THE
COLORADO
EDUCATION
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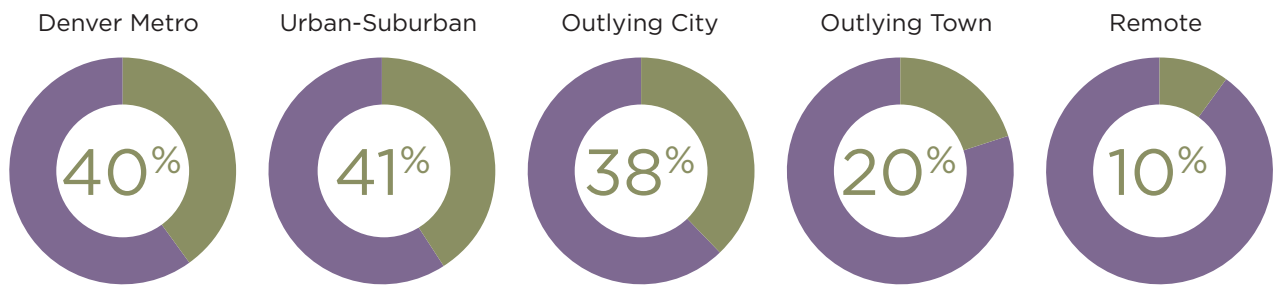
Research and Analysis by

SLOPE
RESEARCH + ANALYTICS

COLORADO MSL SYSTEM PROJECT 2015-16:
## System Implementation

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. This report provides an overview of how a sample of Colorado districts have implemented and made changes to their MSL systems.

Slope collected self-reported information from 56 districts representing 31 percent of all Colorado districts and 46 percent of Colorado's teachers and students. The respondents represent a variety of settings and cover a large proportion of important teacher and student demographic groups (see **Figures 1, 2, and 3**).

Figure 1. Proportion of Districts Participating by Setting

Denver Metro	Urban-Suburban	Outlying City	Outlying Town	Remote
40%	41%	38%	20%	10%

Figure 2. Proportion of Students and Teachers in the State Included in Participating Districts

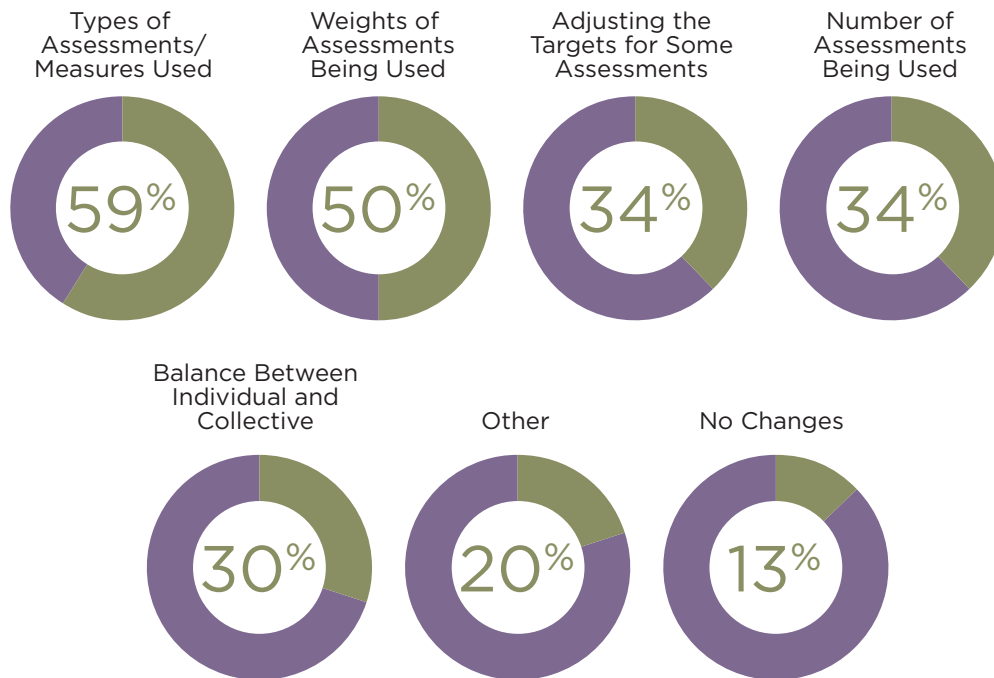| English Language Learners	Minority	Students	Teachers	Free & Reduced Lunch
49%	48%	46%	46%	45%
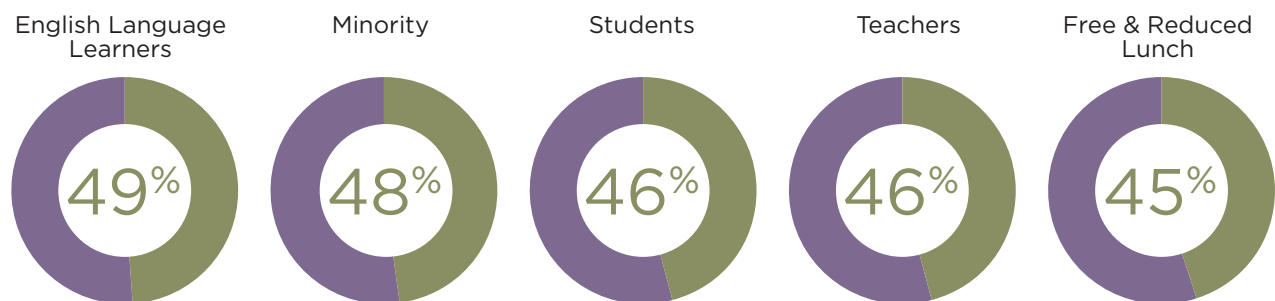
Key Findings:

- Both teachers and district staff reported increased comfort with MSL systems, reflecting educators' increased experience with them. As districts move forward, they should continue engaging teachers and school leaders to build on and improve the MSL systems they've established.

- MSLs are not consistently viewed as influencing instructional practice, even though most respondents viewed the information from MSLs as valuable. This could be because the design of many MSLs is not providing actionable feedback about instructional practice. It could also be because MSLs are not being used effectively to inform changes to instructional practice. Districts should examine both the meaningfulness of their MSLs for informing instruction and the ways that teachers and school leaders are using MSL data to inform instruction.

- Teachers in this study raised concerns about time and support to engage in MSL processes, and the need for consistent expectations. Districts should work with teachers and school leaders to identify and address their needs for effectively implementing MSLs. They should also make sure teachers and evaluators are engaging in the process in a rigorous way that ensures confidence in their systems.

- Ongoing changes to state assessments and teacher evaluation policies have prompted districts to focus more on ways to use local assessments to increase stability in their systems. However, few districts have processes in place to validate the quality of their local assessments. As districts continue to implement MSLs, they should develop processes to examine the quality of their locally-created assessments and SLO processes to ensure rigor and validity.

Important Changes to MSL Systems

Only 13 percent of the respondents reported that they made no changes to their MSL systems in the 2015-16 school year. The vast majority made some change to their system, and the most common change reported was to the types of assessments and measures each district used in their MSL systems. This means that the majority of the respondents were trying new things and learning how to use new assessments. However, there is also evidence that there may be some stability in these systems moving forward. More than a third of the districts in the study reported that they don't anticipate making significant changes to their MSL systems in future school years.

Figure 3: Percentage of Districts Reporting Important Changes to MSL Systems in 2015-16

Types of Assessments/ Measures Used	Weights of Assessments Being Used	Adjusting the Targets for Some Assessments	Number of Assessments Being Used
59%	50%	34%	34%

Balance Between Individual and Collective	Other	No Changes
30%	20%	13%

Most of the respondents made changes to the types of assessments and measures they used in their MSL systems and also to the weights assigned to each assessment or measure. Respondents gave a variety of reasons for making these changes. Feedback from teachers was the main reason they made changes. Teachers had raised concerns about the specific assessment or measures being used and teachers also had concerns about fairness and comparability across MSL systems for different teacher types. In addition to issues raised by teachers, respondents listed changes in legislation and rules as a driver behind the changes they made this year.
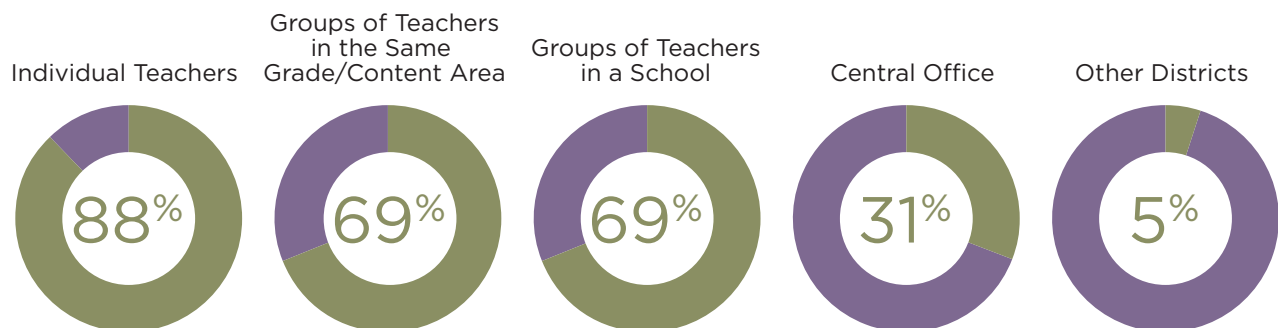
Locally-Created Assessments

Increasingly, respondents we heard from are using locally created assessments for a variety of reasons. During the 2015-16 school year, districts were prevented from using state assessment data as part of their systems[1]. In addition, some districts had noted in previous years that state assessment data was not available early enough to be useful in their evaluation and professional development systems, whereas local assessment data was more readily available. Another motivation to use locally created assessments is to reflect a district's desire for a teacher's evaluation to be fully informed by local context. For these reasons, and likely others, districts have started to use locally created assessments more often as part of their MSL systems.

Figure 4: Does your district use locally-created assessments?

YES | 76% | 24% | NO

76 percent of districts are using locally-created assessments as part of their MSL systems. Teachers are the most influential and recognized stakeholder group districts consult with when designing locally-created assessments. Very few respondents reported consulting other districts for assistance or advice in this process, suggesting the process of creating local assessments is highly context-sensitive.

Figure 5: Stakeholder Groups Involved in Designing Locally Created Assessments

Individual Teachers	Groups of Teachers in the Same Grade/Content Area	Groups of Teachers in a School	Central Office	Other Districts
88%	69%	69%	31%	5%

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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.

While the majority of respondents are working to create their own local assessments, most do not have a plan in place to validate the quality or rigor of these assessments. Only 38 percent of respondents have a validation process. Sixty-three percent of those districts that have a validation process are using one that is developed internally. Assessment validation resources from CDE and externally validated assessments are used by a quarter of responding districts.

Figure 6: Locally Created Assessment Validation Processes

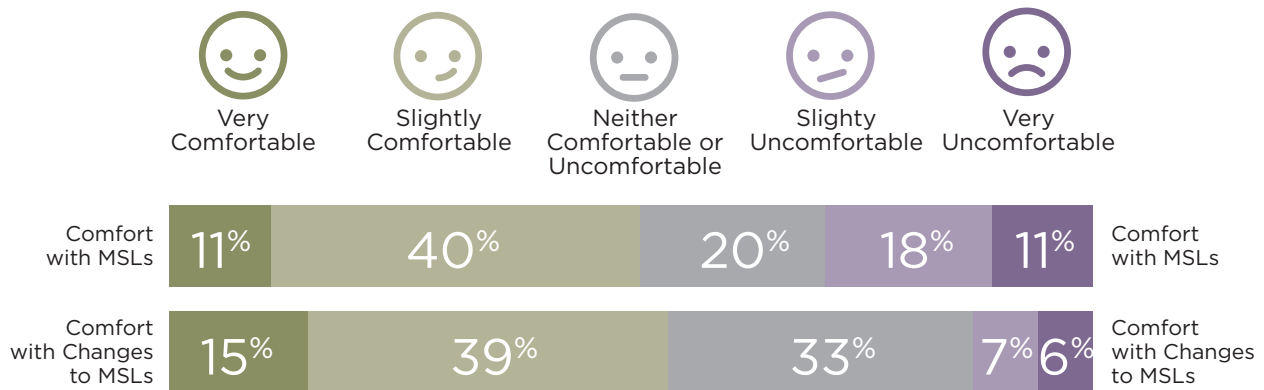| Internally Developed Validation Process	CDE Tools and Resources	Purchase Existing Validated Assessments
63%	25%	25%
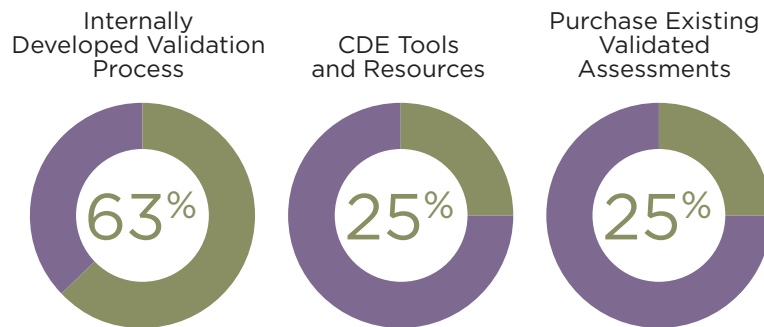
Teacher Comfort with MSLs

The level of teacher comfort, understanding, and satisfaction with MSLs has been an important topic in previous years' research and was this year as well. We were interested in hearing from both district level actors and teachers on this issue. Each respondent provided valuable feedback about the teacher experience with MSLs. We also convened a teacher focus group[2] to ask them what they thought about the MSL processes in their districts.

District Perspective

For the last two years, districts have reported that teachers have grown increasingly comfortable and proficient with their MSLs. In the past, some districts have attributed this to experience. This year was no different. The majority of respondents reported that teachers were both comfortable with their MSL systems overall and also with changes that have been made to their systems (51 percent and 54 percent, respectively). At the same time, nearly one-third of respondents (29 percent) reported that teachers were uncomfortable with their MSL systems, which warrants attention.

Figure 7: Percentage of Districts Reporting Teacher Comfort With MSLs

	Very Comfortable	Slightly Comfortable	Neither Comfortable or Uncomfortable	Slightly Uncomfortable	Very Uncomfortable	
Comfort with MSLs	11%	40%	20%	18%	11%	Comfort with MSLs
Comfort with Changes to MSLs	15%	39%	33%	7%	6%	Comfort with Changes to MSLs

Teacher Perspective

Teachers in the focus group echoed some of what district staff said and also added some important insights. In general, most teachers indicated they had a good understanding of the MSL process and knew how to implement their own MSLs effectively. "The more we do it, the deeper the understanding" was a statement made by one of the teachers, and was reflective of a number of comments we heard. The main reason teachers gave us for their greater understanding of MSLs was having a hand in creating or selecting their own assessments. Two teachers described the effect of teacher control on understanding their systems:

> [I] created my own assessments based on the state standards. [I] used some hard data with forms [from an online grading system] to grade them...I totally understand them because I created them.

> Our departments got to decide their MSLs - something that works for us, that is empowering, [that] is realistic, [and] applicable. That has definitely helped with the understanding.
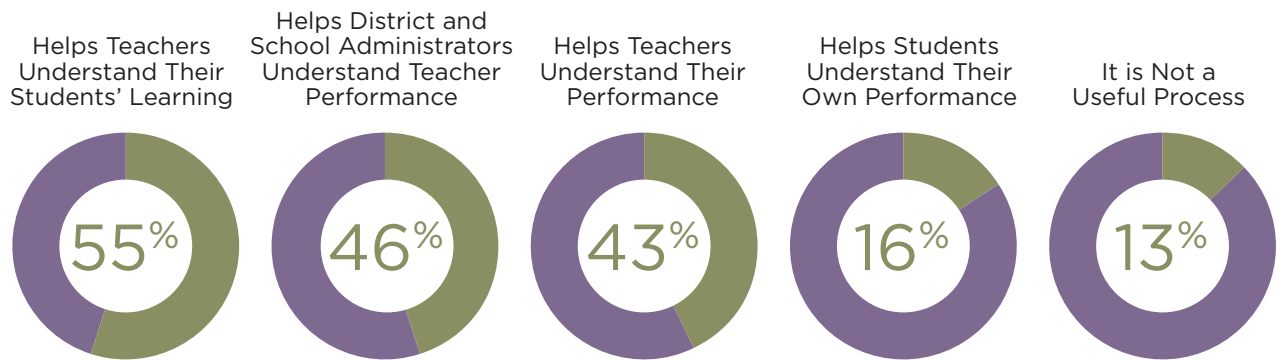
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2   The focus group consisted of 11 teachers from across the state (40 percent from urban-suburban, 30 percent from outlying town, and 10 percent each from Denver-metro, outlying city, and remote district settings).

MSL Utility

District Perspective

One important piece of information we hoped to learn from both districts and teachers alike was whether or not the MSL process was perceived as useful and served valuable purposes. Overall, districts we spoke with reported that the most important role MSLs play is helping teachers understand their students' learning and, to a lesser extent, helping districts better understand teacher performance. Very few districts reported that MSLs were not a useful process.

Figure 8: Percentage of Districts Reporting Views on the Utility of MSLs

Helps Teachers Understand Their Students' Learning	Helps District and School Administrators Understand Teacher Performance	Helps Teachers Understand Their Performance	Helps Students Understand Their Own Performance	It is Not a Useful Process
55%	46%	43%	16%	13%

Interestingly, while respondents saw value in MSLs, particularly in informing a better understanding of student learning, most did not feel that MSLs improve teaching (only 42 percent) or help districts or teachers themselves understand teacher performance (46 and 43 percent respectively). Respondents did feel that MSLs help teachers better understand student learning (55 percent) and also can form the basis for a constructive conversation about teacher practice (61 percent). The implication from these perspectives on the utility of MSLs is that respondents see the value of the information MSLs provide about student learning, but they don't necessarily see that information as being strongly connected to instructional practice and changes that teachers can make to improve their practice.

Figure 9: District Agreement About the Utility of MSLs

Forms the Basis for an Instructive Conversation About Practice	Improves Teaching
61%	42%
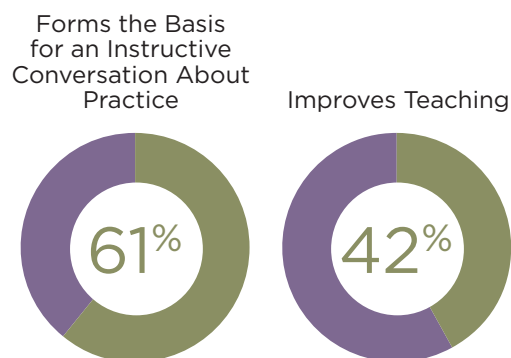
Teacher Perspective

While the teachers in our focus group indicated that they had an overall high level of understanding of the MSL process, opinions were not as positive on the value and utility of MSLs. Some of their comments echoed responses from district staff that MSLs were not strongly connected to their instructional practice. Overall, the teachers we spoke with said that MSLs could be valuable, but that there were considerable gaps in the system and implementation in their districts that prevented the true value from being realized. Three important themes emerged in our discussion of MSL value with teachers: adequate time for implementation, consistency and quality of implementation, and quality of training and guidance.

Adequate Time for Implementation

Several teachers made reference to the importance of providing adequate time to engage in thoughtful planning and discussion when designing and implementing their MSLs. Their comments suggested that a rushed process and emphasis on simply completing the requirements of their MSLs did not seem to increase their understanding or investment in the work.

> *The problem is that we haven't been given the time [and] that has been a big challenge. I do a writing assessment, because we are so small, and because there is constant turnover, I usually score those assessments during the summer because the end of the year gets crazy. We have to compile our own data and make our own charts, [it] is a lot. Not having the time has been a struggle.*

> *There is a time crunch, not always time to do the things we need to do, with all of the other instructional expectations.*

> *In my district, we also struggled with time. Right now it has become an event. [Do] a pre and post test, plug in the data, and you are done.*

Consistency of Implementation

Some teachers noted concerns about the consistency among teachers in their engagement in the process. Leadership in establishing expectations was noted as one driver of inconsistency. The design of the MSL process itself was also noted as a factor that could lead to inconsistent outcomes between teachers.

> *It goes back to how much time you put into it. We really took the time to look at the data and other [teachers] didn't put that time in and it wasn't as important to them. That is the frustrating part: the inconsistencies. You have the [teachers] who care and the [teachers] who don't.*

> *There is no accountability [in the process]. If it doesn't come out well, you can change it.*

> *The expectation wasn't there from above. It was very lenient. I look back and wish I had done different things.*

Quality of Training and Guidance

Finally, some teachers commented that insufficient guidance from school and district leadership led to MSL measures that were not as instructionally meaningful as they might have been. They also noted that a lack of leadership in the process led to confusion and frustration among teachers.

> *Last year, on our PD day, [teachers were] told to write assessments. There was no guidance and no follow-up. A few of us who had had training sort of understood how to do that. When it came time to decide on our pie, we used [vendor assessments] because no one wrote assessments.*

> *It is always about how it is dictated from the leadership. In our building it was very confusing. It wasn't led correctly; some teachers didn't care. It didn't trickle down [from leadership], wasn't talked about, [and] was mostly [done] in your team.*

Conclusion

As districts continue to implement MSLs, comfort across at all levels is increasing, but continuous implementation is also raising new concerns around adequate skills to engage in a rigorous process and the right training around those skills. Districts and educators across the state will need continued support to ensure that MSL implementation is effective and meaningful.