



CASE STUDY

# Innovations in Professional Development at the Douglas County School District (CO)

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Originally published in *District Management Journal*, v.3, Winter 2010

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# Innovations in Professional Development *at the Douglas County School District*

Jim Christensen, the outgoing Superintendent of the Douglas County School District (DCSD) in Castle Rock, Colorado, recalls the day in 2007 when he walked out of an hour-long mandatory professional development session for principals on “storm drain management” and proclaimed “Never, ever, again!” His reaction is one likely shared by district administrators elsewhere, but this time Christensen did something about it. He turned his frustration into an idea, and turned that idea into reality. He was determined that compliance-oriented professional development should no longer consume some of the most precious time of his principals and administrators. Christensen came up with the idea that compliance-oriented professional development could be much more effectively delivered online. Two years later, the old system is but a memory.

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Christensen’s actions at DCSD provide a compelling example of a district’s innovative efforts to make more effective use of time and resources. The initial idea to replace compliance-oriented professional development for principals with more value-added online sessions was quickly put into place. Over the last two years, it has been refined and streamlined, reducing the amount of seat time for principals, giving them greater flexibility over their schedules, and freeing them up for the many other demands on their time. As the idea was tested and refined, it has been rolled out to successively greater numbers of employees. Today, all employees in the district benefit from the programs that were initially developed during Christensen’s “light bulb” moment.

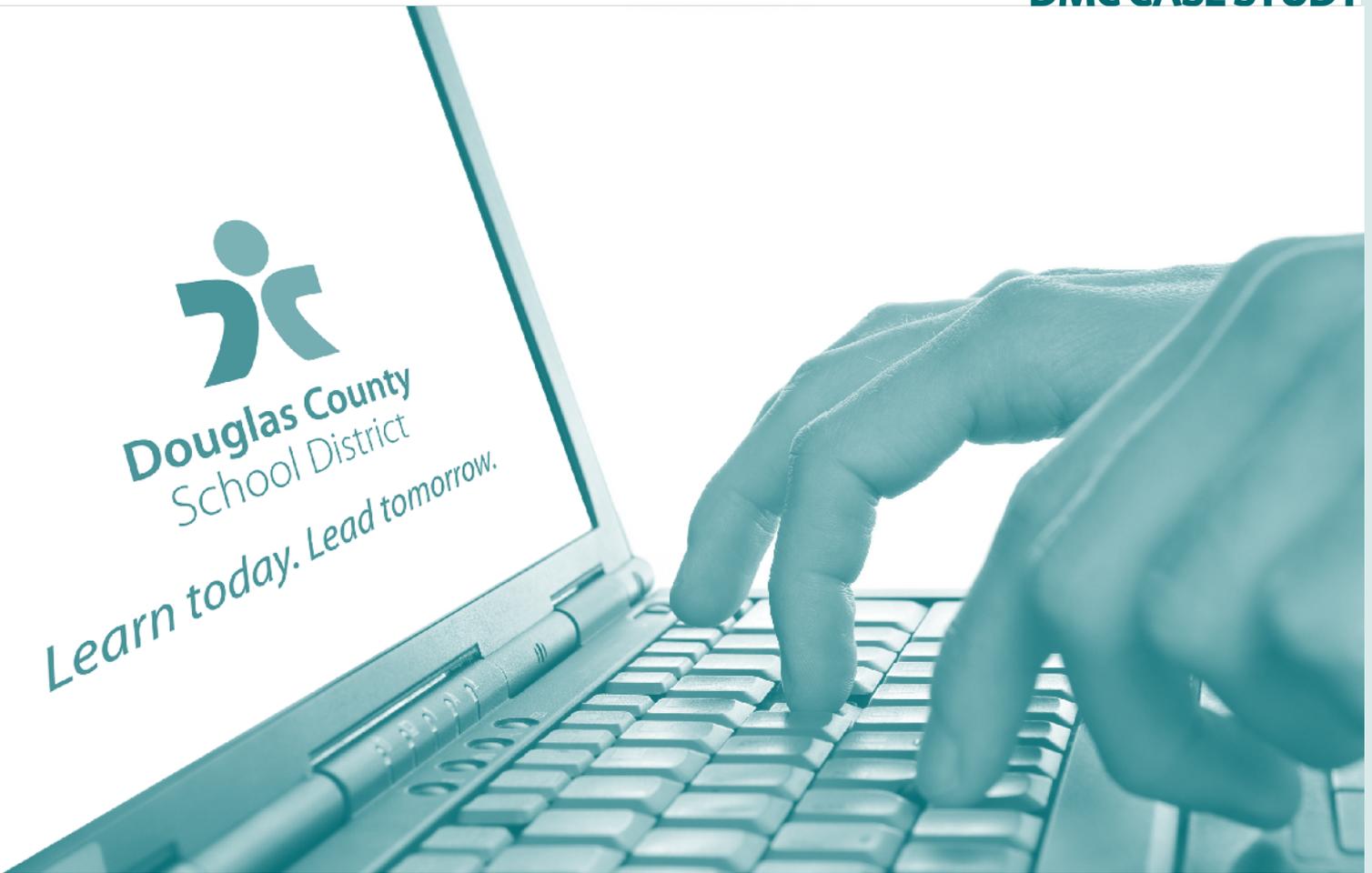
### **Solving “Time Deficit Disorder”**

For Douglas County, the time spent on compliance was emblematic of the bigger issue of time allocation in the district. Like most other school systems nationwide, Douglas County felt plagued by the problem of having to do too many things in too little time. The problem was particularly acute for principals, whose time was

demanding by students, teachers, parents, the community, politicians, and other administrators. These principals often felt like they were suffering from “time deficit disorder” amid all the conflicting commitments.

The issue of mandated professional development was further complicated by the absence of an organized blueprint as to which courses principals needed to take, when they needed to take them, and how much time it would take. Adding to everyone’s frustration with these mandated courses was a lack of understanding as to how these fit into the district’s goals. Moreover, Christensen believed that the mandated topics were crowding out opportunities for more strategic discussions. Pat McGraw, the Executive Director of The Center for Staff and Community Development in DCSD, commented, “We were loading them up, especially with low-value mandated items.”

The year after Christensen’s “aha moment”, he began rolling out “eTraining,” an online, self-guided, self-scheduled system for taking the mandatory compliance trainings. The same content was delivered to the principals and their knowledge of the material was tested through quizzes at the end of the online courses. In addition, all of the required trainings were listed in a one-page “blueprint” that made it easy to



see which trainings were required (Figure 1). The blueprint also categorized the trainings by level of importance so that principals could easily identify which sessions were annual requirements, one-time only requirements, and value-added trainings for enrichment and personal development. Finally, each training topic listed in the blueprint was linked to the strategic priorities of the DCSD Balanced Scorecard so that each employee could understand the strategic nature of the training. Everything fit together coherently—professional development linking to technology and strategy—and it all helped embed the new method in the culture of the DCSD. Principals loved the new flexibility that allowed them to do the training anywhere and anytime, and it freed up professional development time for more strategic issues. In total, about 30 state-mandated sessions have been transferred into eTraining, and at least six additional sessions are coming soon. “We are moving away from face-to-face professional development, and going towards a more blended format,” describes McGraw.

### **Making it Happen**

How did the DCSD make this happen? First, they didn’t ignore the “lightbulb” idea of trying to make better use of people’s time. Even though these trainings were mandated by the state of Colorado, the DCSD searched for a more effective delivery system. Second, they made sure to devote existing resources and staff to addressing this issue. McGraw describes a start-up cycle that included devoting an employee to the process, writing scripts for the sessions, and producing them online. “It took a lot of time to put it together and we have to keep it updated, but the costs for technology development were minimal. It was not an effective use of resources to have people being paid to sit for sessions that were taking more than an hour each, so we have reaped savings of huge magnitude from two hundred administrators taking these trainings online.”

Like any new system, there were a few issues to iron out in the beginning, but nothing that was insurmountable. Those included keeping the material up to date, keeping track of the people who took the online classes, and

FIGURE 1

## Douglas County School District Building Leadership Academy Blueprint 2008-2009

<b>Annual Requirements</b> These trainings are required by all building leaders annually.	<b>Required Training One Time Only</b> These are mostly compliance issues required by State Statute or DCSD Board of Education Policy. Some trainings will require periodic updates.	<b>Embedded</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Level Summits</li> <li>Feeder Meetings</li> <li>Assistant Principal Meetings</li> <li>Mentor/Protege'</li> </ul> Topics to be covered through scheduled meetings	<b>Essential</b> This framework of essential training is required knowledge and skills for all DCSD building leaders and is essential for both strategic and operational success.			<b>Value Added</b> Provide essential knowledge and skills and may be self selected for individual improvement or based on input from a supervisor and/or survey data.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mandatory Child Abuse Reporting <b>Process Management*</b></li> </ul>	Compliance Issues <i>Serving Students</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>IDEIA</li> <li>504</li> <li>NCLB</li> </ul> <b>Process Management*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Goal Setting/Evaluation</li> <li>Performance Management</li> <li>Process Review</li> </ul> <b>Leadership Focus*</b>	McREL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Balanced Leadership Overview</li> <li>Purposeful Community</li> <li>Managing Change</li> <li>Choosing The Right Focus</li> </ul> <b>Leadership Focus*</b>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strength's Finder</li> <li>Breakthrough Coach</li> <li>Classroom Walkthrough Training</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employee Evaluation System—Halogen</li> <li>Classified Evaluation Process</li> <li>Certified Evaluation Process</li> </ul> <b>Staff Focus*</b>	Compliance Issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ADA</li> <li>FMLA</li> <li>FLSA</li> </ul> <b>Process Management*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Balanced Scorecard</li> <li>"District Vision" End 1.0, EL 2.0</li> <li>Core Values</li> </ul> <b>School Improvement Process*</b>	Cultural Competency <b>Stakeholder Focus*</b>	Information Science <b>Student Learning*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Essentials in Hiring/Retention</li> <li>Gallup Teacher Insight <b>Process Management*</b></li> <li><i>Human Resources eLearning</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7 Habits of Highly Effective People</li> <li>Great Leaders, Great Teams, Great Results</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sexual Harassment Reporting <b>Process Management*</b></li> </ul>	Compliance Issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Progressive Discipline</li> <li>F.R.I.S.K.</li> </ul> <b>Process Management*</b>	Communicating with the Public <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School Accountability Reports (SARS)</li> <li>Surveys</li> <li>Crisis Communications</li> <li>Websites/Newsletters</li> </ul> <b>Stakeholder Focus*</b>	Math Leadership Academy/Supervision for Essential Learnings <b>Leadership Focus*</b>			Supervision of Instruction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literacy <b>Student Learning*</b></li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staffing Process</li> <li>Position Control</li> <li>Student Based Budgeting</li> </ul> <b>Staff Focus*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Code of Conduct</li> <li>Discipline</li> <li>Transportation</li> </ul> <b>Process Management*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting the Needs of All Students (RTI)</li> <li>Focus on Instruction</li> </ul> <b>Student Learning*</b>	Crisis Prevention Intervention Training (CPI) <i>Essential for schools with SIED Programs</i> <b>Staff Focus*</b>			Honoring Diversity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Families in Poverty</li> <li>Managing Conflict</li> </ul>
Introduction to Professional Learning Communities <b>Process Management*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emergency Response</li> <li>Crisis Management</li> </ul> <b>Process Management*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responsible Citizens</li> <li>Critical Thinking</li> </ul> <b>Leadership Focus*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Instruction That Works</li> <li>High Yield Strategies</li> <li>Differentiation</li> <li>Overview of 4 Domains</li> </ul> <b>Student Learning*</b>			Foundations of Teaching for Administrators <b>Leadership Focus*</b>
Support Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Key Processes</li> </ul> <b>Process Management*</b>	Assistant Principals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monthly Trainings and Leadership Development</li> <li>New AP Induction</li> </ul> <b>Leadership Focus*</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data Analysis for School Improvement</li> <li>Quality Grading Practices</li> </ul> <b>Process Management*</b>			Quality Assessment Criteria Design (6QC) <b>Student Learning*</b>	

\* Strategic Priorities of the DCSD Balanced Scorecard

Note: The above blueprint has been condensed for presentation in the *District Management Journal*.

making sure the school system's computer equipment could handle the additional load. But overall, they were able to solve these problems and believe it was well worth the effort. Though they do not have hard financial data, McGraw said the old system appeared to waste dollars and time as administrators sat in long workshops that interrupted their regular roster of responsibilities.

After the first year of the program, feedback was so positive from administrators and principals that the DCSD realized they needed to roll out eTraining on a larger scale. "Blueprints" for each employee-type in the organization are in development in order to create greater transparency about the necessary professional development sessions and pathways in the district. Today, there are blueprints for building leaders, for employees, for certified licensure, and new ones are constantly being developed. Though administrators are not compensated for eTraining classes, teachers and classified employees such as classroom aides are compensated as part of a performance pay package.

### A Culture of Innovation

This innovative strategy resulted in other benefits. Those who work in the DCSD know that new ideas and new ways of doing things are welcome. And the success of this innovative effort has led to more innovation in the district.

For example, as it became clear that protecting principals from distractions and threats to their core work reaped rewards, Christensen established another initiative designed to further protect the time of the principals. The initiative called "JJ180" said that from January to June, for 180 days, no new major initiatives could be introduced in the district. He printed and distributed cards to each employee that spelled out the gist of JJ180. If a building administrator believed anyone or anything was encroaching on his or her time during this period, he or she simply presented the "JJ180 card" to serve as a reminder of the importance of focusing on the core work. This was an explicit attempt to manage and prioritize the time of the principals; the physical card gave staff an easy and fun way to remind each other that time was an important resource. In addition, it forced each person to be thoughtful before proposing changes and new initiatives, and protected building administrators from being pelted with partially formed ideas.

By fostering a culture of innovation throughout the district, Douglas County has solved a host of challenges. For example, innovation helped them develop a solution to their dearth of special education teachers, and it led to the development of a successful alternative program for students at risk of dropping out.

One of the key pieces to success in any sort of innovative venture is a strong relationship with the local American Federation of Teachers (AFT) affiliate. In crafting a unique working relationship with the AFT, the DCSD has created an ally that has supported and sometimes championed this series of innovations. The union there plays a central role in the development of teachers in the district, rather than focusing their efforts on protecting poor performers as many union chapters are accused of doing. The DCSD pays for two employees in the Federation to work full-time on teacher professional development; former union president Pat McGraw is now a central figure in the DCSD administration, heading up the Center for Staff and Community Development.

Beyond these initiatives, there is a long string of other inventive efforts championed from within the district, including a renowned pay for performance compensation model and an initiative to streamline the usefulness of the DCSD website. While only time will tell whether each of these initiatives will be successful, it is clear that Douglas County has created a culture where ideas are valued and many are pursued for the betterment of the education of the students of Castle Rock. □



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