, and the other 2 percent are other races.

District Mission, Vision and Values

The district’s mission is to “educate every student for success” with a vision “to be the schools of choice for all families in Eagle County.” They promote:

- **Teamwork – focusing on a district-wide common purpose**
- **Innovation – promoting creative solutions**
- **Professional pride – recognizing and celebrating individual and collaborative efforts**

The district commitment to student success is partly accomplished by developing individual, multi-year achievement goals for every student in grades 2-10. By setting an objective for each student and designing targeted instructional programs, the district aims to meet the needs of each student – from those who struggle to high achievers.

When the board of education hired the current superintendent, Dr. Sandra Smyser, in 2008 they asked her to visit other U.S. school districts to identify promising practices. What she found confirmed the district’s approach to student learning:

- **Focus on the individual child**
- **Use differentiated instruction**
- **Invest in teachers’ professional development**

The Instructional Program

The district provides choices through schools that deliver a common core curriculum in reading, writing, math, social studies and science through five different approaches to learning:

- **Expeditionary Learning**
- **International Baccalaureate**
- **Dual Language**
- **Project-Based Learning**
- **World Class Conventional Model**

The district also offers full-day kindergarten, Advanced Placement and dual enrollment options.

All elementary schools have a strong focus on literacy and mathematics and are required to spend at least 200 minutes daily on literacy and 60 minutes on math.

In the 2010-11 academic year, cluster groups throughout the district focused on formative assessment. This is an “active and intentional learning process that partners the teacher and the students to continuously and systematically gather evidence of learning with the goal of improving student achievement.”³ Formative assessment is part of the instructional process and provides the information to adjust teaching and learning as they are happening.

In the coming school year, more focus will be placed on formative assessment in classrooms and cluster groups. And because of the district’s new rigorous curriculum design launched in June 2011, teachers will also have a detailed road map to ensure students meet rigorous standards.

The new curriculum design is described by Larry Ainsworth in his book, Rigorous Curriculum Design: How to Create Curricular Units of Study that Align Standards, Instruction, and Assessment.⁴ The aligned components provide clear learning outcomes with matching assessments along with engaging learning experiences and instructional strategies. Using this process, a team of district leaders and selected teachers created a comprehensive curriculum aligned to the new Colorado Academic Standards.

Teacher Effectiveness System – The Early Years

Starting in 2001, five of the district's then 15 schools entered TAP each year over a three-year period. The district encouraged schools with readiness and capacity to apply first and provided \$1,000 bonuses to individual teachers in schools that signed up during the first year.

Although the district worked with TAP consultants during those early years, one administrator said, "We were learning how to implement this at the same time schools were. Although there were design principles, rubrics and even a database to support the evaluations, a lot of pieces had to come together at the same time."

During the first five years, the district based bonuses and salary increases on student achievement scores and individual teacher evaluation scores – tying teachers' compensation as closely as possible to their own students' achievement scores.

But there were challenges. While teachers in core content areas could be reasonably linked to their students' achievement, K-2 teachers and exploratory teachers at all levels such as those teaching art, music and physical education lacked common assessments and therefore defaulted to earning a building-level score. Further complicating matters were the differences in the amount of time each teacher spent with his or her students, and in the data needs among administrators, teachers and support staff.

Educators said those challenges and others "led to a backlash, animosity and erosion of trust." They cited top-down implementation of the pay-for-performance system, inconsistent support from the central office, and the complexities of the evaluation metrics as problematic.

One principal described the TAP model as "confining, formulaic and unable to tailor to school or community needs," yet did appreciate that "it brought differentiated pay and wonderful staff development that we still enjoy."

By the end of 2007, a significant number of teachers, principals and central office administrators had left the district, causing the district to reassess its pay-for-performance system.

That year, the district hired an interim superintendent and several new central office leaders. A new performance-based compensation steering committee comprised of critics, advocates and teachers' association representatives again studied performance-pay systems around the country and vetted its findings and recommendations with the administration, board of education, Eagle County Education Association and support personnel.

As a result, the district revised its pay-for-performance system in 2008 to standardize the process of differentiated compensation for all employees based on student achievement and employee evaluation. The new system relied on an index of building- and district-level assessment results from a variety of tests and a number of test analysis methods. More effort was put into addressing concerns and creating a culture of learning and continuous improvement. This culture was supported by a newly instituted district-level professional development department that has supported ongoing instructional improvement based on best national practices.

Professional Excellence, Accountability and Recognition – The Eagle County School District Model Today

The district’s objective is “to place a well-trained and well-prepared teacher in front of every student, every day.” In its revised teacher effectiveness system, the district adapted the original four TAP components to better suit district needs:

Multiple Career Paths for Teachers

The district encourages teachers to pursue a variety of positions throughout their careers depending on their interests, abilities and accomplishments. Responsibilities and compensation differ with each position – career teacher, mentor teacher and master teacher:

- Career teachers are 100-percent classroom-based instructors who have a traditional 183-day contract. They also participate in the required 70-minute weekly cluster group meetings that provide embedded professional development serving individual teacher, school or district needs.



- Mentor teachers spend 70 percent of their time in their classroom and 30 percent of their time coaching teachers as well as planning and leading cluster groups. They are contracted for 10 additional days and receive a \$5,000 stipend for these responsibilities. There is one mentor teacher for every six to eight teachers in a school.
- Master teachers spend 30 percent of their time in their classroom and the remaining time coaching and evaluating teachers as well as overseeing cluster groups. They are contracted for 20 additional days and receive an \$11,500 stipend for these responsibilities. There is a master teacher for about every 14 to 16 teachers in a school.

Ongoing, Applied Professional Growth

Teachers focus on improving student achievement through a continuous cycle of professional coaching and weekly, structured cluster group meetings. Cluster groups are not team or department meetings; they are part of a well-directed, high-quality and research-driven professional development program. While each group's composition is determined at the school level, the topics covered have become increasingly district-driven over the last two years. For example, the 2010-11 cluster groups focused on learning and applying the principles of formative assessment in their classrooms.

The district's cluster groups are facilitated by a master teacher and are effective by:

- Focusing on individual student, teacher and school achievement
- Accounting for grade-level, subject or departmental differences
- Providing leadership by both mentor and master teachers
- Working with small groups of teachers (four to six participants)
- Meeting for at least 70 minutes per week
- Following a protocol that ensures conversations are focused on student achievement

As an example, a teacher might bring in a sample of student work to get feedback from other teachers. The teacher can identify the student's challenges and ask group members what other instructional strategies they should consider using. Many of these conversations are about making the teacher-student connection.

Instructionally Focused Accountability

The district measures teacher performance and student learning in three ways:

1. **Teacher skills, knowledge and responsibility based on the teacher evaluation rubric**
2. **School-wide achievement based on Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) tests and the ACT**
3. **Individual student achievement based on the Northwest Evaluation Association's (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) benchmark assessment system**

Teacher Skills, Knowledge and Responsibility

Every teacher is evaluated three times during the school year based on the rubric adopted by the board of education. A mentor teacher conducts a first observation in September or October. This is a low-stakes evaluation that focuses on coaching, feedback and continuous improvement.

For the next two evaluations, a master teacher conducts one announced observation, and the principal conducts one unannounced observation.

Scoring on the rubric identifies specific areas of improvement with detailed evidence from a teacher's instruction and concrete examples to address these areas. This feedback helps teachers improve their instructional practices and informs the work of cluster groups.

Principal ratings are weighted at 60 percent, master teacher evaluations at 35 percent and teacher self-reflection at 5 percent.

The announced evaluation includes a pre-conference between the evaluator and the teacher. Both evaluations include a post-conference lasting up to one hour and provide teachers with two kinds of explicit feedback in addition to formal scores – one “area for reinforcement” and one “area for refinement,” each tied to a specific indicator on the rubric. Evaluators and teachers analyze how a particular strength of the lesson contributed to student learning and discuss how the teacher can continue to build on that area of strength (reinforcement). They also analyze an element of the lesson that could have been improved, and discuss how the teacher can work to better contribute to student learning in that area (refinement).

There are two categories of teacher observations – “snapshot” indicators as seen in a single observation and “evidence over time.” When evaluators share results with teachers, they adjust goals and professional learning opportunities to help students meet standards.

Evaluators use an extensive evaluation manual developed by the district’s professional development department, receive four days of training on the evaluation process and are certified according to a performance assessment. (The manual is also a handbook for teachers on exemplary instructional practices.) They are re-certified every year to ensure inter-rater consistency.

School-wide Achievement

Annual CSAP growth scores are used to measure the overall building scale score for growth over a year’s time based on reports of the percent of students who are “catching up,” “keeping up” and “moving up.” ACT scores are compared to the school’s prior-year averages and the state average. Results are shared with principals and teachers.

Individual Student Achievement

Using a value-added calculation, each student’s growth is tracked over time to show gains made above his or her historical growth and other students’ nationally-normed performance based on NWEA MAP tests.

Performance-Based Compensation

Teachers are paid according to performance after an initial placement based on an experience and skills continuum.

Initially, the district’s total salary expenditure matched that budgeted for the existing step-and-lane salary schedule. Prior to the 2008 recession, teachers received an annual bonus up to 4 percent of their contract salaries based on an index of assessment results and then could also earn an additional pay raise (up to 4 percent) based on principal and master teacher observations in the classroom (teacher evaluations). The student achievement index consisted of district-wide ACT and CSAP scores, building-level CSAP scores, and building-level NWEA MAP growth scores. The percentage determined for the bonus was also added to the teachers’ contracted salaries for the following year. There was also a negotiated inflationary component that varied based on the cost of living, district funding, and other factors.

Due to current budget constraints driven by Colorado’s decline in per-pupil funding since the 2008 recession, Eagle County Schools capped both the annual bonus based on student

achievement as well as the annual salary increase based on teacher evaluations to a maximum of 2% each.

Those who teach English as a second language, teach in bilingual schools, teach math, or teach science get a one-time bonus of \$1,500. Currently, teachers that sign on to teach at one of the district's high poverty schools receive a one-time bonus of \$2,500-- provided by a five-year federal Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant about to expire.

EXAMPLE: "JOE"

Prior to 2009-2010, Teacher Joe made \$45,000 as his contract salary. He also added \$3,000 for an advanced degree and \$2,500 for working in a high-poverty school as a la carte salary additions. These additions were NOT included in his contract salary. They will increase as district needs and market conditions require. \$45,000 is used for determining his bonus and next year's raise. Joe will earn:

| | |
|--|----------|
| Base contract salary | \$45,000 |
| Advanced degree and high-poverty school additions | \$5,500 |
| Bonus from 2.5% increase based on assessment index for district and his school (CSAP, NWEA, ACT) | \$1,124 |
| Salary increase for Joe's "high performing" evaluation, which was 3% | \$1,350 |
| Total Compensation | \$52,974 |

Based on a \$1,350 salary increase for Joe's "high performing" evaluation, which was 3%, Joe's new annual salary base for the following year will be \$46,350. There is a salary freeze, bonus of max 4% (based on the combined evaluation score and student achievement index) and no negotiated inflationary component. Joe stays at his high-poverty school.

| 2009-2010 AND 2010-2011 ADJUSTMENTS FOR TOUGH TIMES – APPLIES TO THE CURRENT SCHOOL YEAR | |
|--|----------|
| Base contract salary | \$46,350 |
| 2% increase based on combined evaluation and student achievement scores | \$900 |
| Advanced degree and high-poverty school additions | \$5,500 |
| Total Compensation | \$52,750 |

His base salary will be \$46,350. His total compensation is \$52,750 in 2009-2010.

Teacher Effectiveness System – The Principal’s Perspective

Principals are trained rigorously in the teacher evaluation rubric and effective instructional strategies so that through the evaluation system, teachers come to know what effective instructional practices look like. Training includes watching videos of actual lessons and analyzing the teaching behaviors that are impacting student achievement. When principals evaluate career teachers, they often ask reflective questions like, “What would happen if you paired students differently?” and “How are you teaching problem-solving skills?” These questions are designed to elicit other instructional strategies teachers might use and encourage them to teach higher order thinking skills.

“Teachers’ understanding is still growing, but teachers are fairly accurate on what a particular instructional strategy looks like when it is implemented,” said one principal. Another added, “We go into classrooms, we see the day’s lesson on the board, which means kids know what they’re supposed to be working on and learning.”

“Here it’s not clipboard Olympics,” said one teacher. “Evaluators come in and are involved. We know our evaluation observations will lead to professional learning opportunities in our cluster groups. We all want feedback to become better teachers.”

The principal is solely responsible for scoring the section of the evaluation rubric related to teachers’ professional responsibility – such as being a leader in helping others use data and sharing best practices.

Principals are evaluated by the executive director of curriculum and instruction or executive director of student services. While their evaluation is being revised to match the new Colorado quality standards for principals, the current principal evaluation is the same one used for the district’s classified staff and focuses on job performance and job knowledge. Principals are also evaluated on initiative, reliability, quality of work, communication, teamwork and attitude. Student achievement is part of each principal’s bonus and is calculated on a district-wide basis.

Teacher Effectiveness System – The Master and Mentor Teacher’s Perspective

In the first fall observation, mentor teachers record only what they see in the lesson and then determine areas for coaching – both individually and through the clusters. They check back to ensure the teacher is making progress and answer any questions.

“I feel comfortable with the evaluation process,” said one mentor teacher. “Evaluation, when used correctly, can improve instruction. When used punitively, it’s horrible! Teachers shut down. I prepare for teachers to challenge me on every score and then encourage them to challenge me. That’s what starts the dialogue on good instructional practices.”

Master teachers are deeply involved with career teachers’ evaluations – from the pre-conference to scripting the observed lesson and providing thoughtful post-conference feedback. “The principal and I are in close agreement on our evaluation scores of career teachers,” said one master teacher. “But the post-conference is all me. I work on reinforcement, refinement and presentation of scores. Sometimes I have difficulty finding areas of refinement for really strong teachers.”

“You don’t just get to keep your job because you didn’t hurt anybody, but because you taught kids,” said one teacher. “They learned and grew.”

The teacher evaluation rubrics require additional criteria for master and mentor teachers.

Conducted by the principal, 70 percent of master teacher evaluations are based on their responsibilities such as professionalism, coaching skills, effective career teacher evaluations, and organizing and

coaching in cluster groups. The other 30 percent is like any other teacher – corresponding to the career teacher rubric.

For mentor teachers, 30 percent of their evaluation is based on the mentor teacher rubrics and 70 percent on the career teacher rubric, again corresponding to the proportion of time dedicated to each responsibility.

Teacher Effectiveness System – The Career Teacher’s Perspective

The career teacher evaluation rubric focuses on four domains:

- . Planning, instruction and assessment (2 indicators)
- . Instruction (9 indicators)
- . Learning environment (5 indicators)
- . Professional responsibilities (6 indicators)

Teachers earn an average rating in each domain as 1) unsatisfactory, 3) professional or 5) exemplary. Using a 1, 2, or 3 provides a weighted average between 1 and 5. In the post-conference, teachers see their scores and discuss them with the evaluator. The evaluator may suggest new instructional strategies or encourage the teacher to join certain cluster groups.

Some teachers keep an “evidentiary binder” of instructional work over time. Master teachers review these in pre-conferences with teachers. This information complements the two “snapshot” observations of lessons that are rated, as well as the four classroom visits that collect “over time” data.

Another added, “Based on my scores in a previous district, I expected to receive 3s, 4s and 5s on my evaluation. I got a 2 in differentiation and I bawled my eyes out. I’m not a crier. I read Tomlinson’s⁵ book cover to cover and use it in my classroom. I now see how this evaluation rubric has undoubtedly made me a better teacher.”

Teachers also appreciate the extensive, high-quality professional development. Several mentioned they are making more money on a performance-based system than on a step-and-lane system. “Through the Eagle TIF grant, I know I have earned as much as if I had gotten a master’s degree,” said one teacher. “And I would be paying big bucks for a master’s.”

Enabling Factors

Interviewees said 11 factors needed to be in place for the district's pay-for-performance system to work:

1. **Strong board and community support.** The passage of the 2001 mill levy override tied to a pay-for-performance plan set the stage for the district's teacher effectiveness system.
2. **Constant, open and transparent communication.** District administrators visited with staff and community members at every school to explain the model and seek buy-in.
3. **Additional financial resources.** Fifty percent of the mill levy override was allocated to funding the pay-for-performance system. A federal TIF grant also supported some of the professional development.
4. **Initial adoption of a comprehensive, research-based pay-for-performance model.** A subcommittee studied the possible national pay-for-performance plans and chose TAP because of its four strong research-based components.
5. **“Top-notch” teacher evaluation tool.** The evaluation tool grew out of the TAP evaluation rubric. Over time – and especially since 2007 when the district chose to make the system more flexible and abandon the TAP name – the evaluation tool has become shorter and more targeted to high-quality instruction.
6. **Research-based instructional practices.** The district's instructional staff is on top of national promising practices and works hard to support teachers and principals. They have brought in national models of differentiated instruction, rigorous curriculum development and formative assessment. They also provide professional learning in the instructional strategies assessed in the evaluation rubric.
7. **Coaching system including principals, master and mentor teachers.** The original TAP model required a specific staffing ratio of mentor and master teachers in schools, along with specific roles. This deep coaching bench coupled with best practices and “top-notch” evaluations has led to significant teacher expertise in effective instructional strategies.
8. **Supportive data systems.** The district developed a data system to track teacher scores that were compared by grade, content area, school, etc. The system also checked inter-rater reliability within and across schools. If an evaluator was outside the norm for a previous evaluation, then more training was offered.

9. **A culture of collaboration through data-informed professional development.** Teacher evaluation scores informed the cluster group topics. Consistently high performing teachers were studied to identify successful instructional practices. Professional development and cluster groups promoted collaboration as a means to improve instructional skills.
10. **Clear focus on learning outcomes.** Everyone in the district knew their primary roles were to increase student achievement and close the achievement gap. Students were tied to predicted growth scores, and teachers were there to help students meet their goals.
11. **Ongoing, continuous improvement and adaptation.** Although TAP had a well-defined model, the district had gone beyond it – and by 2007 had dropped TAP as the name of the program and adapted the original model into one tailored and better suited to their district.

Inhibiting Factors

Interviewees identified four factors that inhibited successful implementation of the district’s pay-for-performance system:



1. **A top-down mandate.** Because the system was tied to the 2001 mill levy override approved by voters, it was a *fait accompli* from the start. Teachers and their professional association said they felt it was imposed on them even though there was an advisory committee that included teachers. They wanted more time to consider its implications and become more involved in how it would be rolled out. Some teachers – in-

cluding some who were known to be effective – left almost immediately because they didn’t believe in the system.

2. **Lack of transparency in how growth scores were calculated.** Part of the growth scores came from the NWEA MAP tests, using a proprietary methodology developed by William Sanders. Not only were growth models difficult to explain in general, but Sanders

did not share “what’s inside the box.” Even so, district leaders used graphs and examples of typical teachers to show how the calculations would lead to performance pay.

3. **Students not taking the test seriously.** Student test scores affected teacher bonuses. “Some kids bomb the test on purpose,” said one teacher. To address this, teachers that have good rapport with the students administer the test.
4. **Some teachers have yet to buy into the pay-for-performance system.** The district’s response is to continue to provide professional development and encourage teachers to actively participate in clusters.

Lessons Learned

In anticipation of the statewide implementation of SB-191 – the Great Teachers and Leaders Law – Eagle County School District educators suggest these as must-have elements for all Colorado school districts:

- **A sense of urgency.** The board and community felt they could no longer be complacent in educating the district’s children and ignoring a growing achievement gap. Initially, stagnant student achievement scores, some unevenness in teaching quality and the need to attract excellent teachers drove the passage of the 2001 mill levy and thus the pay-for-performance plan.
- **Active and visible leadership and support for the teacher effectiveness system across the system.** There must be widespread and unified leadership across the district – extensive support for the teacher effectiveness system, and the right people in the right places.
- **Honor and value teachers from the beginning.** A teacher effectiveness system can’t be seen as a “gotcha” system designed to punish teachers. This puts them on the defensive and demoralizes them. It should be cast as a system with professional learning opportunities that can turn good teachers into great teachers. Teachers must be treated with professional respect, and those who choose to remain in the classroom as career teachers should be valued.
- **Transparent, targeted and ongoing communication.** Multiple stakeholders (including parents and community members, school board members, district administrators, teachers, and classified staff) must be involved in the design, implementation and communication of the pay-for-performance plan. All groups need to understand the new teacher effectiveness

system and how it will affect them and the larger school system. Communication needs to be timely, targeted to specific audiences and ongoing. All stakeholders need to know why a pay-for-performance system is important – and that it leads to quality teachers who improve student achievement.

- **A mechanism for listening, adapting and improving the system.** Even during initial implementation, district administrators made it clear that the system would be a work in progress that needed administrators and teachers to work together to support its implementation. Because no system is perfect, there will always be trade-offs. A good rule of thumb is to be fair to kids first.
- **Skin in the game!** To increase accountability for student achievement, everyone in the system needs some responsibility and accountability related to their roles. The district extended the pay-for-performance plan to administrators and classified staff.
- **A clear purpose, design and intended outcomes for developing a teacher effectiveness system.** At its best, it forms the basis for helping teachers to improve their instructional skills through professional learning while rewarding and retaining effective teachers. At the minimum, it identifies and either develops or dismisses weak teachers. Eagle County School District uses mentor teachers, master teachers and cluster groups to accomplish this.
- **A single effectiveness system that fits within a district’s larger school improvement strategy.** Placing a pay-for-performance system on top of a step-and-lane system doesn’t work. (One administrator claimed that with a dual system, the pay-for-performance system is the first thing to go in financially difficult times.) An educator effectiveness system must fit within a larger context that includes district student achievement goals, a strategic plan, curriculum, instruction, assessment, schools of choice and special populations. Aligning instructional strategies to help students achieve state academic standards is critical. Periodic benchmark and common assessments, along with continual formative assessment in the classroom, provide the timely feedback to make adjustments in instruction to meet all students’ learning needs.
- **Technical rigor in student achievement measures used in teachers’ evaluations.** State and benchmark tests need to be perceived as measuring what is important and reflecting what is being taught in the district. These tests need to meet technical quality requirements. New common assessments developed this year will increase the quality of assessments used next year.

- **Ongoing professional learning.** A robust teacher effectiveness system puts the most emphasis on professional learning for all teachers. Only by improving teaching will learning improve. Eagle County School District was expert in using clusters in training teachers in new initiatives (such as formative assessment and soon rigorous curriculum design) and in areas where groups of teachers within a school needed more experience in certain areas measured by the rubrics. Eagle provided high-quality, differentiated professional learning for what was being assessed in the evaluation tool.
- **Attention to other changes in policies and district practices affected by the teacher effectiveness system.** The evaluation system created a ripple effect through the district. Board policies and teachers' association contracts were changed to reflect the new system. New data systems were built, and new teacher career opportunities were developed (mentor and master) along with new evaluation rubrics. In the first four years of the program, the Milken Foundation donated the TAP training materials and a coach.

Outcomes

Although not every teacher or administrator bought into the pay-for-performance evaluation plan in 2001, most teachers now voice support for the high-quality professional learning opportunities they receive. They appreciate increased compensation based on results and enjoy the respect they receive – and have earned – as professionals who help all students succeed. Teachers work hard to learn new content and instructional skills and tailor these to their students' needs.

Even in the tough environment of Eagle County's high-cost housing market, teacher retention rates have increased. New teachers embrace the culture of professional learning and accountability. Unfortunately, some new teachers move on after three years to other districts with more affordable housing. The district bears these costs, but is an incubator for high-quality professional learning for teachers, and reports that teachers enter other districts with outstanding skills and knowledge.

There is more open sharing and dialogue in the district about how to improve both student achievement and the pay-for-performance system. The community supports a culture of excellence intertwined with a culture of "no excuses." Teachers feel more accountable for student achievement. "We know we are being held accountable for student achievement," said one teacher. "We share best instructional practices with other teachers in our school and learn new promising practices in cluster groups that may help even more."

Principals feel more empowered to ensure that every teacher in their school is effective. Having strong teachers in schools has boosted teacher morale. Teachers haven't tried to migrate to higher performing schools, as growth scores honor their instructional skills in their own schools.

The community likes the accountability of the district's pay-for-performance system and has voted for taxes to support it. "The community knows we are giving their own kids, grandkids and most of their neighbors' kids a better education," said one administrator. "They are willing to pay for a better education for them."

Even with decreasing financial resources and increasing numbers of students on free or reduced-price lunch, student achievement has increased over the last three years. Highlights of the 2010 CSAP results include:

- . An increased number of students in grades 3-10 scored proficient in reading, writing, math and science compared with the previous year.
- . Overall reading scores were up 2 percent, writing scores up 1 percent, math scores up 2 percent and science scores up 4 percent.
- . Six out of the eight grade levels tested improved their scores from the previous year and met or exceeded average state scores.
- . The percent of students "catching up" across the district increased from 35 percent to 42 percent.
- . Over the last three years, the median growth percentile has increased from 53rd to 58th – and the same figure for students receiving free or reduced-price lunch has increased from 55th to 61st.

Next Steps

With the implementation of a rigorous curriculum design aligned to state standards this fall, teachers will improve their content knowledge in literacy, math, science and social studies. The new curriculum will feature district-developed unit lessons with common, "mirrored" pre- and post-tests that will replace the NWEA growth measures used in teacher evaluations. When coupled with teachers' increasingly effective instructional strategies, district educators anticipate continued student achievement growth.

The rigorous curriculum design process will continue to be developed in the coming year to include curriculum units and student measures in world languages and exploratory subjects.

Deepening teachers' use of formative assessment also will continue in cluster groups and in classroom instruction.

“I know we can have all students proficient at their grade level – at least by the time they leave our district. I know we can do it because I see the passion, talent and dedication of the teachers in this district. We can deliver this dream for students and their families...We are innovative and flexible, and we have amazing talent here. There is no reason we cannot be one of the few districts who figure this out and ensure all students are at grade level by the time they graduate.”

Dr. Sandra Smyser, Superintendent of Eagle County Schools

Acknowledgements

Central office staff, school board members, principals and teachers participated in interviews. Eagle School District opened its doors to researchers to describe what they were doing, how they were doing it, the challenges they faced and lessons they learned. Interviewees were both gracious and candid in their interviews. Without them, this knowledge could not be captured and shared.

Author: Jane Armstrong, JM Armstrong & Associates

Research Assistance provided by Kristen Davidson, University of Colorado, Boulder

Endnotes

¹According to the Milken Foundation, 2001.

²Eagle County Schools Annual Report, 2009-2010

³ Ibid

⁴Larry Ainsworth. Rigorous Curriculum Design: How to Create Curricular Units of Study that Align Standards, Instruction, and Assessment.

⁵ [How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed Ability Classrooms \(2nd Edition\)](#) by Carol A. Tomlinson (May 7, 2004) ASCD.