THE
COLORADO
EDUCATION
INITIATIVE

COLORADO MSL SYSTEM PROJECT 2015-16:
Student Learning Objectives

Since the 2013-14 school year, Colorado districts have been creating and implementing Measures of Student Learning (MSL) systems that comprise the 50% of an educator's evaluation that is based on student academic growth. To help districts in this effort, The Colorado Education Initiative (CEI) has partnered with Slope Research (Slope) to gather information about MSL system design and implementation from school districts across Colorado. Slope collected information from 56 districts representing 31 percent of all Colorado districts and 46 percent of Colorado's teachers and students.

This year Slope specifically focused on student learning objectives (SLOs) across all of the participating districts and also studied SLO systems more deeply in four Colorado districts, interviewing key district staff, observing trainings, and reviewing SLO resources. These districts included Adams 12 Five Star Schools, Denver Public Schools, Mesa County Valley District 51, and Thompson. This report includes findings from these four districts as well as information gathered from the other districts that participated in the general data collection. There are also profiles of each of the four focus districts at the end.

What is an SLO?

SLOs are a process in which teachers (individual teachers or groups) set meaningful goals for learning over time based on the baseline performance of students and identify assessments to measure those goals. Teachers may establish SLOs individually or use school- or district-determined assessments and targets. They may also use multiple assessments to measure the same goal. An effective SLO system requires extensive educator training, robust district supports, and general assessment literacy across all parties.

Rationale for SLO Use

Flexibility	Less Vulnerable	Close to Instruction
SLOs can incorporate a variety of assessments and can be applied to all teachers, which is especially important as there are currently few standardized assessments for teachers who instruct in non-tested grades and subject areas.	Due to their flexibility, SLOs are less vuleratble to changes in the laws that govern MSL implementation and to changes in state assessment systems.	SLOs provide a measure of student learning that is closely aligned to the instructional practice that teachers engage in daily within their classrooms.

Key Findings

Overall, the findings of this study provide several conclusions regarding respondents' use of SLOs and their implementation of MSL systems:

- It seems that ongoing changes to state assessments and changes to teacher evaluation policies have prompted respondents to focus more on ways to use local assessments within their MSL systems in order to increase the stability of their systems over time.

- Respondents have made efforts to slowly implement SLOs (e.g., piloting SLOs with limited teachers or schools or utilizing low weights within their MSL system). As familiarity and knowledge of SLO systems grow, districts have gradually increased the implementation by increasing the number of teachers using SLOs and/or increasing the weights assigned to SLOs within their MSL systems.

- Although respondents seem to be generally confident about the quality of their SLO systems (e.g., protocols and logistics), they overwhelmingly reported wanting more time and resources to provide additional training to their teachers and school leaders on the SLO process and assessment literacy in general.

- At this point in time, it appears that most respondents have a limited understanding of the validity of their SLO processes, which could largely be due to the fact that SLOs are still a relatively new practice.

Use of SLOs

The 2015-16 study focused on the increasing number of districts using SLOs as a major component of their MSL systems. More than half of districts participating in the study (61 percent) reported using SLOs as part of their MSL systems, and an additional 27 percent intend to use SLOs in the future. Though the majority of respondents are using SLOs, many thought there was important work to be done to make SLOs high-quality measures. Respondents cited insufficient assessment literacy, scarce training time, and lack of SLO examples as challenges.

Figure 1. Does your district use SLOs?

YES 76% 27% 12% NO

No, but will in the future

Respondents reported using SLOs in 2015-16 as both a collective and individual measures of student learning. Due to changes in legislation that prevented districts from utilizing CMAS state summative assessments[1], many included SLOs as the highest weighted measure within their MSL systems in 2015-16. Of the respondents that are using collective SLOs the average weight is 18% and of the districts using individual SLOs the average is 27%.

In fact, 59 percent of respondents that reported using SLOs in 2015-16 indicated that they had increased the use of SLOs from the previous school year. Respondents increased the use of SLOs in various ways, including using them with more teachers (21 percent of reporting districts), adding them as an individual measure (18 percent) or as a collective measure (6 percent), and giving them a larger weight in the district's MSL system (9 percent). Looking forward, 27 percent of respondents that reported using SLOs in 2015-16 plan on increasing the use of SLOs in the future.
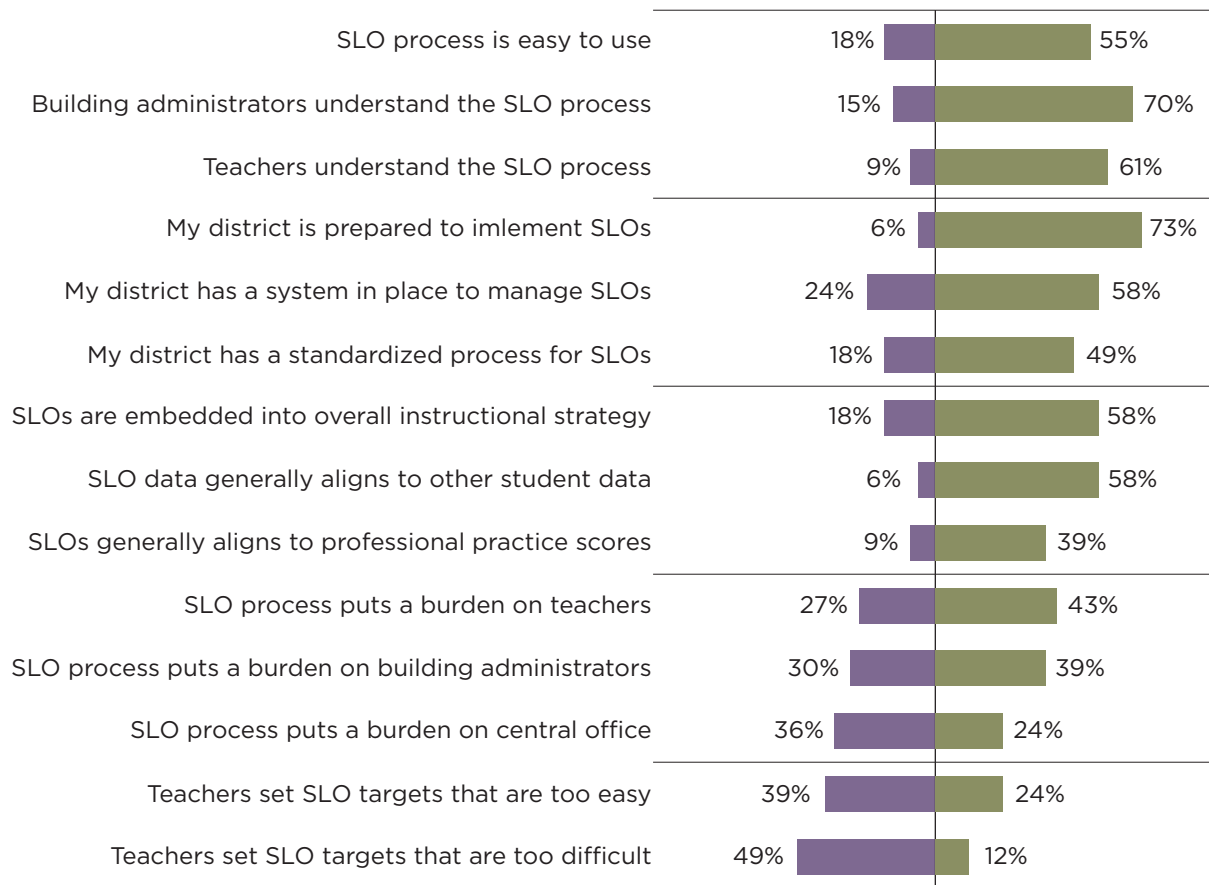
A variety of stakeholders were identified as being involved in creating SLO systems. Teachers and building administrators were the most common stakeholders involved (both at 85 percent), but respondents also indicated support from CDE (21 percent), and external contractors and consultants (15 percent).

---

1   During the 2015-16 school year, H.B. 15-1323 specified that for that school year only, districts and local school boards could not use the 2014-15 results of the new state assessments in their MSL systems. Those assessments are CMAS science and social studies, CMAS PARCC English language arts and math. State assessment results from 2014-15 could be used as baseline data only, not as final results.

SLO Implementation

In order to better understand how educators are experiencing SLOs, we asked district respondents about their opinions of various aspects of SLO implementation in their districts. Their responses are shown in **Figure 2** (note that neutral responses and responses of "I don't know" are not specified in the graphic). Overall, respondents reported feeling relatively confident in the general understanding and implementation of SLO processes within their districts. However, they reported less agreement to questions related to SLO scoring and alignment of SLO outcomes with other district data. This finding may indicate that they need additional support and/or resources that address these two specific areas. It should be noted, however, that a number of respondents reported "I don't know" to questions regarding SLO alignment to other data (student and teacher), which indicates many may have yet to explore this alignment given that SLOs are still relatively new to them.

Figure 2. SLO Implementation

Statement	Disagree	Agree
SLO process is easy to use	18%	55%
Building administrators understand the SLO process	15%	70%
Teachers understand the SLO process	9%	61%
My district is prepared to imlement SLOs	6%	73%
My district has a system in place to manage SLOs	24%	58%
My district has a standardized process for SLOs	18%	49%
SLOs are embedded into overall instructional strategy	18%	58%
SLO data generally aligns to other student data	6%	58%
SLOs generally aligns to professional practice scores	9%	39%
SLO process puts a burden on teachers	27%	43%
SLO process puts a burden on building administrators	30%	39%
SLO process puts a burden on central office	36%	24%
Teachers set SLO targets that are too easy	39%	24%
Teachers set SLO targets that are too difficult	49%	12%

Districts were also asked about their use of a variety of supports for SLO implementation (See **Figure 3**, note that responses of "unsure" are not specified). The first column identifies a summary of use by combining current and anticipated use; the final three columns provide more specific information regarding districts' responses. Although a large number of respondents appear to be providing resources and guidance around the SLO process, fewer appear to be providing specific SLO training. This finding indicates that many seem to be taking a more indirect approach to supporting the implementation of their SLO system. Based on the findings outlined within the next section, respondents are most likely taking this more indirect approach due to a lack of capacity and time to implement a strong training structure. Finally, the fact that less than 10 percent of respondents are using SLO certification indicates that they may not have had a chance to implement a certification process or that perhaps certification is not something that districts have really considered.
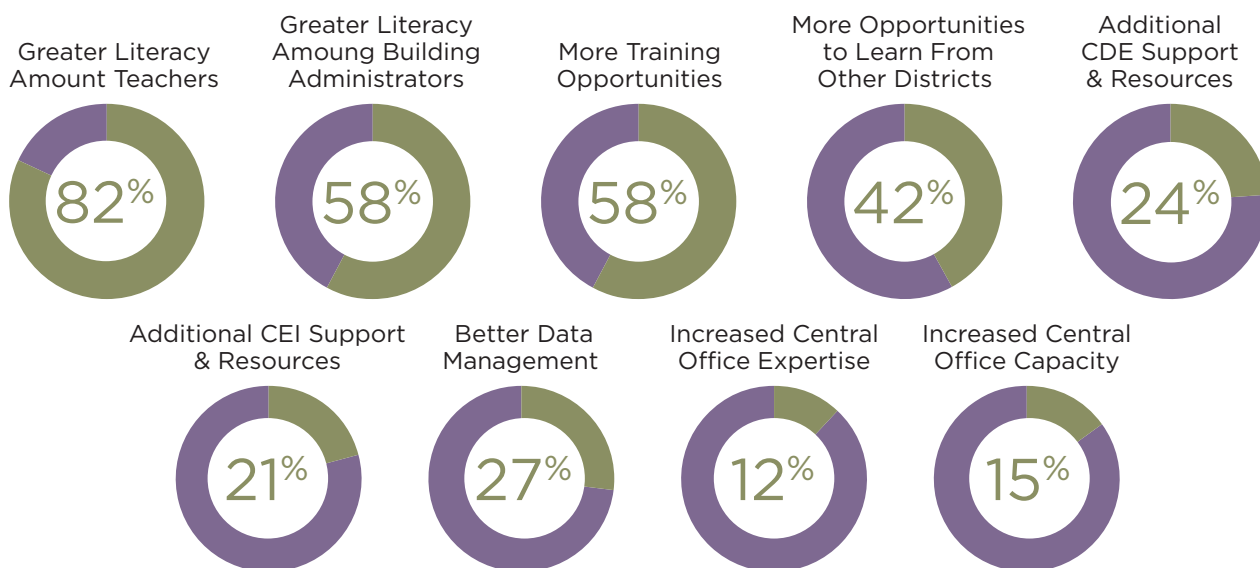
Figure 3. SLO Components

| | Above 70% | 60% to 69% | 50% to 59% | Below 50% |

	Currently Doing Or Planning On Doing	Currently Doing In Some or All Teams/Schools	Planning On Doing	Not Doing/Not Planning On Doing
Assessment Selection Guidance	78%	53%	25%	22%
SLO Rubrics	69%	56%	13%	28%
SLO Scoring Guidance	69%	50%	19%	22%
SLO Templates	68%	59%	9%	28%
Sample SLOs	62%	31%	31%	28%
SLO School Trainings	57%	34%	22%	38%
SLO Training Modules	53%	28%	25%	34%
SLO District Trainings	53%	31%	22%	38%
SLO Certification	9%	3%	6%	56%

When asked about factors that would better prepare them to effectively implement SLOs, respondents most often pointed to greater assessment literacy among teachers and building administrators. More opportunities for training and to learn from other districts using SLOs were also identified as important factors. Additionally, respondents reported that additional support and resources from CDE and other organizations, such as CEI, would be helpful. Finally, better data management and greater central office expertise and capacity were also identified as needs.
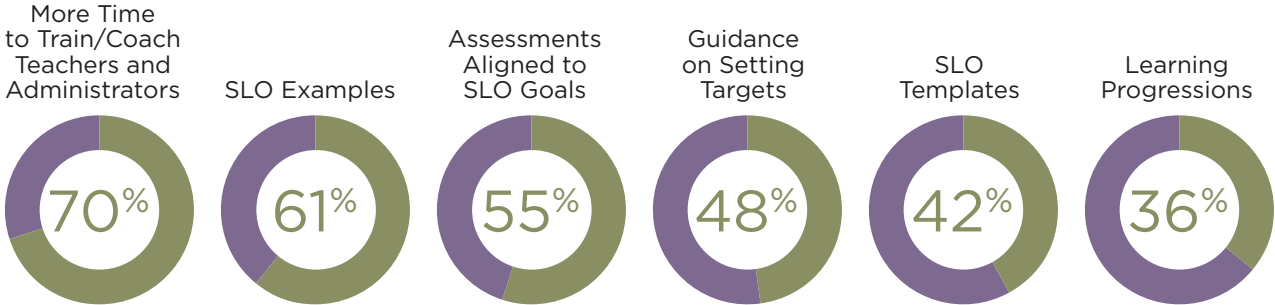
Figure 4. Factors That Support Implementation

Greater Literacy Amount Teachers	Greater Literacy Amoung Building Administrators	More Training Opportunities	More Opportunities to Learn From Other Districts	Additional CDE Support & Resources
82%	58%	58%	42%	24%

Additional CEI Support & Resources	Better Data Management	Increased Central Office Expertise	Increased Central Office Capacity
21%	27%	12%	15%

Lessons Learned – Training and Support			
Adams 12: *During initial implementation of SLOs, begin with the understanding that everyone will learn and grow in this process; expect revisions and enhancements to the process as this learning occurs*	**Denver:** *Have a solid training/coaching model fully planned out prior to implementation*	**Mesa 51:** *High-quality training and support is critical (break into small portions)*	**Thompson:** *Heavily train principals/ evaluators early in the process*

As a follow-up question, districts were asked to identify what resources they would need in order to implement SLOs more effectively (**see Figure 5**). Districts could select as many resources as they would like; these resources are reported below listed in order of frequency. Overall, the vast majority of respondents reported needing additional time to train and coach their teachers and building administrators on their SLO process. Additionally, over half of respondents reported wanting SLO examples and assessments that are directly aligned to SLOs. A lower percentage of respondents indicated wanting resources around learning progressions, which is the academic path a student takes as they progress toward the mastery of standards. However, given that SLOs are still relatively new, it could be that most districts' SLO systems are currently not built in a way to allow for the tracking of students across learning progressions (i.e., many districts may still be utilizing a pre/post-test methodology).

Figure 5. Percent of Districts Requesting SLO Resources

More Time to Train/Coach Teachers and Administrators	SLO Examples	Assessments Aligned to SLO Goals	Guidance on Setting Targets	SLO Templates	Learning Progressions
70%	61%	55%	48%	42%	36%

Recommendations

Overall, districts exploring SLO systems should consider the amount and quality of resources and supports required to do so successfully. Based on lessons learned from the four case study districts, providing opportunities to help educators build SLO knowledge and expertise is critical to successful implementation. Specifically, districts should consider utilizing opportunities available through other already existing instructional supports, such as PLCs, data teams, data trainings, etc. By doing this, districts can build an SLO model and process that aligns with instructional and assessment practices so that SLOs can be embedded into teachers' work, rather than standing apart from it. In addition, by incorporating assessment literacy components to existing trainings on student assessment data, districts can begin to increase general assessment literacy knowledge within their district. CDE has several assessment literacy modules that districts could utilize to help build knowledge within this area. In doing so, districts must take into account educators current knowledge in order to prioritize coaching and support.

Lessons Learned – Building buy-in
Adams 12: *Start by identifying the underlying values of your system; doing this keeps the focus on good instructional practice and provides a solid foundation to build on moving forward*
Denver: *Build off of other systems already in place*
Mesa 51: *Start out with an optional (non-accountability) year*
Thompson: *Pilot with specific groups first*

The experiences of the case study districts also suggest that districts should consider a staggered implementation approach for SLOs. Starting with a small group of educators (e.g., certain content areas or schools) and learning from the process allows improvements to processes and resources to be made before SLOs are implemented with all teachers. Distributing leadership and training responsibilities among school leaders, teacher leaders, and instructional coaches can ensure that educators at multiple levels are training and coaching teachers and providing feedback to them. SLOs require engagement from both teachers and evaluators, and this type of model can give them more time and capacity to implement them well. Ongoing coaching on SLOs, as opposed to one-time trainings, can also help to embed SLOs in instructional practice, differentiate support to teachers, and model good instructional practice for teachers.

Finally, as districts continue to collect SLO data, they should develop and implement processes to ensure that SLO systems are consistent and fair to all educators. This can include peer reviews of SLOs, as well as analyzing SLO data to help support and inform future improvements. In doing this, districts should consider ways to examine the alignment of SLO results to other student assessment data (external to SLOs) and to professional practice data to give them additional information to support and inform decisions around SLO scoring.

SLO Focus District Profiles

Adams 12	
Purpose of SLOs The educator effectiveness committee felt very strongly about identifying a measure of student learning that is reflective of what teachers do in the classroom and is directly linked to teachers' content areas. **SLO Definition** A measurable, long-term goal informed by available data that a team of educators develops collaboratively along with an administrator at the beginning of a period of instruction for all students or for subgroups of students.	**SLO System Details** • 2015-16 was the 1st year of district-wide implementation • All teachers and SSPs use SLOs • Example SLOs are available to reference but the district encourages teachers to create their own SLOs **Challenges in Implementation** • Changing the mindset of educators and evaluators to see SLOs as good instructional practice, as opposed to compliance with district policy • Providing the quality and quantity of training that is required for teachers and administrators to fully understand the SLO process **Advice for Other Districts** • Start by identifying the underlying values of your system; doing this keeps the focus on good instructional practice and provides a solid foundation to build on moving forward • During initial implementation of SLOs, begin with the understanding that everyone will learn and grow in this process; expect revisions and enhancements to the process as this learning occurs

Denver	
Purpose of SLOs To help teachers familiarize themselves with and implement the new Colorado Academic Standards, and to identify MSLs that that are aligned with teachers' instructional practice and are applicable to teachers in all content areas and grades. **SLO Definition** Course-long learning objectives set by teachers to identify and then monitor student progress along a learning progression towards critical learning outcomes	**SLO System Details** • 2015-16 was the second year of district-wide implementation • All teachers and SSPs use SLOs • District-created model SLOs are available for teachers to use in almost all content areas and grades; teachers can modify model SLO or create their own SLOs **Challenges in Implementation** • Quality control has been a challenge due to the autonomous nature of the SLO process • Providing the quality and quantity of training that is required for teachers and administrators to fully understand the SLO process **Advice for Other Districts** • Build off of other systems already in place • Keep the SLO process as simple as possible; start slow and build • Have a solid training/coaching model fully planned out prior to implementation

Mesa 51

Purpose of SLOs

The Technical Advisory Committee wanted to identify a process that would be a positive experience for teachers while still evaluating performance. The committee felt SLOs would be a measure that closely aligns to what teachers are doing within the classroom and the impact they have on student academic growth.

SLO Definition

The SLO process is a collaborative goal-setting process that focuses on the big ideas or essential areas of learning within a content area; SLOs are aligned to standards..

SLO System Details
- 2015-16 was the 1st year of district-wide implementation
- All teachers and SSPs use SLOs
- Principals also use aggregate of teachers' SLOs in their evaluation
- Example SLO templates and sample SLOs are available; district was very intentional in not providing "exemplars" so teachers would feel ownership over the creation of SLOs
- Learning progressions will be available to use in the future

Challenges in Implementation
- Gaining teacher buy-in/ownership of the SLO process
- Many educators initially lack the assessment and data literacy needed to successfully implement SLOs

Advice for Other Districts
- Strong leadership buy-in and support is essential
- Involve teachers as much as possible and allow people to grow in the process
- Start with an optional (non-accountability) year
- High-quality training and support is critical (break into small portions)

Thompson

Purpose of SLOs

SLOs are designed to support best practices, instruction, and be a measure of student growth for evaluation. The process of setting goals, monitoring progress, and evaluating performance is strong instructional practice.

SLO Definition

A specific, long-term goal for student learning, customized to a teacher's particular students. SLOs are designed to both support instruction and measure student growth for teacher evaluation.

SLO System Details
- 2014-15 was a pilot year for SSP SLOs
- 2015-16 was a pilot year for teacher SLOs
- SSPs and some specific teacher types use SLOs
- Users develop their own SLOs using guidance
- SLO template and samples are available

Challenges in Implementation
- Designing a system and process that delivers the understanding of all the components of an effective SLO
- Norming the process across the district and developing a strong inter-rater agreement

Advice for Other Districts
- Develop exemplars, guidance, and resources for users
- Heavily train principals/evaluators early in the process
- Strategic implementation of the SLO system, piloting with specific groups first