

Is Westminster 50 on to something?

By Jeremy P. Meyer *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

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A revolutionary academic strategy introduced in 2009 by the troubled Westminster school district took a radical approach to how children should be promoted in school, leaving plenty of people skeptical.

At first, it appeared the new model that blew up the grade-level structure was a failure. Scores plummeted, the superintendent left, and the district was placed on turnaround status.

Gradual improvement since implementation and last week's third-grade reading scores show the district may be on to something.

Instead of grouping children in grades by age, the district puts kids into classes based on what they know. Kids advance to the next level after they prove proficiency.

The "competency-based system" had only been tried in a small Alaskan school district before Westminster 50 took it on.

The Adams County school district, with 10,000 students and 21 schools, had many challenges. It had been placed on academic watch by the state in 2006. Most of its students are poor and English is not their native language.

After the first year, the idea looked like a flop because scores dropped in seven of eight grades in reading and math and crashed 12 points in seventh-grade math. The district was given four years to improve or face a loss of accreditation.

Then-Superintendent Roberta Selleck blamed the problem on an "implementation dip." The next year, she was gone, replaced by Deputy Superintendent Pam Swanson.

The teaching model, then called "standards-based," was modified. It was renamed "competency-based system" and went from 10 developmental levels to 14 then 12. Since the dip of the 2009-10 year, scores have steadily climbed.

In 2012, the state pulled the district off turnaround status.

Then, last week, news came that third-grade reading scores had increased by 6 percentage points over the previous year. Those third-graders started in the system when they were kindergartners. That's good news for a district in a state where the average score dropped by a point.

It's not to say everything is perfect. Only 56 percent of the district's third-graders were proficient or advanced compared to the state average of 72 percent.

Swanson proudly points out the number of unsatisfactory readers also declined, dropping to 16 percent this year from 20 percent in 2013.

"We are not done yet," she said. "I am excited that after a decade, we are back to having a majority of our

third-graders advanced or proficient in reading."

The district is challenged by trying to fit its teaching model into the state assessment that still is based on grade levels.

So for the district, assigning its students to the proper state test is a complex task. "We're serving two masters," Swanson said.

Nevertheless, chief education officer Oliver Grenham said the improvement is creating a buzz.

"People are looking at those scores and saying, 'What is causing those scores?'," he said. "It is teaching kids at the level that they are ready for learning — meeting kids where they are at."

It is a simple idea but a Herculean task that administrators, teachers and students are pulling off every day in Westminster.

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