

Delta County School District: Maintaining Momentum by Empowering District Educators

Delta County School District is a local education agency in rural Colorado that consolidates five smaller townships in the Gunnison River Valley²¹ Across different student subgroups, the county has recently shown positive trends in achievement as measured by the Colorado Measures of Academic Success.²² Assistant superintendent Kurt Clay and other district leaders were challenged with maintaining this momentum for all students served by Delta County. He elaborated, “Student success is the why behind all of our [district initiatives]. Student success is the one piece that reaches across all grade levels and content areas.”⁵



District leaders began this work by looking into popular resources offered by various vendors. They soon realized that, because all vendors advertise seemingly impressive results, there needed to be a better way to support school administrators and teachers in deciding which resources are most supported by research on how students learn best and are thus worth implementing. Based on literature suggesting that building teacher quality has the largest effect size on student learning²³, district leaders looked to partner with an organization with expertise in the learning sciences that could provide Delta County educators with flexible professional learning opportunities and help them be more “thoughtful in their craft” as they select among available resources.⁵

Empowering Educators Through Neuroteach Global

Upon discovering the Center for Transformative Teaching and Learning’s (CTTL) goal to assist educators in applying concepts, principles and findings from the learning sciences in the classroom, Clay and a

²¹ Delta County School District (DCSD). (n.d.). *Area profile*. Retrieved from <http://www.deltaschools.com/area-profile.php>

²² Colorado Department of Education (CDE). (2018a). *District dashboard: Delta County 50(j)*. Retrieved from <https://www.cde.state.co.us/code/districtdashboard>

²³ Darling-Hammond, L. (2000). Teacher quality and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8(1), 1-44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v8n1.2000>

team of Delta County teachers attended the 2018 Science of Teaching and School Leadership Academy. Aside from receiving information on evidence-based instructional strategies to implement in Delta County schools, Clay had an opportunity to directly engage with CTTL Director Glenn Whitman to learn about [Neuroteach Global](#), a series of microcourses about the learning sciences supported by ongoing online coaching sessions. Given its flexible, self-paced delivery method, Delta County's district leaders decided to partner with CTTL and make Track One of Neuroteach Global — which covers topics such as teacher and student mindsets, classroom design and classroom culture — available to all of Delta County teachers and leaders. The district's goal for 2019 is that 95 to 100 percent of Delta County's 296 teachers will enroll in Track One of Neuroteach Global.²⁴

To help ease teachers into Neuroteach Global, Delta County began with a districtwide book study on CTTL's publication [Neuroteach](#), which previews some of the concepts and strategies discussed in the Neuroteach Global program. In August 2018, Ian Kelleher, CTTL's Head of Research, visited Delta County's district leaders and school administrators to provide an introductory training session on methods and tools for examining each chapter in-depth. Since the beginning of the 2018-2019 school year, Delta County principals and assistant principals have been heading the book studies at their respective schools. Upon conclusion of the book study in January 2019, Delta County held a follow-up training session with their participating teachers and Glenn Whitman to officially kick off Neuroteach Global.²⁴

Enabling Policies

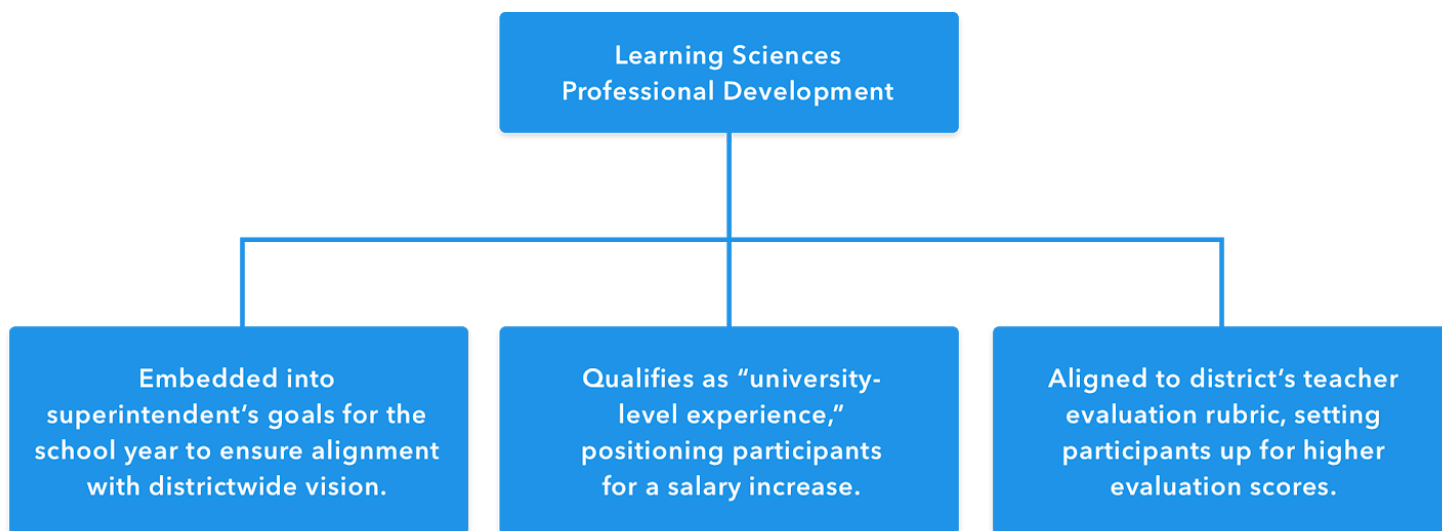
Several district policies created conditions conducive to Delta County's partnership with CTTL. First, Superintendent Caryn Gibson set a districtwide vision for teaching and learning informed by the learning sciences. Specifically, Core Belief 2 of the district's goals for 2018-2019 explains that the district will “[utilize] ... resources in a responsible ... and effective manner” by providing “professional development around educating the whole child through mind brain education.”²⁵ Second, district leaders leveraged the school board's policies regarding teacher salaries to incentivize teachers' participation in Neuroteach Global. In Delta County, 10 university-level credits are required for each teacher to move up the locally dictated pay scale. District leaders chose to qualify Neuroteach Global participation as a university-level experience, putting participants in a better position for a salary increase.⁵

²⁴ K. Clay, personal communication, November 15, 2018

²⁵ Gibson, C. (2018). Delta County School District: *Superintendent goals 2018-2019*. Delta, CO: Delta County School District. Retrieved from <http://www.deltaschools.com/content/misc/superintendent-goals.pdf>

Third, Delta County’s educator evaluation system supports classroom practices with evidence from the learning sciences. Recent changes to the [Colorado law](#) required districts to adopt evaluation systems aligned to the [state’s quality standards](#).²⁶ Therefore, in the 2017-2018 school year, Delta County implemented a [new evaluation rubric](#). This rubric not only requires Delta County teachers to demonstrate “knowledge of ... appropriate evidence-based instructional practices,” but also “knowledge about the ways in which learning takes place, including the levels of intellectual, physical, social and emotional development of their students.” Furthermore, the rubric requires teachers to demonstrate uses of specific classroom strategies supported by the learning sciences, such as providing students with multiple representations of a new concept as well as ample opportunities to make connections with prior knowledge. Through this rubric, Delta County ensures that teachers who receive the Neuroteach Global training are better positioned to receive higher annual evaluation scores.

Delta County School District Policy Structure



Impact of Professional Learning

Because Delta County is in the first year of its engagement with the learning sciences, district leaders have not yet conducted a formal evaluation of the CTTL partnership. However, they are consistently receiving positive reports from school administrators in charge of coordinating the Neuroteach book studies. For example, principals reported that their teachers are having “aha moments” at each session, understanding why student motivations, mindsets and other factors related to their social and

²⁶ Colorado Department of Education (CDE). (2018b). *Supporting great teachers and leaders*. Denver, CO: CDE. Retrieved from <http://www.cde.state.co.us/educatoreffectiveness/sb191factsheet>

emotional learning (SEL) must be cultivated to have the greatest possible impact on their academics. Principals additionally have reported that a culture of appropriate risk-taking is being gradually cultivated as teachers feel more driven to experiment with different strategies by either altering types of homework assignments or redirecting student misbehavior in more positive ways. District leaders hope that participation in Neuroteach Global will reinforce this new learning by encouraging teachers to challenge traditional classroom practices and “use the right strategy at the right time” (e.g. Given the age and proficiency-level of the class, would lecture-based, direct instruction or application-based, small-group activities work better?). Clay also hopes that the district leadership’s participation in Neuroteach Global will drive them to unpack buzzwords such as “rigorous curriculum” and “individualized instruction,” allowing for in-depth evaluations of currently adopted curricula.⁵

Taking Steps Toward a Larger Cultural Shift

Following participation in Neuroteach Global, Delta County seeks to sustain professional learning by forming partnerships with other state-level funding sources. With this support, the district will hire at least one in-house SEL expert who can coordinate and administer job-embedded professional learning opportunities on the topic. By this time, Delta County teachers’ previous participation in Neuroteach Global will have developed their foundational knowledge on the learning sciences, enabling them to naturally see the connections between SEL and other components of “educating the whole child.” Teachers will recognize that students who feel socially and emotionally supported at school are more likely to succeed academically as well.⁵

Finally, to truly catalyze a cultural shift where educators are unafraid to engage with the learning sciences, district leaders would like federal and state policymakers to think about how educator autonomy and accountability policies can coexist. Collecting data on student performance is indeed crucial to ensuring equitable outcomes. However, because teachers must currently meet requirements set by mandated assessments, accountability policies can serve as barriers to teachers experimenting with different strategies, often driving them to resort to familiar traditional practices that they believe will meet state standards. Policymakers should not overlook the consequences of well-intended policies on day-to-day teacher behavior.⁵



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