



A suburban district
innovates and improves to
avoid state intervention

In 2018, leading education nonprofits AdvancED and Measured Progress came together. With more than a century of experience in accreditation and school improvement and decades of leadership in student assessment solutions, the new organization—Cognia™—brings institutions around the world a new, holistic way to view school performance and student achievement.

The activities described in this paper were carried out before the merger by AdvancED in partnership with the institutions described. We've retained references to AdvancED to avoid confusion.



A suburban district **innovates** and **improves** to avoid state intervention

Case Study: Westminster Public Schools

Westminster, CO

Study Dates: 2016–19

Rebels with a Cause

A pioneering district in suburban Denver avoids state intervention by partnering with AdvancED and using innovations in individualized learning and continuous improvement.



In August 2018, hundreds of suburban Denver school employees filed into Westminster High School's gym. Colorado's performance ratings weren't scheduled to officially be released until the following week, but Dr. Pamela Swanson, the district's superintendent, had a surprise for the staff, which had been working in the shadow of the state's accountability "clock" for most of the decade.

"We are here today to celebrate because all of you, regardless of your job, contributed, and we are off the clock," Swanson said, as attendees in the bleachers held up colored cards to show the current status of Westminster Public Schools' accountability system indicators—a sea of greens and yellows, with no reds in sight. "Some said it couldn't be done statistically. We knew better."

It was a dramatic reversal for the district, which had been the first in the Denver region to face the threat of state intervention after five years of low student test scores. With just a year to avoid takeover—or the potential of a forced merger with another school district—Westminster saw the number of its schools in the top tier of the state rating system double in 2017–18, which stopped the clock and allowed the district to maintain control of its destiny.

The turnaround resulted from innovations in individualized learning and continuous improvement efforts implemented as part of a unique partnership with AdvancED.

The nonprofit educational improvement organization's diagnostic review and evaluation systems, classroom observation tools, leadership coaching, and planning protocols helped the district identify strategies that promoted greater instructional consistency for its pioneering instructional model. To energize the district's efforts, Swanson had urged all employees—teachers and others—to take a step forward for a simple reason: "Our kids would win too," she says.

“We're not your ordinary district. We're rebels with a cause.”

—Dr. Pamela Swanson,
District Superintendent



Not your ordinary district

Serving a predominately minority community with a high percentage of students in poverty, Westminster Public Schools (WPS) has spent the last decade moving in a very different direction than its peers in suburban Denver.

“We’re not your ordinary district,” says Swanson. “We’re rebels with a cause.”

In 2009, the district shifted to embrace competency-based education, with the goal of ending social promotion and instead advancing students as they learn specific skills, says Oliver Grenham, the district’s longstanding chief education officer. Traditional grade levels were eliminated, replaced by performance levels in different content areas, as “time became the variable, and learning the constant,” he explains.

The shift has been accompanied by an emphasis on personalizing education based on students’ aspirations. Starting in sixth grade, each Westminster student identifies prospective careers and tailors his or her learning objectives to help develop the skills needed to be successful (see graphic, right).

“We say the day **after** graduation is the most important day in the district,” Grenham says. “It was a shift in people’s minds.”

The shift to what the district calls its homegrown CBS (Competency-Based System) was embraced by parents and drew national attention. But while students progressed based on their

learning instead of their grade levels, state tests were still administered by age, leading to challenges for the district and its classrooms.

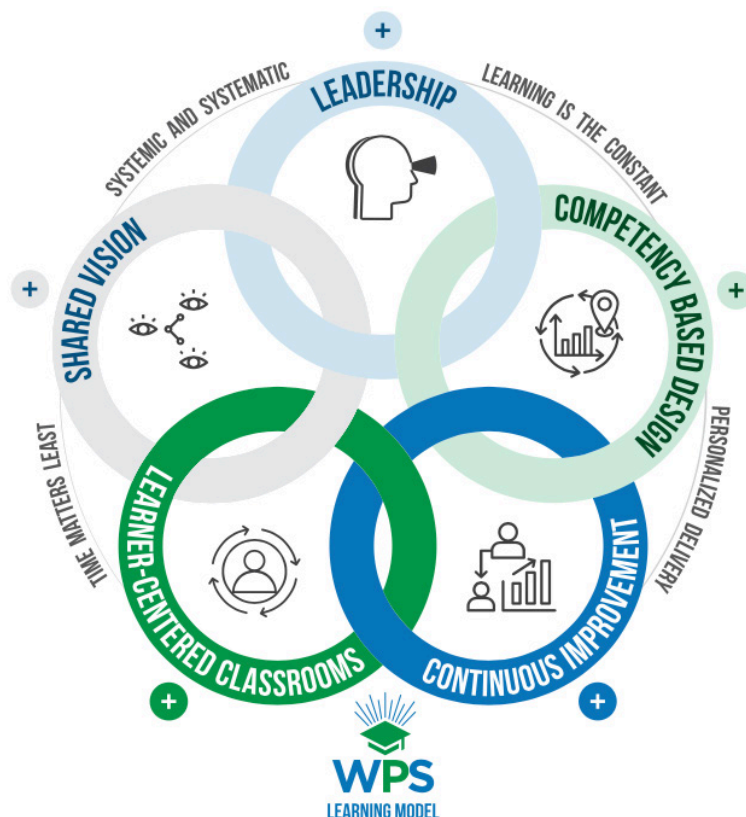
“A lot of conversations we had with principals and teachers were like, ‘You want me to teach in a competency-based model, but we are judged in a proficiency model. Do you want me to teach to the test or where the kids are?’” Grenham recalls.

To accommodate these challenges, the district provided significant school-level flexibility, as well as continuing to make changes in terminology and practices to better accommodate state proficiency standards. What were the results? “We weren’t as consistent [in classroom implementation] as we thought we were, even though we had been doing the [competency-based] model for a number of years,” Grenham says. “We kept recreating year one because we kept changing things every year.”

In 2010, 13 of the district’s 18 schools were put “on the clock,” meaning that—based in large part on low student test scores—they were given “turnaround” or priority improvement status in the state accountability system. The district, in turn, was given five years to improve the schools’ performance ratings.

Test scores did improve at each school from 2010 to 2015, as did the district’s overall state accreditation scores. But following the switch to the new PARCC standardized assessments in 2016, eight Westminster schools saw scores drop, meaning the district had to take new steps to avoid a state takeover.

“Westminster Public Schools has experienced substantial growth in academic achievement and desires to do so again,” district officials said in the written plan.



A Lens of Innovation

“AdvancED was looking at us through a lens of innovation...They came to us as friends and advocates.”

—Dr. Pamela Swanson,
District Superintendent

While Westminster leaders have at times been vocal critics of the mismatch between the state's traditional accountability metrics and the district's competency-based system, they also have been equally vocal about the needs to improve student outcomes and to understand what was and wasn't working in each school.

As one of the five planks of its learning model, continuous improvement is a key part of the district culture. But Westminster leaders also recognized the importance of an outside assessment of the district's strengths and weaknesses.

To that end, Westminster invited AdvancED to conduct a districtwide review and evaluation of the district and its schools in Spring 2016, with an emphasis on identifying places where its implementation of competency-based education (CBE) had been inconsistent.

“The thing that intrigued me the most was that AdvancED was looking at us through a lens of innovation instead of a traditional system,” Swanson says. “They came to us as friends and advocates.”

As part of its evaluation, AdvancED conducted more than 500 interviews and visited 215 classrooms. Citing the

district's vision and the commitment of its stakeholders, AdvancED granted Westminster full accreditation for five years, which meant the district was accredited by both AdvancED and the state's own accountability system.

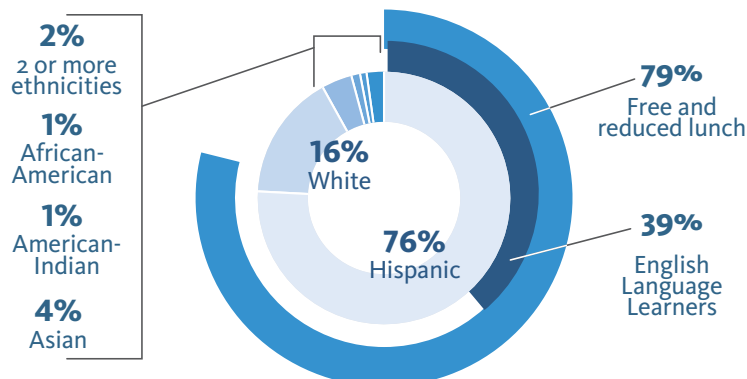
At the same time, AdvancED helped identify three “root causes” for Westminster's ongoing performance challenges:

- inconsistent implementation of its instructional model
- a lack of accountability around competency-based learning
- a need for culture building at the postsecondary level (which began implementing the competency-based model later than the district's elementary and middle schools)

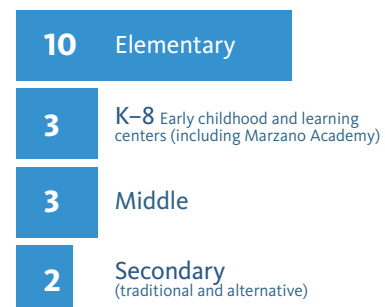
The review also affirmed to district leaders the importance of redoubling Westminster's focus on competency-based education. “We were told, ‘You guys have built an amazing Lamborghini, but not everyone knows how to drive it,’” Swanson says of her takeaway from the review and evaluation process. “If people can understand why you're changing when you're moving through a change, they can back into it a little better.”

About Westminster Public Schools

9,300 STUDENTS



18 SCHOOLS



A Path(way) Forward

Facing the threat of further state action, in 2017 district leaders created a managed pathway plan focused on continuous improvement, one of several options available to low-performing schools and districts on the state's accountability clock. The plan requires districts to work with external partners; Westminster selected AdvancED as its continuous improvement and accountability partner, charged with monitoring and providing feedback on the ongoing implementation of the competency-based model. At the same time, Marzano Research was brought on board as an instructional partner focused on professional development and instructional strategies.

As Westminster's external continuous improvement and accountability partner, AdvancED worked with district officials to pinpoint WPS's challenges first identified in the root cause analysis. Survey results from educators, parents, and teachers identified the same issues with implementation that had been the focus of the district's teacher leadership cabinet. "It was an outside check that validated our thinking," says Jeni Gotto, the district's executive director of teaching and learning. "That gave us the impetus to push forward."

To address consistency, AdvancED worked with district officials to enhance Westminster's existing "learning walks," rolling observations in which groups

of district and school leaders provide feedback and discuss what they see in individual classrooms. These learning walks improved and became even more consistent with the introduction of AdvancED's Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool® (eleot®), a mobile-based observation

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—Jeni Gotto,
Executive Director of Teaching
and Learning

Westminster Public Schools: State Accreditation Designations

2016		2017		2018 (Preliminary)	
Schools	Points	Schools	Points	Schools	Points
Col. STEM Academy	75.9	Col. STEM Academy	78.6	Col. STEM Academy	88.0
Mesa ES	59.3	Westminster Academy	65.7	Metz ES	67.7
Sunset Ridge ES	55.7	Shaw Heights MS	56.7	Mesa ES	64.2
Hidden Lake HS	58.8	Hodgkins ES	56.7	Westminster Academy	64.2
Sherrelwood ES	52.1	Hidden Lake HS	55.7*	Fairview ES	60.4
Tennyson Knolls ES	52.1	Tennyson Knolls ES	52.8	Skyline Vista ES	60.4
Skyline Vista ES	49.8	Scott Carpenter MS	50.5	Scott Carpenter MS	55.9
Scott Carpenter MS	47.8	Harris Park ES	49.4	Hodgkins ES	54.6
Hodgkins ES	46.1	Sherrelwood ES	49.2	Sunset Ridge ES	54.3
Westminster ES	42.6	Flynn ES	47.9	FM Day ES	52.7
Metz ES	40.0	Mesa ES	47.5	Sherrelwood ES	50.9
Shaw Heights MS	39.5	Sunset Ridge ES	45.2	Flynn ES	50.7
Westminster HS	37.7	Fairview ES	40.7	Ranum MS	50.3
Flynn ES	36.0	Metz ES	40.0	Shaw Heights MS	49.2
FM Day ES	35.4	FM Day ES	39.3	Harris Park ES	45.8
Ranum MS	35.2	Ranum MS	38.7	Tennyson Knolls ES	42.9
Harris Park ES	34.2	Skyline Vista ES	38.5	Hidden Lake HS	**
Fairview ES	26.1	Westminster HS	37.5	Westminster HS	40.8

District 39.9		District 41.5		District 44.5	
Academic Achievement	26.9	Academic Achievement	29.2	Academic Achievement	34.3
Academic Growth	49.4	Academic Growth	51.4	Academic Growth	61.3
Postsecondary Readiness	40.3	Postsecondary Readiness	40.3	Postsecondary Readiness	31.9

School Plan Assignment	Points	District Plan Assignment	Points
*Distinction	> 74	Distinction	> 74
Performance	53 - 73.9	Performance	56 - 73.9
Improvement	42 - 52.9	Improvement	44 - 55.9
Priority Improvement	34 - 41.9	Priority Improvement	34 - 43.9
Turnaround	< 33.9	Turnaround	< 33.9

*WPS began recognition of schools of Distinction in 2018.

**Hidden Lake High School is designated an Alternative Education Campus and is included in a separate accreditation calculation (results unavailable at time of publication).

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tool that measures and quantifies student engagement, classroom expectations, feedback, and learning support.

“It’s very focused on the student aspect of learning—what’s happening in the classroom—as opposed to watching the teacher,” Gotto says.

District officials used eLeot to focus more deeply on instructional practices, using evidence of student behaviors captured by observers to reinforce consistency across all classrooms. Westminster also added teachers to the observation teams and conducted visits more frequently.

Grenham says these changes led to a shift away from what some teachers feared was a “gotcha” mindset that previously accompanied observations. “Changing the lens was very dramatic. Kids and teachers and principals are so used to people watching them work, it’s just common practice now,” he says. “People want feedback—they’ve been working on different approaches and ideas, and they want to see if they’re actually making a difference.”

AdvancED also helped facilitate more focused action planning that reinforced districtwide priorities to attract and develop effective educators and leaders, foster a culture of academic success, and strengthen and expand early childhood education.

“One thing we tried to do is manage how many objects of change we have in the system at any given time,” Swanson says. “We found too much is just overwhelming, but not enough doesn’t give us the acceleration we need.”

District officials have long emphasized the use of the PDCA (Plan, Do, Check, Adjust) model at the school and classroom level. However, they worked with AdvancED to enhance that approach and create tools that helped principals shorten continuous

improvement cycles and use data to set individual targets and indicators for their schools.

“We ask principals for the benchmarks and how they are going to hold adults accountable,” Swanson says. “Messaging was important. We made it clear that this was a collaborative approach, not punitive.”

The positive results, adds Gotto, were noticeable almost right away. “For instance, some principals were skeptical about the potential for real change with our learning walks,” says Gotto. “Once it became clear that the walks were being done with ‘positive intent,’ the suggestions were quickly embraced.”

As part of its work to build capacity, AdvancED also provided leadership coaching to principals, focusing on providing effective feedback to teachers with differing levels of experience.

Together, these changes contributed to the turnaround that was the cause for celebration at the beginning of the 2018–19 school year—and led to even more lasting benefits.

“We’ve done a lot of work with the art and science of teaching,” Gotto says. Today, she says, the district is “much more aligned with the shift we want to see in our classrooms.”

The district also gives credit to its embrace of the Kagan Cooperative Learning Strategies for bringing a higher sense of student engagement to the classroom.

Swanson agrees. “The more people talk about the work, the deeper the belief system is,” she says. “From principals and teachers to students, we’re seeing some shifts in people’s perceptions and beliefs.”

Doubling Down

While WPS officially moved off the state's accountability clock in 2018, district officials have no plans to change the focus on improvement.

"I believe we are going to continue to see progress," Swanson told the media at the time. "We have to double down to keep that up."

A key part of doing so involves focusing on talent. The district has developed its own aspiring administrators' pipeline to identify and train leaders committed to supporting Westminster's competency-based model and it plans to create a similar pipeline for teachers. "Young teachers don't automatically come with those skillsets," says Grenham.

Key among those skillsets, says Gotto, is change management. "Can you navigate the change process and the ambiguity you have to live with in system-level innovation?" she asks.

Another key has been empowering the district's non-instructional personnel, who actively participate in professional development and other activities. "It was important to build a shared vision with the instructional and non-instructional staff—everybody had to be on board," Gotto says. "That's one of the reasons the system is standing today."

Noting that staff such as culinary workers and bus drivers are often the first adults students see each day, "it's important they see how their work impacts schools," Swanson says. "Whatever your function is, we're all educators of these kids."

Westminster's journey was guided by its school board, which achieved a high score on AdvancED's initial diagnostic on governance. The board has played an active role in supporting the district's direction, even as the state's accountability system made doing so challenging at times. "They've supported

our efforts, and our staff know that," Swanson says. For its efforts, the Westminster school board unanimously was voted the state school board of the year by the Colorado Association of School Boards.

The broader community also has supported the district's efforts, as reflected by the November 2018 referendum, in which voters approved the district's first mill levy since 2002. The tax increase allows the district to continue offering one of the highest starting teacher salaries in the state.

“We now have teachers coming to the district specifically to work in this model.”

—Oliver Grenham,
District Chief Education Officer

"People are talking about our system, our city council is talking about our system, and people are more inclined to reach out to us because they want to be part of our story," Grenham says.

The turnaround has allowed Westminster to maintain—and strengthen—its focus on CBE. Last year the district hosted a national conference on CBE and planning is underway for a follow-up conference.

In addition, one of the district's elementary schools reopened as a Marzano academy, the second of its kind in the country, and soon WPS will open an arts magnet school.

"We now have teachers coming to the district specifically to work in this model," says Grenham.

Swanson recommends that no matter what instructional model a district follows, district leaders must start by creating a shared vision for continuous improvement efforts. "We are humble about this work because we don't know all the answers," says Swanson. "Westminster's 'why' may not be another district's 'why'—it has to marry with your community, staff, and students."

Swanson and other district leaders stress the importance of communication, particularly when programs and proposed changes are different from the ones to which educators and parents may be accustomed. "The level of communication you have to have in the system is a challenge," says Swanson. "Sometimes it feels like one parent at a time, sometimes it feels like one staff member at a time."

It's also important to approach continuous improvement through a leadership lens, Swanson adds. "There are loads of people who can talk about change and how it feels and what it looks like," she says. "I'm not sure everyone goes the extra mile to understand how we're going to lead it and know if we're leading it effectively."

"Westy Strong" is the district's informal motto, and its leaders credit AdvancED with having the courage to support its innovative instructional model as it worked with school leaders toward the shared goal of improvement.

"It was not in any way like pounding a square peg into a round hole," Swanson says. "AdvancED's team members were good listeners and adapters, using their expertise and sometimes coming out of their own comfort zone to meet us where we are. We see them as learners in this process with us."

About Cognia

Cognia™ is a global nonprofit that has the knowledge to help schools improve. Cognia offers accreditation and certification, assessment, professional learning, and improvement services. The result of the merger of AdvancED and Measured Progress, Cognia was formed to bridge the gap between school evaluation and student assessment. We are the largest education improvement organization in the world and an undeniable force for enhancing schools, engaging students, and driving better outcomes for all.

Find out more at cognia.org.



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