

Success Spotlight



Performance Based Learning: How District 51 is Reinventing Schools to Prepare Students for Postsecondary Success

MESA COUNTY VALLEY 51 SCHOOL DISTRICT encompasses the city of Grand Junction as well as 2,700 square miles of mostly unpopulated high desert country that extends west to the Utah border.

Over time, however, district leaders began to recognize that their schools weren't fulfilling that goal as well as they might. "All our numbers were flat," Schultz said. "Kids weren't graduating ready to take that next step, whatever it might be. They were doing the seat time, but they weren't learning what they needed to learn."

"We see ourselves as a key economic driver of the community," said Schultz, who has worked in the district since 1982, and has been superintendent since 2009. One key district goal, Schultz said, "is to create student learning systems that entice businesses to come here, rather than having all our kids go away to pursue career opportunities elsewhere."

The county was hit hard by the Great Recession, and changes in the [Mesa County Valley 51 School District \(D51\)](#) student population reflect the economic hard times, from which the region is still recovering. Before the Great Recession, about a third of the district's students qualified for federally subsidized lunches, a proxy for poverty. Today, 49 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches.

Earlier in the first decade of this century, before hard times hit, the district was growing by between 400 and 500 students per-year, said Superintendent Steve Schultz. Enrollment reached a high-water mark of 22,500, and has since slipped back a bit to about 22,000. Thirty percent of students are minorities, the vast majority of them Latino.

Objective

Beginning in 2006, Schultz said, the district had taken some small steps toward “retooling and reinventing our school system,” by recognizing that each student learns in his or her own unique style and at differing paces. The district developed three pathways to graduation – distinction, conventional, and individualized – and allowed students to choose the pathway that suited them best.

It was a change, and a meaningful one, but Schultz and the school board considered it “very rudimentary” compared to what came later.

Still, those early steps included the development of what has become an award-winning Individual Career and Academic Plan (ICAP) system. D51 has forged strong ties with Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College. Buses run from high schools to the colleges, and students can take college-level classes ranging from computer-aided design to video production to welding.

In early 2014, district leaders and the D51 school board decided to update the district strategic plan, and to consider making performance-based learning for students a cornerstone of that plan. District officials began researching the practice, and looking into places where it had been implemented effectively.

The world right now is faced with massive change. The school systems we have now are based on the industrial age model that truly is obsolete. Schools aren't broken; we need to reinvent schools. We're interested in preparing our students for the kind of world they are going to have to enter as they leave high school.

*Steve Schultz, Superintendent
District 51*

What is performance-based learning? Here's how the district explained it in a "FAQ" published on its website:

A Performance-based Learning system presents learning objectives as a series of building blocks that stack upon each other. Students move through the course material focusing on one block at a time. What's different about this approach is that the student does not move on to the next block until he or she demonstrates proficiency of the block that precedes it. Instead of getting a grade that averages a student's performance across a range of topics without ensuring mastery of all (or any), under a Performance-based Learning system, a student is evaluated based on his or her ability to master individual skills or bodies of knowledge.

A few months after D51 started looking at performance-based learning, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) gathered a cohort of school districts interested in transitioning to that system. D51 eagerly joined that group.

As part of that process, participating districts studied school districts, in Colorado and elsewhere, that had developed personalized or performance-based learning systems for their students. Adams 50 is the longest standing such district in Colorado. But what really caught the attention of D51 participants was Lindsay Unified, a small California district, 60 miles north of Bakersfield that had radically transformed itself by moving to a performance-based learning model.

In October 2014, CDE arranged a trip for five people from D51 to visit Lindsay. The group included school board members, the teacher association president, and the district's chief academic officer.

"They came back truly inspired by what they saw; so inspired that the following January (2015), we took 17 people back to Lindsay," Schultz said. That larger group included top regional business executives, the rest of the school board, Schultz, five community members, the president of the local community college, the head of the local chamber of commerce, and the publisher of the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel, the region's largest newspaper.

What was it that so impressed the group, ultimately leading D51 to model much of its performance-based learning model on Lindsay's? Here's Schultz's take:

“Walk into any classroom, talk to any student. They can tell you what they’re learning, why they’re learning it, and what’s next.” Students could also articulate, in specific terms, their learning goals in every subject area.

“And all of this lived within a computerized system accessible to students, teachers, and parents. They truly owned their learning. Students in the current system (in Mesa and elsewhere) often can’t articulate why they are doing something.”

After that second trip, the school board was so enthused that all its members said “let’s implement this by fall,” Schultz recalled. The reaction of Schultz and his senior staff was “Well, that’s not realistic.”

Finally, a group of 27 people from D51, including several teachers, returned to Lindsay in May 2015 for a “more nuts-and-bolts” visit to start figuring out the steps the Mesa district would need to take to transition to a performance-based learning system.



Having such broad-based groups visit Lindsay and understand the vision of what D51 is planning to put into place has meant that all key constituencies – educators, parents, businesses, and the community at large – are supportive of the district’s change in direction.

“It is unique and rare to have the school board, district leadership, teacher association leadership all passionately, enthusiastically supporting the same vision,” said Tony Giurado, D51’s chief academic officer.

But to keep that support, implementation has to be smart and systematic, and the benefits to kids have to be plain to see.

D51 ultimately decided that the district would, over time, fully transition to the new system. But to do that well, and to increase the odds of Lindsay-like success, meant starting slow. As part of that plan, and under state law, all students must develop an ICAP within 90 days of enrolling in a district school.

Strategy

D51 chose seven of its 44 schools to become demonstration sites – three elementary schools, three middle schools and one high school. Schultz stressed the importance of referring to the schools as demonstration sites rather than pilots, because the term pilot suggests impermanence.

At the seven demonstration schools, pieces of a performance-based system are being put in place gradually and sequentially. Providing teachers with strong professional development is key, because the shift, even if gradual, is seismic in nature and scope.

“It’s not a thing, not a program, it is a philosophical shift,” Schultz said. “And professional development is the governor on the speed of implementation.”

A key element of professional development is shifting teachers – and students, for that matter – to a “growth mindset.” This is important, Schultz said, because it shifts focus away from time as the driver to mastery of content as the goal.

In a growth mindset, “the message to a student who might say ‘I’m bad at math’ is ‘you can do anything, it just might take a while.’”

D51 envisions full roll-out of the performance-based learning system as lasting up to seven years. And the roll-out will occur in five phases though not, Schultz stressed, on a one-per-year pace. Among the five phases, two currently are being implemented:

- Laying the foundation. This includes teaching students and staff about having a "growth mindset," social-emotional learning (Habits of Mind), and personalized learning. Surveys conducted by the district found that staff and students alike strongly believed that social-emotional learning is a vital component of a 21st century education.
- Supporting effective practices. In this phase, the district delves deeper into aligning standards across schools, establishing rubrics, and sampling differentiated units in the classroom.

The future phases are:

- Building performance-based learning
- Beginning personalized learning
- Refinement

It’s your everyday standard schoolwork. It’s just a more interactive way of learning - instead of just sitting at that table having a teacher talk to you.

*Ronin, Student
R5 High School*

D51 is also moving towards standards-based grading, on a scale of one to four rather than the traditional A to F. And on rubrics the district is developing, the terminology will be different than the traditional “partially proficient, proficient, and advanced.”

In place of advanced, for example, students operating at the highest level will be called “innovating,” with the gerund “ing” denoting that this is a process, not a cut-and-dried end result.

Results

Work in the seven demonstration sites started this school year, so there are no measurable results yet. But when asked what a successful performance-based learning system would look like when fully implemented, here’s what the district’s 13-member senior leadership team had to say:

- Students will know how to go after and get the training they need. “Life isn’t something that happens to them. They lead their lives.”
- Every student who graduates from D51 has achieved mastery and is ready to move on to the next phase of his or her life, whether that involves vocational training, college, the military, or some other pathway.
- Businesses will be knocking on the door to locate in Mesa County.
- Students will leave “educated for their future, not our past.”
- Education is something that will occur with kids, rather than being done to kids.
- Students will have customized educational journeys, so that they understand exactly why they are doing what they’re doing.
- Students possess “true agency,” which means they make their own choices in a safe environment and understand the consequences of those choices.
- Students and teachers will be excited to come to school each day.

Performance-based learning is a model that involves the student in their learning. On a regular basis, they are setting personal goals based on their learning continuum and monitor their progress. Teachers guide them through this process. Because of that engagement, they know where they are and what they need to learn next as they move through the system from preschool on.

*Steve Schultz, Superintendent
District 51*

Chief Academic Officer Giurado said he’s confident that a few years down the road, D51 will offer a national model, similar to Lindsay, but on a larger scale. “Building a system that truly moves toward mastery and away from time-based elements: That’s a game-changer,” he said.

Looking Ahead

Throughout the district, but especially at the demonstration sites, teachers are receiving professional development on the concept of growth mindset, and other foundational practices the district expects all educators to adopt in coming years.

“There is a natural skepticism about mandates, flavor-of-the-month,” Schultz said. “Teachers aren’t saying no. They just don’t completely understand it yet.”

Going forward, the district won’t add additional demonstration sites, but rather will slowly bring all schools into the new systems. Leaders have been taking the concept on what Schultz called a “big road show” to introduce key concepts to D51 schools: growth mindset, habits of mind, and reinvigorated professional learning communities (PLCs).

“We had PLCs in the past, but they never gelled,” Schultz said. Now, with heightened focused, he said he expects the learning communities to add great value.

The difference is now when they demonstrate that proficiency with that rubric, we have evidence that they mastered it rather than a letter grade that may be based on a list of variables. They are more equipped because they are demonstrating proficiency in each of the academic standards in a concrete way, not just turning in work for a grade at the end.

*Don Trujillo, Principal
R5 High School*



How to Do It: Tips for Implementation of a Performance-Based Learning System

1. Define your overall objective

- How can implementing a performance-based learning (PBL) system boost student engagement, postsecondary readiness, personalized learning, and student agency?
- How can a district engage the broader community in the development of such a system to support career pathways?

2. Preparation

- Read the [PBL section](#) of the Mesa County Valley School District 51 (D51) website for background.
 - I. Read the [FAQ](#) page.
 - II. Check out the Grand Junction High School [Educational Planning Guide](#).
- Read the [Grand Junction Daily Sentinel story](#) about the district's ambitions for PBL.
- Read the Lindsay (Calif.) Unified School District [strategic design document](#).
- Read about [Tony Wagner](#), whose thinking influenced D51's PBL design.
- Examine information about [ACT's WorkKeys Program](#), which D51 is using.

3. Implementation tips from the D51 leadership team

- Go slow at the start, and be comfortable with going slow. Speed kills.
- Involve everyone, in the district and the community. Remember: It's a cultural shift, not a program.
 - I. Commit to real community engagement. Actively involve the community from the beginning.
- Work on a healthy school climate and culture for kids and a healthy workplace climate and culture for adults.
- Watch [Simon Sinek's TED talk](#):
- Spend time on the "why" first.
 - I. Why are we doing this?
 - II. Why does it matter?
- Create feedback loops, and be nimble enough to be responsive to that feedback.
- Listen, listen, and then listen some more.
- Meet people where they are, without judgment.
- Drop the "P" from Professional Learning Communities. Create learning communities that include teachers, students, and the instructional leadership team.
- Network with other districts nationally that have embarked on this work. It's a process, not something you "buy and plug in."

4. Assessment/reflection

- What worked?
- What did not work?
- How can it be adjusted?