



THE  
COLORADO  
EDUCATION  
INITIATIVE

Raising the Bar for Teaching & Learning  
in Thompson School District:

**A Guide for District Leaders**



## What is the Integration Project?

The Integration Project is a collaborative effort being led by 13 Colorado school districts with support from the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and The Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) to pilot an integrated model of teaching and learning designed to significantly improve the number and rate of students who are college- and career-ready when they graduate from Colorado high schools. Participating districts provide teachers with [Literacy Design Collaborative \(LDC\)](#) and [Math Design Collaborative \(MDC\)](#), which are instructional tools and training grounded in the Colorado Academic Standards; pilot a rigorous [system of evaluation](#) for teachers and principals; and explore how [new formative and summative assessments](#) provide educators with the data they need to improve student outcomes.

The 13 Integration Districts, including Thompson School District, are the most comprehensive microcosm of the reforms that are taking place in every district in the state.



# Introduction

Thompson School District has taken an early lead in the implementation of Colorado's new standards, evaluations and assessments. If you are a district leader, this publication is for you. It chronicles:

- Thompson's focus on providing teachers with high-quality training about the instructional shifts required to meet new standards.
- Why this training helps teachers feel more confident about the state's more rigorous requirements for evaluation.
- How the focus on instruction and evaluation has driven the need for new and better assessments.
- The transformative role of teacher leadership in this effort.

Through this work, leaders have emerged from every sector of the district, with teachers leading the effort to integrate the three strands of reform, deepening and expanding each so they are seamlessly interconnected.

"This is unusual in education," says Dr. Stan Scheer, superintendent of Thompson Schools. "We [now] have a common language in this district. We have a system of support and methodology that people know and understand, and an expectation to embrace it. That consistency and alignment is absolutely critical. It allows conversations between stakeholders at all levels. This is why we got involved in the Integration work. It's created this common language revolving around asking the question, 'Am I having an impact on students or not?'"

**Take a moment to reflect** on your own district's readiness to integrate standards, evaluations and assessments:

- Does your district have tools and professional development focused on standards implementation that is common across all school sites in the district?
- Do teachers report having the tools and professional development they need to be proficient teachers and meet the new teacher quality standards?
- Are teachers given decision-making power on issues that directly affect their evaluation?
- Are teacher leaders valued, respected and listened to by district leaders?



**Thompson School District** is Colorado's 16th largest district with more than 16,000 students. Located north of Denver, the district includes the cities of Loveland, Berthoud and the southern part of Fort Collins as well as parts of Larimer, Weld and Boulder counties. The district has 20 elementary schools, five middle schools, five high schools and two charter schools.

## Student Demographics

5% English language learners

18% Hispanic

77% White

77% Graduation rate

36% Free & reduced price lunch

## Instructional Tools for the Colorado Academic Standards

The LDC and the MDC are tools that support implementation of the Colorado Academic Standards by:

- Guiding rigorous instruction and backwards design
- Providing frameworks and strategies to differentiate instruction
- Incorporating rigorous formative assessments
- Using a common language and structure to facilitate collaboration by teachers
- Providing instructional strategies that foster student engagement while delivering the Colorado Academic Standards

### Learn more:

#### What is LDC?

#### What is MDC?

**CEI's LDC Toolkit** contains the materials needed to provide professional development to elementary and secondary teachers on LDC.

**CEI's video** on the Integration Project features Colorado teachers and students talking about LDC and MDC.

How is LDC different, and what does it look like in a classroom?

Watch secondary teachers use the LDC framework in classrooms.

## High-Quality Instruction Unifies Schools and Teachers

As Colorado districts have confronted the opportunities and challenges of simultaneously introducing new standards, evaluations and assessments, many models of implementation have taken shape. The anchor for Thompson's work has been its focus on the instructional shifts needed for students to meet the new Colorado Academic Standards. Teachers are using the LDC and MDC to change their approach to teaching, and as a result, they are seeing students engage in learning far beyond their expectations.

The initial challenge was helping teachers understand what is different about the new standards and how classroom instruction needed to change. LDC and MDC are tools that help teachers shift from being masters of knowledge to facilitators of learning. They give teachers strategies and tools to help students engage in thoughtful discourse, and to think, write and speak differently about all types of content.

"Teachers knew the kind of academic behavior and student responses they needed to inspire, but the training and professional development they'd received weren't getting them the results they wanted," says Tiffany Utoft, Thompson's Integration Project Manager, a former classroom teacher now leading the implementation of new standards, evaluations and assessments districtwide. "When they started using LDC and MDC, all of a sudden what they were looking to achieve happened."

LDC is a research-based approach to incorporating literacy into all content areas in elementary and secondary classrooms. LDC is grounded in the Colorado Academic Standards and provides a common framework that facilitates teacher creativity and provides differentiated, meaningful and engaging learning experiences for students.

How is LDC different, and what does it look like in a classroom?



Watch secondary teachers use the LDC framework in classrooms.

[www.literacydesigncollaborative.org/about/videos/](http://www.literacydesigncollaborative.org/about/videos/)



MDC is designed to improve students' mathematics skills and to prepare them for success in college and the workplace. Central to MDC are Formative Assessment Lessons (FALs). Each lesson is research-based and aligned to the Colorado Academic Standards. The FALs represent a major innovation in teaching and learning math. The hybrid model of assessment and instruction is designed for medium-cycle formative assessment—the type that teachers can use every two weeks. Formative assessment teaching requires students to take more responsibility for their work and to engage in a “productive struggle” with challenging tasks. The teacher’s role shifts from providing answers and solutions to encouraging students to reflect and reason through their ideas and asking questions to support students’ thinking.

Utoft says that teachers who have taught an LDC module or MDC lesson have said their students did more than they thought they could do. Most teachers admit they could have placed the bar higher all along.

Kristina Smith is a secondary math teacher in Thompson who is currently on full-time release from the classroom in order to train new teachers on MDC. She is serving as one of three Integration Liaisons for the district. Liaisons are teacher leaders who are actively engaged with implementation, information sharing and coaching related to the new educator evaluation systems and the Colorado Academic Standards in their respective school districts.

“MDC is a way to access conversations with my kids,” Smith says. “I believe in group work and student discovery. When I got into teaching, I set up my room in groups and had my kids sit at tables together, and they just sat without talking to each other. I didn’t know how to engage them in group conversations, and they didn’t know how to engage with each other. MDC tasks lend themselves to kids having conversations and building upon others’ knowledge and using each other as resources.

“I am no longer the end-all-be-all knowledge house,” she adds. “I am a facilitator who helps them access their own knowledge and each other’s knowledge. On assessments, in their work and in conversations, students are finally able to explain why things are happening, not just how to do it. And they’re excited about it.”

### What does MDC look like in a classroom?



Tiffany Utoft, Thompson secondary math teacher and Integration Project Manager, walks through an MDC lesson.

[www.educationnation.com/index.cfm?objectid=62D69380-3A93-11E3-8E6C000C296BA163](http://www.educationnation.com/index.cfm?objectid=62D69380-3A93-11E3-8E6C000C296BA163)



How did using LDC help my student finish the school year on grade level when he started the school year behind?

Emily Yenny, elementary school teacher and Integration Liaison, explains.

<https://vimeo.com/84819764>

Emily Yenny is an elementary teacher who is on full-time release from the classroom to train new teachers on LDC and also serves as one of Thompson's three Integration Liaisons.

"LDC has been a great avenue for me to grow as a teacher," she says. "I'm naturally reflective and now I have a formal process that helps me be more intentionally reflective. I review my module with my peers and get feedback from them, including from teachers across the country who I don't even know. We get to work together across the district, across the state, and we can publish our modules for other teachers across the country to use in their own classrooms. It makes us feel like what we're doing in the classroom matters."



Michelle Logan, technology teacher, says that the connection to the standards that LDC offers has freed her to focus on improving her instruction.

Michelle Logan is a Thompson technology teacher and teacher leader trained on LDC, now on full-time release from the classroom to train teachers and serve as an Integration Liaison. She says that the connection to the standards that LDC offers has freed her to focus on improving her instruction.

"Before LDC, I had opportunities for students to read, think and write in my class, but I wasn't really intentional about the depth of the text or text complexity," Logan says. "What I gave them was interesting and engaging, but I didn't look to see if I was moving students in their understanding at a deeper level. The fact that the standards (Colorado Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, and Communicating) are hard-wired in has freed me to look at my instruction instead of always having to do a crosswalk between the standards and my instruction."

The unexpected result of using LDC and MDC is that they are unifying teachers across the district. The tools provide teachers with autonomy to use materials and strategies they think are most engaging for their students, but teachers design and teach lessons together and use the same rubric to examine student work.



What's different about my instruction and student work using LDC?

Michelle Logan, secondary technology teacher, explains.

<https://vimeo.com/84819766>



“Before LDC and MDC, we were a ‘district of schools’ rather than a school district,” Utoft says. “Each school had its own values and beliefs about what they [thought was] instructionally best for kids, and teachers across town may have thought differently. But by bringing teachers together across the district and asking them to work collaboratively across content areas and grade levels, they began to feel united. It’s brought teachers together on what is best instructionally for students.”

Margaret Crespo, Thompson’s executive director of secondary education, says LDC and MDC are research-based best practices. For veteran teachers, it has been important to message it as such and not that it is totally different from what they have been doing.

“We haven’t reinvented teaching,” Crespo says. “We’ve realigned what we know works into a cohesive framework that makes sense for teachers and students. As a district, we now have a common understanding and vocabulary of not just instruction, but of assessment. MDC and LDC have really helped with this. With a common language, collaboration across schools becomes much easier.”

Thompson’s Director of Curriculum and Instruction Diane Lauer says professional development has always been grounded in best practices, but it has been fragmented and ineffective. “This is the first initiative that has created an overarching umbrella that provides a context and catalyst for professional training and growth opportunities,” Lauer says.

LDC and MDC encompass so many of the professional development trainings Thompson used to offer that the district has discontinued them and is instead offering training on LDC and MDC.

“We’ve been very intentional about taking things off our plate,” Lauer says.

A testament to the power of these instructional tools is how the district is scaling them across the district. Currently, every middle school and high school in Thompson is using LDC and MDC, and teachers in grades 4 and 5 are now being trained. The district is also including LDC and MDC training for new teachers as part of their teacher induction program.

## Stop Doing What Doesn’t Work: Fragmented Professional Development Now Integrated Using LDC and MDC

Thompson has discontinued offering the discrete professional development courses listed below because the topics are included in the LDC and MDC training.

- Differentiation
- Using Data to Inform Instruction
- Using Student Work to Inform Instruction
- Unit Design
- Formative Assessment
- Writing
- How to Access and Use Research Databases
- Use of Primary Sources
- Content Area Reading (for science teachers, social studies teachers, etc.)
- Gradual Release of Responsibility





The tools speak for themselves, and teachers are hungry for things to help them with the teacher effectiveness work.

Utoft says the scaling of LDC and MDC has been driven by teachers. “We sent teachers to quality training and teachers got really excited,” says Utoft. “Then they tried it in their classroom and got immediate results. That excitement led teachers to start advocating for it. They came to the district and said this is what we should be doing for new teachers. This is how we want to write assessments in our content area. So it wasn’t a top-down push. The district was being pulled by a group of empowered teachers.”

Scheer agrees. “Teachers are the ones out there selling it and promoting it,” he says. “This creates credibility for the tools. The tools speak for themselves, and teachers are hungry for things to help them with the teacher effectiveness work.”

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## Improving Instruction Leads to Confidence in Evaluation

Thompson has experienced plenty of growing pains implementing the Colorado State Model Evaluation System. Educators are often anxious about the changes, especially because the system is still being built and there are many unanswered questions from state and district leaders.

“New evaluations require a culture shift,” Utoft says. “It’s no longer about a punitive thing that’s happening to teachers, but an active understanding of where teachers are effective and what you need in order to become more effective. The culture shift is from thinking that a principal is going to come judge me to seeing my principal as a thought partner in helping me better understand how to grow professionally.”

Thompson teachers trained on LDC and MDC see the alignment between the tools and the Colorado State Model Evaluation System. Teachers report that LDC and MDC give them the tools and skills to be able to demonstrate they are proficient, and often more than proficient. When Logan gives teachers the crosswalk of how LDC supports teachers in meeting teacher effectiveness standards, it’s often the tipping point in their buy-in for the work.

“I know we want teachers to believe in the work, but until they can see it and then feel it for themselves, it’s hard for them to embrace it,” Logan says.

MDC and LDC support teacher evaluations by helping teachers meet objectives in the teacher effectiveness rubric. “LDC enables teachers to use strong instructional strategies, and it’s a tool for integrating literacy into everything we do,” says Yenny. “Teachers are being intentional about their teaching and planning. Teachers are reflecting on their work and making adjustments, and at the same time they’re working collaboratively. The instructional strategies that we use through LDC help our kids own their learning. When students own their learning, teachers are reaching high levels on the educator effectiveness rubric.”

Smith says the new evaluation system has required a shift in thinking for teachers. “I think at first, teachers felt they had to comply with the new evaluation system,” Smith says. “Use this rubric, have a conversation with your evaluator, then we’re done. Lots of teachers are still trying to merge the old system with the new system. As more elements of the system are understood, however, teachers are making the connections between their own evaluation and the instructional tools they’re using.”

The new evaluation system requires more of principals too. Paul Banks, Thompson’s executive director of Elementary Education, works with principals to implement the new evaluation system. “Principals are working hard to give

## Colorado State Model Evaluation System—Improving Educator Feedback & Support

Senate Bill 10-191 aims to ensure that every child in every community has excellent classroom teachers and building leaders who are supported in their professional growth. As part of the bill, the way principals and teachers are evaluated in Colorado is changing. To support school districts in implementing the new evaluation requirements, CDE has developed a model system as an option for districts to use for teacher and principal evaluations.

Half of a teacher’s evaluation will be based on five Quality Standards that measure professional practice: content knowledge, establish classroom environment, facilitate learning, reflect on practice and demonstrate leadership. The sixth Quality Standard, student learning outcomes (student growth), will account for the other half of the evaluation and will be based on multiple measures, not a single assessment.

Likewise, half of a principal’s evaluation will be based on six Quality Standards that measure professional practice: strategic leadership, instructional leadership, school cultural and equity leadership, human resource leadership, managerial leadership and external development leadership. The seventh Quality Standard will be based on the academic growth of the students in their school.

teachers timely and actionable feedback and move away from the dog and pony show that evaluation once was,” he says. “We are encouraging principals to set up a system so they are in three to four classrooms a day, and then scheduling time to have a face-to-face feedback session with the teachers. It’s a robust follow-up conversation that is the transformational piece for teachers and principals.”

Teachers are confident that if they are observed during an LDC or MDC lesson, their evaluator will see students reaching higher levels than they have before.

“When an evaluator walks in my classroom, they’re going to see students engaged in conversations with each other to solve problems, utilizing each other as a resource and acknowledging that they are a resource

Despite the enthusiasm for LDC and MDC, and the confidence it instills in teachers that they are hitting the mark, district leaders admit that more needs to be done to support educators and other stakeholders in their understanding and use of the evaluation system.

When Scheer was hired in 2012, he relayed to the school board his concerns about the capacity of principals to meet the new requirements of the law. “Principals have to find ways to fit this into their day,” he says. “They are under a lot of pressure because they have student achievement factored into their evaluation, too.”

Crespo agrees. “Principals need support having courageous conversations—frank conversations—with teachers. There isn’t training for that,” she says. Likewise, the district needs to do more to help parents understand the shifts required in the Colorado Academic Standards and the new expectations for teachers and principals.

According to Crespo, the district has learned a lot about what works and what doesn’t work by piloting the system for two years. “Seeing the evaluation system put into practice is great, but we’ve got a long way to go,” she says.

Teachers are confident that if they are observed during an LDC or MDC lesson, their evaluator will see students reaching higher levels than they have before.

### What tools and artifacts do LDC teachers use in their evaluation?



Michelle Logan explains.

<https://vimeo.com/84819765>

themselves,” Smith says. “They’re going to see conversations about math where students are using math vocabulary. That’s when I know my kids get it. It’s amazing to hear them talk like mathematicians.”

In her role as a teacher trainer and Integration Liaison, Yenny has created a concise list of “look-fors” for elementary principals to check if teachers are making the shift to the Colorado Academic Standards. It includes items like “Students who need support above and below grade level expectations are identified, receive targeted instruction and are moving to the next level.”

### See how Colorado’s standards for effective teachers are supported by LDC.

<http://coloradoedinitiative.org/resources/ldc-toolkit/>



Go to “LDC Alignment to Standards and Evaluation” and click on “LDC and Teacher Evaluation Crosswalk” and “Element 1(b) Addendum to Evaluation Crosswalk.”



## The Missing Link—Building Assessments that Teachers Trust

The most pressing challenge for Thompson is defining how teachers will be evaluated using student growth, also known as Measures of Student Learning (MSL).

To determine whether students are mastering the Colorado Academic Standards, teachers need assessments aligned to the new standards. And because 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation is based on MSLs, teachers need to feel confident that the assessments they are using to measure student achievement are also fair for their own evaluations.

The district decided that 20 percent of a teacher's evaluation will be measured with collective attributes (the School Performance Framework, for example), and 30 percent will be based on individual attributes.

"Evaluation really started to gain traction with teachers when we started to dig into the Measures of Student Learning we'd use for our own evaluation. Suddenly, teachers recognized that what we've been using isn't sufficient, and most of us need more assessment literacy," Utoft says.

Thompson is tackling this challenge by empowering teachers to develop assessments and performance tasks to meet the requirements of the 30 percent individual attributes. Recognizing that most teachers do not have strong assessment literacy, the district partnered with CDE to develop and deliver training focused on what quality assessments would look like in relationship to Senate Bill (SB10-191) and to teaching and learning. Now the district is convening teachers from like content areas, and they will decide as a group what measures should be used based on what they value, what they care about and what would foster confidence.

Utoft is leading much of the MSL work in Thompson. "The goal of SB10-191 is that teachers experience professional growth," she says. "But it won't do that if teachers don't feel confident in the measures being used to evaluate them. We are focused on finding assessments that really foster confidence in the teacher evaluation system, and we're working directly with our teachers to develop them."

### Thompson's Educator Effectiveness System—Podcast and Website



Thompson School District is working toward increased transparency and clarity with communications about educator effectiveness. Included in this website and podcast are the agreed-upon measures by the 1338 Personal Performance Evaluation Council in accordance with SB10-191.

<http://thompson.k12.co.us/domain/1950>

## Measures of Student Learning

Senate Bill 10-191 requires that 50 percent of an educator's evaluation be based on educator impact on student learning using MSLs. This 50 percent will be based on multiple measures of student growth over time, not a single assessment. Teachers must have a team attribution student growth score and at least one individual attribution student growth score. If a teacher teaches a subject that takes the statewide summative exam, it must be used as one of the multiple measures.

MSLs may include Colorado Growth Model results as well as results from other state assessments, district assessments and teacher-developed assessments. Multiple types of assessments may also be used to generate results from goal- or target-setting processes.

Learn more: [CDE's Measures of Student Learning Guidance](#)



*Tiffany Utoft explains*  
how teachers are exploring  
using LDC and MDC as MSLS.

<https://vimeo.com/84893716>



*Why do LDC and MDC  
lend themselves to  
thinking about MSLS?*

Michelle Logan explains.

<https://vimeo.com/84819767>

“We’re focused  
on quality. We don’t need  
a million measures;  
we need quality  
measures.”

Although the district does not require any specific framework or approach to develop MSLS, teachers are exploring how to adopt the LDC and MDC performance tasks. According to Utoft, the amazing thing was that this was not led by the central office; rather, teachers believe in it enough that they came to the conclusion together.

“We’re looking at how other measures can inform teacher evaluation, whether it’s peer review or lesson study or building lesson plans,” Smith says. “As we’re building those tools in Thompson, it’s been exciting to realize we’ve already done it by using MDC and LDC. It’s already ingrained in the work they’re doing.”

The MSL work has been a significant challenge for districts, and Thompson is no exception. Moving to a system that uses student achievement in teachers’ evaluation requires a huge culture shift, and Thompson is only in the beginning stages of tackling this challenge. This is work in progress with no clear answer yet for any content area. It has been frustrating for teachers to proceed with their evaluation with incomplete answers, but the pace has allowed the district to place priority on engaging teachers in developing measures they trust.

“We’ve given teachers choice and flexibility to make these decisions,” Crespo says. “We’re focused on quality. We don’t need a million measures; we need quality measures.”





## Teacher Leaders—The Common Thread

Thompson is a district that has always believed in the power of teacher leadership. According to leaders like Lauer, LDC and MDC have helped the district take teacher leadership to the next level. “What we’ve noticed is that LDC and MDC act as a bridge to connect people from the different schools,” Lauer says. “This has provided another layer of leadership so that it’s not always about ideas and perspectives of a school site, but about ideas and perspectives of people engaging in this work. It’s provided a more integrated fabric of teacher leadership.”

“Teachers are the experts. They are promoting this work, which leads to credibility for the work,” Scheer says.

Crespo agrees. “People trust people in their profession. The district didn’t have to sell this work. It sold itself.”

In Integration Districts across Colorado, Liaisons roll out communications with teachers on the evaluation system, develop a system of peer coaching or facilitate teacher conversations about MSLS. In Thompson, the role of Liaisons is evolving into a new model of teacher leadership.

Utoft says that as teacher leadership in the district has grown and the Liaisons have taken on new responsibilities at the district level, the strategies used for rolling out work have changed. “It used to be that we would be trained in a ‘grand summit’ type setting,” she says. “Come to the district office and get trained. Now it’s not about that. It’s about personalizing learning for our adults. Going to buildings or content area teachers and offering support based on their needs. We’ve been able to offer more targeted support.”

New types of teacher leaders are emerging through this work. In the past, teacher leaders were often veteran teachers. Now leaders emerge who have only been teaching a few years, but have a robust understanding of the new standards. In the past, their colleagues might have asked, “How can I mentor you?” Now they ask, “How can you lead us?”

“Our district leaders really trust teachers to make professional decisions at the district level,” Utoft says. “That’s a shift for districts. How do you really listen to the people who serve our most precious assets—our kids—and let them lead?”

## For District Leaders— Now What?

Consider these guiding questions for your district as administrators, teachers and support staff work collaboratively to integrate new standards, evaluations and assessments:

Does your district have tools and professional development focused on standards implementation that is common across all school sites in the district?

- In Thompson, the use of LDC and MDC for instruction has led to a common understanding of what good instruction looks like as well as a common language.

Do teachers report having the tools and professional development they need to be a proficient teacher and meet the new teacher quality standards?

- The teachers in Thompson who are using LDC and MDC in their classrooms report feeling more confident that they are meeting Colorado's Teacher Quality Standards and will do well on their evaluation. LDC and MDC are frameworks built on the Colorado Academic Standards, encourage collaboration among teachers, move the teacher from knowledge giver to facilitator and inspire students to own their own learning—all practices found on Colorado's teacher evaluation rubric.

Are teachers given decision-making power on issues that directly affect their evaluation?

- In Thompson, 30 percent of a teacher's evaluation will be based on individual MSLs. To determine the specific measures (assessments, portfolios, etc.), content area teachers are making decisions based on what they already use, believe is a high-quality measure and believe meets the requirements of the state.

Are teacher leaders valued, respected and listened to by district leaders?

- Teachers have taken on new leadership roles at the district level in Thompson that help bridge the

communications and training gap between the district and teachers. Teachers have more informal leadership roles in their buildings, typically driven by their expertise in standards implementation.

Here are some next steps you might take to ignite this work in your own district:

- Learn more about LDC and MDC:
  - CEI has resources and support available for districts interested in implementing these instructional tools. Contact [CEI](#) to learn more.
  - [What is LDC?](#)
  - [What is MDC?](#)
  - [CEI's LDC Toolkit contains the materials needed to provide professional development to elementary and secondary teachers.](#)
  - [CEI's video on the Integration Project features Colorado teachers and students talking about LDC and MDC.](#)
- Explore CDE's resources on the Colorado State Model Evaluation System and MSLs:
  - [CDE fact sheet on State Model Evaluation System.](#)
  - [Video](#) of Colorado district and school leaders discussing the benefits of the new evaluation system.
  - [CDE's guidance on Measures of Student Learning.](#)
- Contact [CEI](#) to learn more about the Integration Project and opportunities for district leaders to engage with each other about standards, evaluations and assessments implementation.







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