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# West Denver Prep: Using Data to Drive Instruction and Improve Achievement

Successful Strategies from Colorado Schools

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-Josh Smith, Principal; West Denver Prep Harvey Park

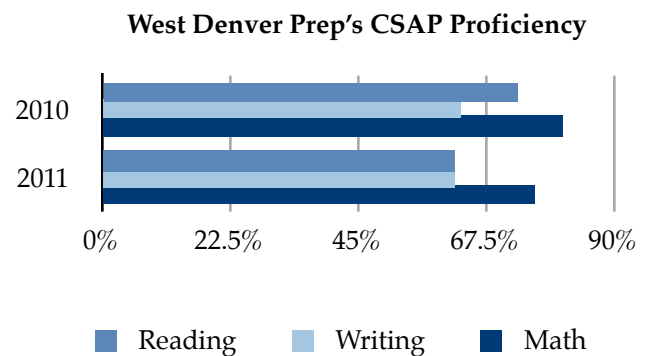
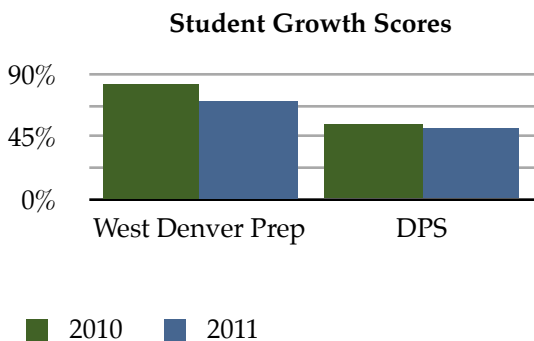


## Why Feature West Denver Prep?

West Denver Prep is a network of urban charter schools in west Denver that primarily serves low-income minority middle school students. The Harvey Park campus, led by Principal Josh Smith, estimates that, on average, most students enter the 6th grade 1.5 – 2 years behind. And yet WDP ranked first of all schools statewide on student academic growth in 2011.

DEMOGRAPHICS	
92% of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch	WDP serves kids in grades 6-8
96% of student body are minority students	Other WDP goals include a 95% attendance rate; and ensuring that ELL students progress at an equal rate to the general population
33% are English Language Learners (previously 70%)	

## How Does West Denver Prep Measure Success?



## West Denver Prep's Vision and Mission

**Success for every student.** Through a demanding education of high standards, structure and accountability, West Denver Preparatory Charter School prepares students for educational success from middle school through college.

## West Denver Prep's Harvey Park Core Belief

"Every one of our students can be successful. If kids aren't successful, then we're doing something wrong."

## The Challenge

How do teachers know that students have mastered an academic standard? And what does a teacher do when students haven't mastered a standard? This is one of the most critical challenges facing Colorado educators. There is growing agreement that student data should guide educators as they tackle these challenges, but there are few schools that effectively use data to drive instruction and meet students' individual academic needs.

West Denver Prep is one example of a school that has effectively tackled this challenge.

"There is a real temptation and risk to just talking about how important data is. But we have to go beyond that and figure out what data is relevant, how to collect it, and align it to what we're looking for. Then we have to decide what to do about it. It's pretty easy to collect lots of data on student achievement. The difficult thing is figuring out what to do with it," commented Josh Smith, Principal.

West Denver Prep uses a variety of formative, summative, and interim assessments to monitor student learning. And, like most schools, the staff struggles to make sense of what to do with the data they collect.

Josh and his staff agree that CSAP is a useful assessment, but in a very limited fashion. Because CSAP results aren't received by the school until the summer months, it's too late to modify instructions, lesson plans, or scope and sequence in the same school year. It is useful for identifying which standards need to be in the focus of the next school year, or for placing students in ability levels.

WDP students take the NWEA test three times a year, and unlike CSAP, the results of the test are more timely. It's a useful assessment because it's nationally normed and provides growth information in the winter and the end of the year. It helps to identify where students are struggling most and assists administrators in grouping students of similar ability into classes. However, according to Josh Smith, they still have a long way to go in order to use the results of NWEA to drive instructional practices.

WDP has a core belief that data should drive instruction, and because the CSAP and NWEA are not sufficient for doing so, WDP has developed its own approach.

## The Promising Practice

"Teachers need to have access to data and the time to analyze it. Most teachers in most schools don't. We didn't either, but we created Data Day because we didn't have enough time to use it meaningfully," said Principal Smith.

WDP has built a process and a school schedule that gives teachers meaningful time to understand student achievement data and create an action plan to move students forward.

WDP divides the school year into 6 week terms. At any one time during the school year, teachers have planned their scope and sequence for 12 weeks (two terms). At the end of each term all students are administered a RAP (Regular Assessment Program) test. The RAP is aligned to the Colorado Academic Standards, developed collaboratively by WDP teachers, and covers the material presented the previous six weeks. Each test question is aligned to a specific standard, so that results from the test point to specific standards that students have or have not mastered.

Each six-week period is followed by Data Day, and this is what really distinguishes WDP from other schools. Instead of asking teachers to quickly or individually review the RAP results, students are given a release day and WDP staff convenes for Data Day. Data Day is held the Monday following the week of RAP tests so that teachers can make immediate changes to the next six weeks of instruction based on RAP results. The staff spends the weekend prior to Data Day inputting RAP results into Alpine software, an important tool because it can quickly produce reports based on the standard, the student, or the test item. Prior to using Alpine, one person at West Denver Prep was creating large spreadsheets with this information. Alpine creates efficiency and helps focus attention where it's most needed.

Data Day is spent in small groups among subject area counterparts, led by a senior teacher in each content area, known as the content specialist, and is facilitated by administrators. Most of the day is spent analyzing the data and coming up with an action plan, identifying cross-campus trends, best practices and planning for the upcoming six weeks.

“Now we devote time and resources deciding what to do with the data we collect. Our data is easy to see and understand in snapshot form,” said Josh Smith, Principal.

During Data Day, each teacher develops an action plan for the coming six weeks. While professional judgment and creativity are required, teachers are also given clear guidelines that help them plan:

- I. If fewer than 65% of students mastered a standard, the standard must be retaught to the entire class.
- II. If between 65% - 80% of students mastered the standard, the standard needs to be reviewed as a whole class.
- III. If more than 80% of students mastered the material, the standard needs to be reviewed with individual students to make sure they master it.

During Data Day, teachers are also asking important questions that result in continuous improvement, such as “Is the assessment question fair?” “Should we introduce the material differently?” “What specific instructional strategies seem to work for standard x?”

Teachers at WDP value the opportunity to make decisions based on data.

“When my kids get to me, I usually have ten that can’t count to 10 in English. I have to be able to get them to the point of finding the surface area of a rectangular prism by March. I have to teach four years of curriculum in six months. I have very little time for spiral review, I have to keep moving fast, but then when I have a data sit-down and see how they actually did on the assessment, I can say, OK, this didn’t work, this didn’t work, this didn’t work, I have to squeeze it in somewhere, and I have to make a plan for it. I can’t just say, ‘bummer, I don’t have any time’. It forces intentional spiraling, which is great. And it’s also not, “I THINK they didn’t understand how to calculate perimeter, so I maybe ought to review it’, it’s either ‘Yes, they got it, or no, they didn’t get it’. This is immensely helpful, because I can intentionally spiral what needs to be spiraled and not review things that don’t require it.” Kathryn Marble, 6th Grade Math Problem Solving Teacher.

## **Bolstering the Promising Practice**

West Denver Prep’s use of data does not occur in isolation from other important initiatives. West Denver Prep constantly works to align and integrate all important elements of education. Professional Development is based on teacher needs, which are identified through peer and principal observations and assessment results. Instruction is heavily guided by student achievement data, which often leads to the specific professional development based on student and teacher needs. WDP commits resources and time to each of these.

Teachers are provided with many opportunities to improve their instruction. The data collected through RAP tests shed light on which teachers are strong at teaching specific standards and which teachers need more help. West Denver Prep believes that excellent instruction requires planning time and opportunities to engage with colleagues and administrators on a regular basis. Therefore, teachers teach four periods and have three periods of planning, which results in every teacher having 150 minutes of planning time every day. This provides flexibility during the school day for peer-to-peer observations – even between schools. Administrators will also sub for teachers in order to create the opportunity.

“At the beginning of the year, administrators really push to require teachers to observe one another, because we want to establish a culture where this is routine and normal. As the school year goes on, it happens informally more frequently because they are used to it,” commented Josh Smith.

Teachers also participate in professional development twice each RAP period. Shana Dinner de Vaca, WDP’s Chief Curriculum Officer, develops and facilitates professional development based on student achievement data and what teachers say they need. She is totally focused on improving instruction. Shana also supports the lead teacher (specialist) for every grade level subject area. Together, they develop the school’s curriculum. Shana ensures solid replication across campuses by creating structures that support teachers, identifying resources and best practices, and sharing them with specialists, teachers and principals. She also coordinates all assessments and Data Day.

“I support teachers’ individual professional needs. If one teacher is struggling to find good strategies to teach a particular lesson, I help create the opportunity for her to observe one of her peers teach the lesson,” noted Shana Dinner de Vaca.

In addition to teachers observing one another, administrators conduct unannounced observations of teachers.

“We’ve been pretty successful informally observing every teacher every other week. The Principal and AP take the lead as instructional support at each campus. Each school also has a Director of Student Life who is responsible for discipline and maintaining student culture. Each of these administrators cycles through being “on-duty” to attend to student issues. On days that they are not on duty, they use this time to observe and debrief with teachers. We prioritize teacher support and feedback, so we devote resources to providing an AP and Director of Student Life,” commented Shana Dinner de Vaca.

Informal observations are typically about ½ a period or 25 minutes. By the next day, if not sooner, teachers receive written feedback from the administrator, including things s/he was thrilled to see, things that need work, and questions for the teacher. Each teacher meets every other week with an administrator to debrief and set more formal goals. Formal observations occur 3 times a year and include a detailed observation protocol. They are full periods and are announced.

“It’s hard to keep track of everything. But I have cheat sheets on our school’s student achievement data and I look at it before every conversation with a teacher so that I know how they’re doing on each of their objectives. Teachers aren’t going to take something seriously if the principal doesn’t,” noted Josh Smith.

Teachers at West Denver Prep recognize that their students’ achievement is a result of these aligned structures, and credit how the school effectively uses data.

## **Important Resources That Make West Denver Prep Successful**

- I. Staff.
  - A. The charter network employs a Chief Curriculum Officer who is totally focused on developing and refining the curriculum and ensuring effective instruction across the network. She develops PD in response to student achievement data and teachers’ needs. She works closely with teacher leaders in a coaching/mentorship role.
  - B. The Principal, along with an Assistant Principal, focuses on observing and supporting teachers. Each campus also has a Director of Student Life who supports the administrative team in managing student discipline issues as well as creating and maintaining a positive student culture.

## II. Software

- A. Alpine Data System is software that stores and analyzes student achievement data.

## III. Time

- A. Students are released one day every six weeks so staff can fully engage in Data Day.
- B. WDP students receive 181 instructional days per academic year.
- C. WDP students spend 8.25 hours in school each day while teachers spend 9 hours.
- D. WDP teachers get 150 minutes of planning time/day, which enables opportunities for peer observations.

## Sharing Tools and Artifacts – Helping All Colorado Schools Be Successful

Following are artifacts that West Denver Prep is willing to share with all Colorado schools:

- I. [Data Day Agenda](#)
- II. [Sample List of Professional Development Courses](#)
- III. [Professional Development Schedule](#)
- IV. [Snapshot of Alpine Assessment Analysis](#)
- V. [Formal Observation Protocol](#)
- VI. [Informal Observation Protocol](#)
- VII. [Driven by Data: A Practical Guide to Improve Instruction](#) by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo

## Acknowledgments

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