Westminster Public Schools (WPS) is a large suburban school district just northwest of Denver in the state of Colorado. Westminster is currently the largest district in the country to fully implement a competency-based learning system, in which students do not move on to the next concept until they have demonstrated mastery of the previous one. Westminster Public Schools is comprised of 20 schools, including two early childhood centers and two high schools. WPS also has four “innovation” or magnet schools: the Colorado STEM Academy serving grades K-8; the new John E. Flynn Marzano Academy, serving grades PK-5; the Metropolitan Arts Academy for grades PK-6, and the Westminster Academy for International Studies serving grades PK-7.

WPS serves nearly 10,000 students across a highly mobile and at-risk population. Approximately 32% of Westminster students are English Language Learners according to state and NCES data. In addition, the community experiences relatively high poverty rates which impacts school-aged students to a high degree. At the high school level, eight out of every 10 students qualify for the national Free and Reduced Lunch program. The district also includes a high number of traditionally underserved students, with the student body of Westminster High School reporting as 76% Hispanic, 16% White/Caucasian, 6% Asian, and 1% or less for all other categories.

Westminster has faced its share of challenges with the implementation of its Competency-Based System (CBS) of learning. From once being on the state watchlist and placed on an “accountability clock,” to being recognized for large growth gains for students, the district has come a long way. The transition to CBS has been challenging for all stakeholders, but also highly rewarding. One aspect of the innovative model that is difficult from an administrative perspective, according to WPS Superintendent Pamela Swanson, is the difference in state testing requirements which are tied to grade level. In the competency-based education system, students are not judged only by their grade level. “We may have a fourth grader reading at a fifth-grade level, but doing math at a third-grade level. We don’t wait a year to move them up” said Swanson.

However, the school district’s commitment to the new learning model is beginning to move the needle for Westminster students. Westminster Public Schools’ graduation rate has risen over the past four years, from 59.4% in the 2014-2015 school year to 67.9% in 2017-18. The improved graduation rates are further evidence of our continued academic improvement and the value of a Competency Based System” said Superintendent Swanson. “It’s not enough to have students walk across the stage and receive a diploma. It is just as important to have a system in place that provides flexibility so some students can graduate early while others can take the needed time to acquire the skills needed for the day after graduation.”

State testing data from the 2017-18 school year demonstrated an increase in overall academic achievement as well as student growth in both English Language Arts (ELA) and math for the third consecutive year. Student growth was especially remarkable in ELA, where Westminster students grew 5% more than the state average. Growth was not relegated to only one group of students, but occurred across multiple subgroups, including English Language Learners and students with disabilities. “The data are very clear. All of our students are being elevated by our Competency Based System (CBS)” said Swanson.

Building a Competency-Based System
Westminster’s journey began in 2007 when district leaders heard Richard DeLorenzo, formerly of Chugach School District in Alaska speak. Under DeLorenzo’s leadership, Chugach became the first K-12 district in

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1 https://www.westminsterpublicschools.org/site/Default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=1&PageID=1&ViewID=6446ee88-d30c-497e-9316-3f8874b3e108&FlexDataID=17595
2 https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/district_detail.asp?Search=1&details=1&InstName=westminster&State=08
3 Ibid.
4 https://www.greatschools.org/colorado/westminster/1525-Westminster-High-School/
5 https://www.westminsterpublicschools.org/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=1&ModuleinstanceID0126&ViewID=6446EE88-D30C-497E-9316-3F8874B3E108&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=18480&PageID=1
6 Ibid.
7 https://www.westminsterpublicschools.org/site/Default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=1&PageID=1&ViewID=6446ee88-d30c-497e-9316-3f8874b3e108&FlexDataID=17595
the nation to fully implement an instructional model based solely on performance and student mastery. The Westminster leaders returned home from the visit to Chugach School District and went to work, talking to their students, families, community, and teachers about what they had learned. WPS school leaders held open conversations weekly to explain their vision for competency-based learning at Westminster and to ask for feedback from stakeholders. Teacher leaders acted as program ambassadors to explain the new vision to their colleagues, and the school board, the teacher union, and non-instructional staff were part of the early discussions.

The district worked for two full years to build consensus and a shared vision for what they began calling their “Competency-Based System” (CBS). This new program language was chosen deliberately to reflect the district’s realization that they would need to rethink the entire system of education in the district if they truly wanted to go down the path of implementing a personalized, mastery-based learning model for every single student in Westminster Public Schools. “The changes we were looking at affected everything, “ said Jeni Gotto, Westminster’s Executive Director of Teaching and Learning. “Moving to the Competency-Based System affected purchasing, instruction, curriculum, our use of physical spaces, everything.” Gotto credits the hard work done to explain the district’s vision and the imperative for change to their community before making any actual changes as one of the primary reasons for the success and longevity of Westminster’s CBS programming. WPS leaders committed to not making change until they had achieved at least 80% consensus in their district. “After the first year, we took a vote and did not have the consensus we wanted in order to move forward,” said Gotto. “So, we kept talking.”

All this discussion paid off when, in the spring of 2009, the district began their CBS pilot program at Metz Elementary School. After working to refine their model, the district began their rollout to all grades K-8 in Year 1 (2009-2010) and then added a new grade level each year thereafter: 9th grade in 2010-2011, 10th grade in 2011-2012, 11th grade in 2012-2013, and finally 12th grade in 2013-2014. The CBS model now encompasses over 700 teachers across all 20 Westminster schools. “There were definitely lessons learned along the way,” said Gotto. For example, while piloting the program in a small setting allowed the district to course-correct and solve problems that arose in a small setting before implementing in a larger one, the rollout model also meant that the same group of students was the “test group” for five years in a row (8th-12th grades). The district also phased-in their implementation across classes, allowing teachers and families time to “bridge” from the traditional system to the new Competency-Based System.

All four core subjects were taught in a learning management system (LMS) called Empower and moved to using competency-based instruction and a Marzano proficiency scale for assessment. For several years, however, at the high school level, electives were still taught in traditional mode with standard report cards and A-F grades. This had the inadvertent effect of slowing adoption as the old structures were slow to be fully replaced. This resulted in additional time and energy being spent on maintaining both systems. The district also worked closely with local and state colleges during the implementation process to connect with registrars, to ensure NCAA compliance for student athletes, and to convert their Marzano-scale proficiency levels into a traditional GPA so that Westminster students would not miss out on scholarship opportunities.

What CBS Means for Westminster Students, Parents, Teachers, and Leaders
Westminster Public Schools uses the same RISC school reform model as Lindsay Unified School District and Chugach School District. The RISC framework includes elements such as Shared Vision, Competency-Based Design, Continuous Improvement, and Learner-Centered Classrooms, and one area of strength for the district is the commitment to Leadership at Every Level. WPS Superintendent Swanson meets regularly to listen to and gather input from stakeholder groups throughout the school community. These include the Superintendent Student Leadership Cabinet, Teacher Leadership Cabinet, Superintendent Support Cabinet, Administrative Cabinet, Principals’ Advisory Cabinet, and the Parent Leadership Cabinet.
In general, students have been excited by the move to the new system and proud of their work. Teachers reported seeing more motivation and more student ownership of their own learning process in the CBS model; they can see their learning targets and understand that their pathway to mastery may be different from the person sitting next to them. One WPS student reported that in their previous school, there was a lot of time spent by the teacher trying to get everyone in the classroom on the same page, both behaviorally and academically. “Now that I am here,” said the student, “I can move at my own level.” A WPS teacher described her own experiences by saying, “[Adopting competency-based learning is] absolutely the right thing for kids - and it is absolutely the hardest thing I have ever done in my life.”

Lastly, a new grant-funded program is helping the district to reach out to student families and to help them understand the Competency-Based System at WPS. The PASS program offers nine-week courses to parents to cover a number of topics - from how schools are funded, to how state and national standards work, to preparation for both college and career. So far, the outreach has impacted the families of nearly 500 WPS students, helping parents understand how to log into the parent portal, helping them to understand how to track their student’s progress or credits towards graduation, and helping them to learn about other opportunities to engage with their children’s schools.

Building Blocks for Success
Westminster Public Schools also stands out for the deep work they have done to rethink and rebuild the teaching and learning process as the basis of their Competency-based System. Recognizing the need to find ways to tailor curriculum and learning for individual students, the team used Robert Marzano’s The Art and Science of Teaching as the basis of their instruction. WPS also convened team teams to build their curriculum along with standards-aligned scoring guides for the projects and demonstrations of mastery; these were aligned with proficiency scale scores from 0-4. The curriculum undergoes a cycle of evaluation and revision so that content remains relevant. Students’ schedules have been adjusted, too, to incorporate blocks of “What I Need” (or “WIN”) time, allowing them the flexibility to seek out additional support, to find needed resources, to get help finishing a mastery project, or to engage in enrichment activities based on their own needs. Students go to content area experts based on what they are struggling with or wanting to accelerate in. For “recovery” learners (those missing content or not having demonstrated mastery on multiple concepts/levels), WPS offers the unique opportunity to make up those missing skills by designing rigorous learning progressions and multilevel assessments. For example, a course unit on Story Elements currently houses 35 different activities and assessments, allowing students to pick and choose their pathway, but also giving teachers flexibility over how different parts of the lesson might be delivered for whole group, targeted small group, and/or independent study modalities. Students have the opportunity to demonstrate mastery and proceed to new levels and/or to adjust their pathways every three weeks. While this self-pacing allows some to excel, others still need support. As one teacher explained, “[I] rely on personal knowledge of kids to know when to encourage them to keep working and when to step in and help.” As in all personalized education models, relationships remain key to the teaching and learning process at WPS.

Next Steps for Westminster Public Schools
WPS continues to push ahead in terms of innovative learning. The district opened the nation’s second Marzano Academy in the fall of 2018 in collaboration with Robert Marzano, respected educator and the author of The Art and Science of Teaching. The John E. Flynn A Marzano Academy opened in the fall of 2018 as

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a PreK-5 school, which will be expanding to include grades 6, 7, and 8 as well. The school itself will be based on the competency-based education model and the vision of a personalized education that meets the needs of all children articulated by Marzano.

District officials worked with Marzano throughout the 2018-19 school year to write the new school into the district’s improvement plan. The Flynn Marzano Academy will also serve as a lab school and training ground for teachers across the district to refine their practice within the competency-based learning model. WPS teacher Seth Aboott called the opportunity for teachers to work directly with Marzano “a once in a lifetime opportunity” for an educator, and it was one that he and his colleagues could not be more excited about.11