

A Colorado school district radically overhauls how students are placed in classes. Will Adams 50 make the grade?

Kathleen Vail

Leveling the Field



Outside Karen Jenks' classroom window, the iron-gray sky foreshadows a rare fall snowstorm that will soon dump nearly three feet of snow in the Rocky Mountain foothills and close schools all over Colorado's Front Range.

Inside Jenks' classroom, students focus not on the impending storm, but on magnetic pizza slices on a white board in the front of the room. They are studying fractions.

It may not look like it at first glance, but a revolution is occurring in Adams County School District 50, which serves 10,000 students just north of Denver. If it succeeds, the district will overturn a public school icon: the grade level.

"All research shows when you do something new, it takes five years to show results," says Jenks, a former corporate lawyer with a passion for math. "We said, 'We don't have five years.'"

That sense of urgency, prompted by persistently low achievement and a statewide open enrollment policy that was siphoning away middle-class families, led Adams 50 to make wholesale changes in the way students are taught. Starting this year, elementary and middle school students are being grouped by level, not age, and the reform moves to the high school next year.

In a traditional classroom, some of Jenks' students would be in third grade, others in fourth, and a couple would be in fifth. But here, they are all on Level 3, and fractions are a skill they must master before they move to Level 4.

Changing how public schools operate, however necessary, is tricky business. Adams 50 is the largest district so far to attempt the reform, which started in tiny Chugach, Alaska, and is being used by a handful of smaller districts mostly in that state. Interest is growing, however, with Maine's Department of Education providing training for its districts with the goal that all schools will adopt the model.

"The moral purpose is to have all children proficient," says Copper Stoll, Adams 50's chief academic officer. "That's why we changed the system."



A mandate for change

Jenks' school, Metz Elementary, started the reform in 2008-09. This story, however, starts in 2006, when school board member and former teacher Marge Rinaldi attended a session at the Colorado School Boards Association's annual conference.

There, former Chugach Superintendent Richard DeLorenzo talked about how the district earned a coveted Baldrige Award

A lawyer for 25 years, Karen Jenks now teaches math and science at Metz Elementary School. Students take ownership of their learning under this system, she says. They know exactly what skills they need to master before they can go to the next level.



because of its approach to standards-based education. Rinaldi says DeLorenzo used many of the same words and phrases as Roberta Selleck, Adams 50's new superintendent.

Selleck was hired to make changes: In addition to low achievement and middle-class flight, the district also had a revolving door for teachers, with about 100 of the district's 550 leaving every year. Demographic shifts over the past decade had brought more non-English-speaking families and more poor children to the district. Today, nearly 75 percent of students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches and almost 40 percent are English language learners.

"We knew we could be doing a better job with our kids, our high at-risk population," Rinaldi says.

Selleck had just convinced the community to approve a \$100 million bond issue to, among other things, build the district's first new high school in 30 years. When she looked over the materials Rinaldi brought back, she says, "I thought, 'Oh my gosh, someone figured out how to do standards-based in a whole system.'"

Standards-based education has been around for decades, including the ill-fated outcomes-based reform of the early 1990s. The basic premise—that children should demonstrate that they've mastered skills before they advance to learn new ones—has been used in many different ways over the years.

For Selleck and Stoll, DeLorenzo's model made sense. It helped the lowest-performing and struggling students by



giving them more time, while not holding back high-performing students who could move at their own pace. If it worked, it might stop the district from losing students and attract new ones.

The Chugach model

DeLorenzo was a special education teacher in Alaska when he was hired in 1994 by then-Chugach Superintendent Roger Sampson to make some desperately needed changes

in the district. Over 25 years, Chugach did not see a single graduate go to college, and Sampson says vandalism was a major problem because students felt disconnected from their schools.

"It was a challenging district, to say the least," Sampson says of Chugach. "We had a system that said, 'You'll spend 180 days in the chair. Hopefully you've progressed enough to progress to the next grade.'"

According to Sampson, a third-grade teacher in Chugach with nine students might have five who don't know the alphabet and one reading at a ninth-grade level. And yet, she needed to teach the third-grade curriculum to everyone. "The ones who didn't get it said it was frustrating; the ones who were ahead said it was boring," Sampson says.

Based on the recognition "that kids learn at different rates," Sampson and DeLorenzo developed what is now called the Re-Inventing Schools Coalition (RISC) model because it replaces grade levels with skill levels. Or, as DeLorenzo describes it: "We give kids the road map; they figure out how they learn best."

Achievement soared. Today, 95 percent of Chugach's students go on to postsecondary education or to the military.

"We had empowered the kids to take responsibility for their education, and they got it. If kids were struggling, we helped them," says Sampson, who was appointed Alaska's education commissioner and now heads the Education Commission of the States in Denver. "Once they realized they controlled the pace, they exploded."

Community and teacher buy-in

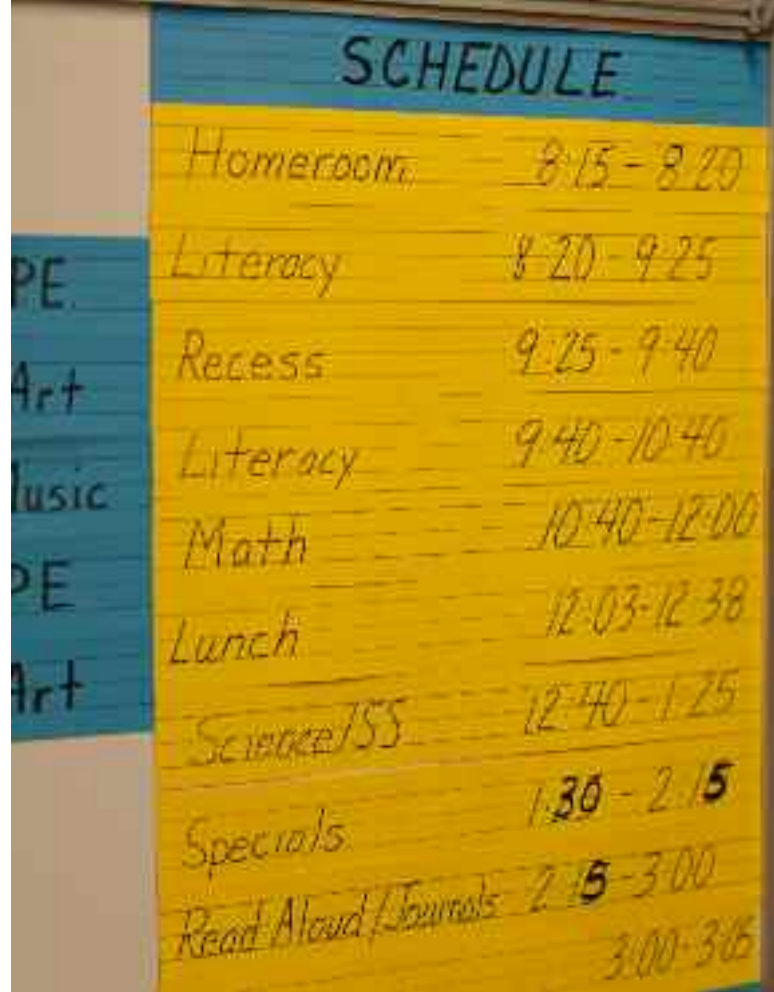
Taking a reform that works for a district of 200 students and making it successful for 10,000 is Adams 50's biggest challenge. Community and teacher buy-in is critical; DeLorenzo recommended that 80 percent of the district's more than 500 teachers be on board before a decision was made to implement the effort.

Selleck sought teachers with "a constructive critical eye" to attend a summer 2007 symposium put on by DeLorenzo's group. Board members, central office staff, and building-level administrators also attended. Afterward, DeLorenzo came to the district and spoke with more teachers.

When teachers said they were having a hard time conceptualizing what the reform would look like, the district arranged a trip to Chugach. It was open to 40 teachers, with the district paying travel expenses of about \$1,500 each. In return, the teachers had to sign a contract agreeing to stay with the district for three years. If they left before the three years were up, they had to return the money.

Karen Jenks went on the trip and was sold on the model, she says, after speaking with Chugach's students and teachers. She was concerned that the size difference between the two districts would prove too much to be successful, but didn't want the number of students to be a barrier.

"I came back and said, 'Let's get past this. Yes, the school



Metz students go to their level groups for literacy and math classes and heterogeneous groups for other classes. Standards-based reform, says Jenks, allows the teachers to fill in student gaps in knowledge. "I saw kids who would understand algebra but not know how to do addition and subtraction."

is small, but we have to get past it. It's important for us to do this because of our size. We have more credibility because of our size."

Seventy-five percent of teachers supported the new model, but that wasn't enough for Selleck or the district. The superintendent wanted 80 percent, and she held more conversations with teachers. The second vote was 85 percent in favor.

"You had a lot of people who were really excited. Some who wanted to pull back," says Jenks. "The kids' reaction changed all of us. The kids love it."

Parents and community members also attended meetings, learning how the reform would change their children's education. "Everyone was worried about how the community would react," says Stoll. "People have been cautious. School is one of those things that people think of as a comfortable blanket. They don't want it to change much."

School board president Vicky Marshall says "core leaders in our parent community" started conversations about the reform. "It was important that we knew how the community would feel about this," she says, noting the board and district would not have gone forward without community and employee support.

"It was the balance," she says. "We see this as the right

thing to do, but we know we can't force it on our community and our staff. We would have waited and kept the talk alive, but we wouldn't have flipped the switch until we knew we had that support."

The hard work of reform

After the visits and training, Adams 50 teachers and administrators had to figure out how to bring the reform to their classrooms. Ten levels were identified that would replace the current grade system. Education researcher Robert Marzano agreed to work with teachers to determine what skills would be included in each level and how they would be measured. More than 100 teachers worked—without pay—with Marzano throughout the summer.

"The teachers were just great, living with the ambiguity," says Marzano. "They had a lot of questions. We had to say, some of these decisions haven't been made yet. They have to be made along the way."

Metz Elementary, the pilot school, put the reform in place in 2008-09. Of the school's 430 students, 80 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 60 percent are English language learners. Students are placed in their level groups in literacy and math and spend one-third of the day in heterogeneous classrooms.

"Kids want to know what they are learning and why and how they will get there," says Principal Shannon Willy, who has been at the school 11 years. "It's driven me to be more focused on instruction."

Within the levels, pri-

Metz Principal Shannon Willy says her school volunteered to pilot the standards-based reform because the teachers wanted to have a voice in shaping the reform. Their attitude was: "We can wait for it to happen or we can move it forward," she says.

mary students stay with students near their age—addressing parent concerns that sixth-graders and first-graders would be in the same classes. Middle school students stay together, as will high school students.

Early signs are encouraging, Stoll says. Metz's fourth- and fifth-grade reading and math scores rose in the first year, and discipline problems went down by 40 percent "because kids were at their own level, not bored or frustrated," she says.

As the program expands, Adams 50 has trained 65 teacher-coaches to assist with the reform. Called Beacon teachers, they are released from regular classroom duties and assigned to schools for two years, allowing them to model the reform for colleagues and be resources and troubleshooters.

"I was willing to do what was necessary to show how to do this," says kindergarten teacher Nikolaus Namba, a Beacon teacher. "Ongoing professional development is essential with this kind of systemic change."

Namba, like Jenks, is so convinced this is the right approach that he says he'd quit Adams if the district halted the effort. "If this stopped tomorrow, I'd still be doing it," Namba says. "This will change the face of education."

High school hurdles

In 2010-11, the reforms move to the high school. Parents have been concerned that colleges will not accept nontraditional transcripts, and Sampson knows from his experience in Chugach that high school is "where the pushback comes."

DeLorenzo says that the reform doesn't mean honor rolls and other high school traditions have to be eliminated. "You can keep a grade and credit system; it just looks different," he says.

The lowest GPA would be 3.0. If students don't earn an A or a B in the class, they haven't mastered it, so they will need to take it again. "Once you let teachers see that, they are open to changing the system," he says.

When the high school program is in place, students will graduate when they've mastered Level 10 learning targets in the four core classes (reading, math, science, and social studies). "If you are not done with learning targets in May, you can work in summer school, you can work on them over the summer, or you will come back in the fall and work on them again," says Stoll.

Some students will complete the graduation requirements early and take Advanced Placement classes for





Top left: Adams County 50 School Board Vice President Marge Rinaldi. Top right: School Board President Vicky Marshall. Far right: Superintendent Roberta Selleck.

college credit. “Our dream is to have kids walk across the stage with 18 college credits,” she says.

Money and sustainability

Reform takes resources, of course. Teacher training, trips to Alaska, and rewriting standards and assessments costs money, and Adams 50 “reallocated current funding” to pay the bills, Selleck says.

The district did not receive corporate money or foundation grants to supplement the cost, and Selleck decided to end programs that were not showing results, including a smaller-class-size initiative. Two hundred full-time positions were eliminated.

“Class size was the biggest pot of money,” she says. “Low class size was not the answer. We would not be on academic watch if it did work.”

Cutting the positions allowed the district to raise salaries for starting teachers, which garnered union support and has helped in recruiting and retaining existing staff.

Stoll says the fact that Adams 50 is doing the reform without outside financial support is important because others can’t use lack of money as an excuse. “They can see that it doesn’t cost you any more than the usual,” says Stoll. “Anyone can do this if they want to.”

Of course, additional money would be nice, and with it, the district would have done some things differently, like adding even more teacher training. Selleck and the board hope Adams 50 will qualify for federal Race to the Top money.

The success of any reform has another essential lynchpin: sustainability. DeLorenzo says the school board’s united support for the reform is why he was willing to work with Adams 50. “It’s hard to sustain without the support of the board and superintendent,” he says. “You can do it with principals, school, and teachers, but only in pockets.”

Says Sampson: “You must have leadership at the superintendent and board level deep enough that they can sustain through the first wave of crisis and pushback.”

Colorado’s mandatory term limits heighten the sustainability issue: Board members can serve only two four-year terms.

A couple of election cycles could see an entirely different board than the one right now. “We needed to make sure we had the support, because of the term limits,” says Marshall.

Board members have talked about reaching out to potential future candidates “so they can understand and support this,” she says.

In the spotlight

Adams 50 gets visitors every month—about 100 in 2008-09 and nearly 50 in the first half of this school year. DeLorenzo and RISC believe observers, researchers, and others who want to try the reform will benefit from the site visits.

“We don’t want to keep it under wraps,” Stoll says. “We want to share the journey.”

About 80 people attended Adams 50’s session at a recent Colorado Association of School Boards (CASB) conference. Jane Urschel, the association’s deputy executive director, says the district has CASB’s support.

“It’s like breaking the mold on a model that’s been in place for a century and remolding to say that we really believe students learn at different rates,” Urschel says, noting the reform requires a culture shift. “Changing culture is like digging up a graveyard—it’s difficult to do.”

Van Schoales, education officer at the Denver-based Piton Foundation, supports Adams 50’s effort as well. Most districts, he says, now are working toward competency-based systems for students.

He’s concerned, however, that Adams 50 will face a backlash if achievement doesn’t increase relatively quickly. That won’t be easy, considering how far below the state average students are now.

“Making the transformation from a time-based system to a competency-based system is very difficult,” Schoales says. “Districts have done it in bits and pieces, but not wholesale.”

It’s a risk Adams 50 is willing to take.

“It takes courage to do this,” says Stoll. “It’s not for the faint of heart.” ■

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