



# BEYOND BUY-IN:

Partnering with Practitioners to Build A Professional Growth and Accountability System for Denver's Educators

By Craig D. Jerald | June 2013



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## About the Author

**Craig D. Jerald** is the president of Break the Curve Consulting, which provides technical assistance and strategic advice to organizations working to improve education for all students. Before founding Break the Curve, Craig served as a principal partner at The Education Trust and as a senior editor at *Education Week*. His other recent publications include *Leading for Effective Teaching: How School Systems Can Support Principal Success* (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012) and *Movin' It and Improvin' It: Using Both Education Strategies to Increase Teaching Effectiveness* (Center for American Progress, 2012).

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### Overview

Although “teacher buy-in” has become a buzzword in the national conversation about new approaches to evaluating teachers, Kendra Wilhelm recalls being corrected when she used that phrase during an interview for the position of LEAP program manager for Denver Public Schools (DPS) last year. LEAP, which stands for Leading Effective Academic Practice, is Denver’s new system for developing and evaluating effective classroom teaching. Instead of designing LEAP in the central office first and then using targeted communication strategies to encourage educators to “buy into” the new system, DPS made a serious commitment to deeply engage teachers and principals in every step of LEAP’s ongoing design, development, and rollout. “It might seem like a technical distinction, but it represents a major shift in philosophy,” says Wilhelm, who was hired in July 2012.

The process began early in 2009, when the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation invited DPS to compete for a large multi-year grant to build a comprehensive talent management system for ensuring an effective teacher in every classroom. The competition required district leaders to craft their plans in partnership with local teachers’ associations, a stipulation offering DPS a decided advantage stemming from a successful earlier collaboration with the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) on a groundbreaking performance compensation plan adopted in 2004. In January 2010, the Gates Foundation awarded DPS a \$10 million, three-year “accelerator grant” to support the district’s efforts to develop a shared definition of effective teaching, along with an accountability and support system to assess teachers’ performance against that definition and to facilitate their efforts to improve over time.

**FIGURE 1. DISTRICT CONTEXT**

DISTRICT FACTS*	
Schools	155
Teachers	5,237
Students	66,814
STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS	
American Indian	1%
Asian	3%
Black	15%
Hispanic	58%
White	20%
Other	3%
Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	72%

\* Excluding charter schools, which do not participate in LEAP.

Since then, DPS has leveraged a wide variety of strategies to ensure that LEAP’s ongoing development is deeply informed by educators’ own experiences and ideas. The district immediately carried its partnership with DCTA into the initial design phase beginning in April 2010. Henry Roman and Carolyn Crowder, DCTA’s president and executive director, agreed to serve with superintendent Tom Boasberg and other district leaders on a five-member Steering Committee that functions as the core decision-making body for work related to LEAP. In addition, Pam Shamburg, a highly respected middle school teacher, was appointed by DCTA to work on special assignment as a member

of the district's LEAP Leadership Team. In the full-time position of DCTA Liaison, Shamburg works hand-in-hand with central office leaders to help manage every detail of LEAP's ongoing development.

The composition of both the Steering Committee and the LEAP Leadership Team ensures strategic cross-functionality across the central office, along with strong teacher voice, which enables LEAP to be continuously aligned with policies related to curriculum and instruction as well as human capital management. The LEAP Leadership Team includes central office leaders responsible for teacher leadership and development, student assessment, and talent management broadly. As such, the work of designing and developing LEAP is shared across the central office rather than within a single, "siloes" team within DPS.

DPS formally launched LEAP's design phase by engaging an outside organization to facilitate 23 stakeholder focus groups during a three-week period in April 2010, allowing more than 225 teachers, principals, and other stakeholders to provide early input about what was working with the current system and what "guiding principles" should inform a new system. The district then formed five practitioner-led Design Teams to make more detailed recommendations for LEAP's design based on the focus group findings. DPS and DCTA jointly appointed a teacher and a principal to co-chair each Design Team, and those co-chairs then selected several other teachers and principals to fill out the diverse teams.

Based on Design Team recommendations, DPS developed a customized *Framework for Effective Teaching* during the fall of 2010, introducing a shared definition of effective teaching that would become the foundation not only for LEAP but for aligning all of Denver's talent management policies. Early in 2011, DPS began piloting several LEAP components that were ready to test on the ground, including initial versions of the *Framework*, the classroom observation and feedback cycle, and student perception surveys. A 16-school pilot conducted that spring enabled more than 500 classroom teachers and school leaders to provide feedback on those components, leading to significant improvements in LEAP's initial design. It also contributed greatly to the creation of professional development resources aligned with the *Framework*.

DPS then invited all schools to test the refined components through a full-year pilot during the 2011-12 school year. To ensure committed participation in the pilot, DCTA and DPS agreed that school faculties should vote on whether or not to participate in the pilot. Based on a majority vote of teachers in each building, 94 percent of Denver schools volunteered to participate.

DPS adopted a multi-faceted strategy to ensure that LEAP would continue to be developed and refined with significant input and feedback from practitioners throughout the yearlong pilot. The LEAP Team expanded to include a second full-time DCTA position called Outreach Manager, enabling music teacher Zachary Rupp to visit nearly every school during the year to talk with teachers about LEAP and to solicit face-to-face feedback. Superintendent Boasberg and Chief Academic Officer Susana Cordova also discussed LEAP during the Superintendent Faculty Meetings they hold in each school every year. Thousands of teachers responded to formal online surveys administered by the research organization McREL after each of four classroom observation windows, and McREL also convened focus groups of teachers several times during the pilot. Finally, hundreds of teachers and principals took advantage of the LEAP website's anonymous feedback functionality. In a survey conducted during spring 2012, fully 80 percent of teachers reported that they had provided feedback on LEAP.

In addition, the lead-up to the 2011-12 district-wide pilot provided opportunities for hundreds of teachers to go beyond providing feedback and take ownership of helping their peers better understand LEAP. Prior to the building-level vote on participation, more than 60 teachers from the original 16 pilot schools volunteered to visit other schools in order to discuss their personal experiences with LEAP and to answer questions about participation in the pilot. And, rather than conducting centralized training for thousands of teachers on LEAP, DPS asked teacher leaders and principals to conduct training for educators in their own schools using a set of adaptable turnkey materials.

DPS learned valuable lessons about how to partner with practitioners at every stage of the LEAP process, from initial design to large-scale piloting. Above all, Denver's experience with LEAP shows

## *Denver's experience with LEAP shows that it is possible for school systems to design and implement major initiatives with significant involvement from teachers and school leaders.*

that it is possible for school systems to design and implement major initiatives with significant involvement from teachers and school leaders. If Denver is any indication, educators are hungry for opportunities to be meaningfully involved in large-scale reform initiatives, and many will gladly spend significant amounts of time and energy on such efforts if they believe their contributions will be taken seriously.

## Background

In March 2010, Denver Public Schools (DPS) published *The Denver Plan 2010*, a comprehensive strategic blueprint for improving student outcomes. The Plan placed a high priority on ensuring a highly effective teacher in every classroom and outlined a set of strategies to support that commitment, including development of a shared definition of effective teaching and a multi-measure system to provide feedback and professional development to help teachers improve their practice. That set of work, dubbed *Empowering Excellent Educators*, would be supported by a \$10 million grant to define and support effective teaching, which the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation had awarded DPS that January. In addition, DPS planned to build on its track record of successful collaboration with the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA), beginning with a five-leader Steering Committee that included Superintendent Tom Boasberg, DCTA president Henry Roman, and DCTA Executive Director Carolyn Crowder.

Among large urban school districts, Denver enjoys an especially rich history of labor-management

collaboration to improve human capital policies. In 1999, union and district leaders agreed to pilot an ambitious pay-for-performance initiative eventually known as the Denver Professional Compensation System, or ProComp. The agreement created a four-person Design Team to oversee the design and implementation of a two-year pilot, with the district and union each appointing two members. In 2001, DPS established a larger Joint Task Force on Teacher Compensation, including five teachers and five principals, to design a full-scale version further piloted and eventually approved by a majority vote of union members in 2004. According to a 2007 book co-written by a union-appointed member of the original Design Team, “teacher members of the [task force] made critical contributions to ProComp’s design, rendering it workable, fair, and likely the most progressive teacher pay system in the United States”<sup>1</sup> at the time.

A number of educators continued to play significant leadership roles in ProComp as it was further refined and implemented, including Henry Roman, who was later elected DCTA president in 2009. Roman recalls some surprised reactions when he sent a personalized letter to principals and assistant principals explaining the amount of performance compensation they qualified for under ProComp. “Here is the guy from the teachers’ union explaining this to principals,” says Roman. “You get to a certain level of trust if you do this for a long enough time.”

Susana Cordova, Denver’s Chief Academic Officer (CAO), agrees that the ProComp experience laid fertile ground for continuing collaboration with educators to establish new ways of working. She also recalls leaders very intentionally engaging in a listening tour to talk with educators about how district reforms were working and not working after she was recruited to join the central office in 2002, following a set of fairly “top-down” initiatives prior to that. “By now we have a pretty long history of collaborating to figure out what makes the most sense and, in fact, a pretty high expectation that that’s the way you do things,” she says. “I don’t think that having a small group of people design something and then say ‘go run with it’ would work here.”

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<sup>1</sup> Gonring, P., Teske, P., & Jupp, B. (2007). *Pay-for-Performance Teacher Compensation: An Inside View of Denver’s ProComp Plan*. Boston, MA: Harvard Education Press.

That historical context contributed to a productive collaborative experience when DPS and DCTA agreed to respond to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's invitation to compete for a grant to support new ways to define and improve teacher effectiveness in 2009. And it suggested several strategies for engaging teachers in the work supported by the grant, including a Steering Committee with significant DCTA representation and opportunities for teachers to pilot and help refine the new system prior to full implementation.

However, while earlier experiences provided a valuable foundation for collaboration, with LEAP Denver went far beyond the level of educator engagement seen in any previous initiative. The reason had to do with the fundamental purpose of the new system. "LEAP is a system of professional growth and support with an evaluative component," explains Superintendent Boasberg. "You would never just call LEAP an 'evaluation system.'" Because growing as a professional requires a greater investment of time and energy than merely being evaluated as a professional, it stood to reason that LEAP would need to be designed with significant involvement from the very educators who would be expected to successfully leverage it for that purpose. "We knew we needed to get a lot of engagement from our educators in order to design the most thoughtful system possible," recalls Boasberg.

## Designing LEAP

(January 2010 to January 2011)

Before diving into designing its new system of teacher growth and accountability, DPS first had to decide on an internal structure for managing that work, one that would support significant participation from practitioners while ensuring strategic alignment with the district's broader goals. (See Figure 2.) To that end, DPS determined that LEAP should be managed by a cross-functional group of leaders rather than scattering responsibilities across existing offices, on the one hand, or isolating all responsibility within a new or existing office, on the other. In addition to a classroom teacher who serves as the full-time DCTA Liaison, the LEAP Leadership Team includes central office leaders with broad strategic responsibilities for

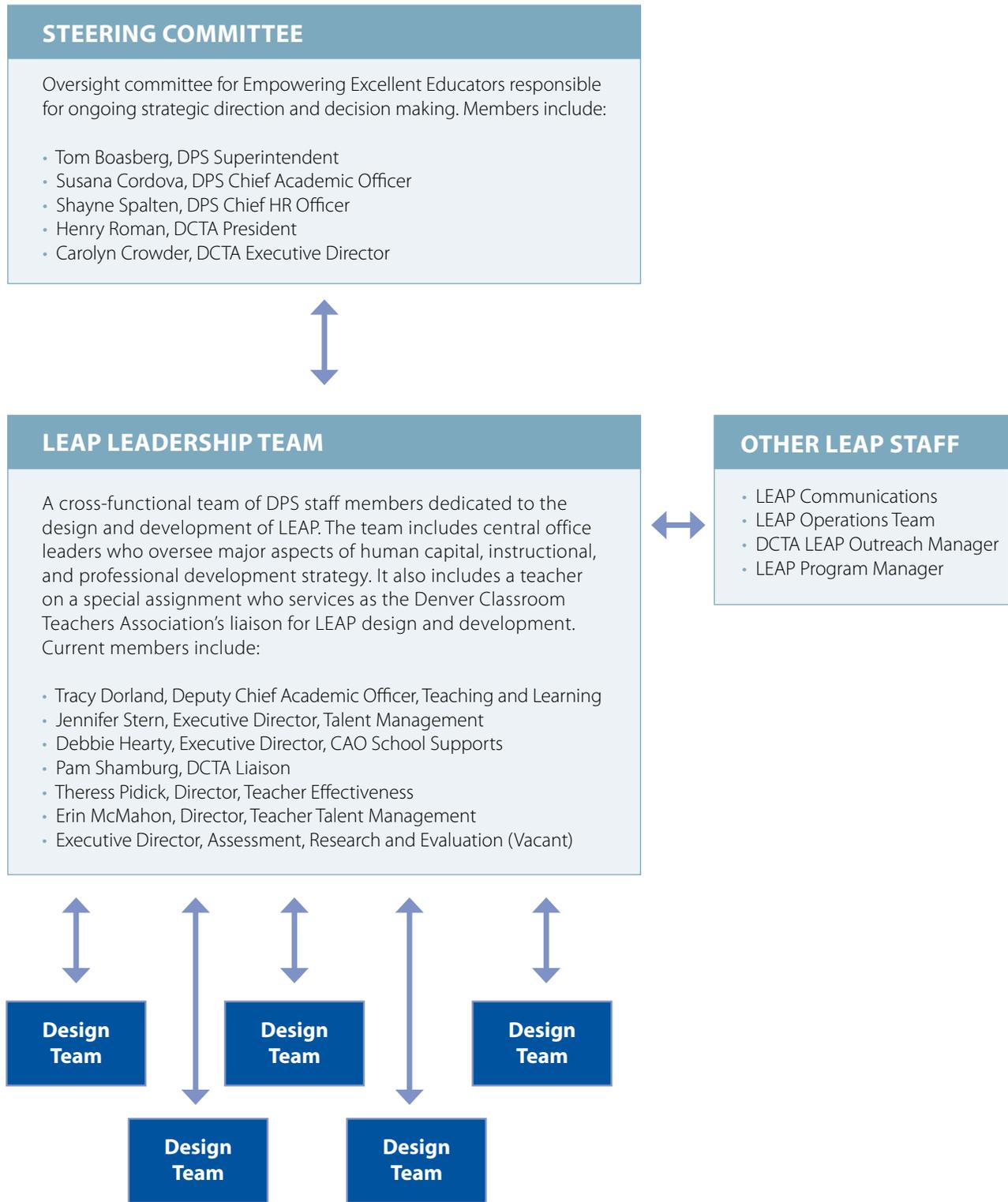
*DPS determined that LEAP should be managed by a cross-functional group of leaders rather than scattering responsibilities across existing offices, on the one hand, or isolating all responsibility within a new or existing office, on the other.*

diverse policy areas ranging from student assessment to talent management to professional development and teacher leadership. "You have to think hard about your internal structure," says Jennifer Stern, Denver's Executive Director of Talent Management, "because what you're building has to connect with the broader work and strategy of the entire school district, which requires engagement with lots of other internal stakeholders."

DPS intended the composition of the Steering Committee to likewise facilitate strategic cross-functionality along with strong teacher voice. By including both the district's Chief Academic Officer, Susana Cordova, and its Chief Human Resource Officer, Shayne Spalten, the district ensured that LEAP would be developed in alignment with strategic initiatives impacting the curriculum and instruction in classrooms along with DPS's efforts to recruit, reward, develop, and retain talented teachers in every classroom. (See Figure 2.)

To ensure that input from educators and other stakeholders would guide the system's development from the very outset, DPS engaged Civic Canopy, a Denver-based nonprofit organization, to facilitate a series of focus groups during April 2010. Civic Canopy organized the focus groups as an iterative process taking place over a three-week period, allowing for deeper probing of participants' viewpoints. The first round explored what participants believed to be the shortcomings of the current system, contextualizing the question with data on student achievement and

**FIGURE 2. ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE FOR MANAGING LEAP'S DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT**



Practitioner-chaired teams of teachers and school leaders formed to make recommendations for LEAP's design based on findings

teacher’s current evaluation ratings. Subsequent rounds built on that foundation to explore ideas about what a better approach might look like and then tested emerging ideas to ensure confidence in the findings. (See Figure 3.) More than 225 principals, teachers, district staff members, and students participated in the process, and Civic Canopy wove their collective input into a set of “guiding principles” that were then used to guide LEAP’s design moving forward. (See Figure 4.) Teachers who participated in the focus groups say they appreciated the opportunity to provide input at

such an early stage. “It empowered teachers to help get the conversation going,” explains Keith Roybal, a high school science teacher who participated in the focus groups and who later agreed to serve as the LEAP Team’s DCTA Outreach Manager for 2012-13. “When you’re making such a big paradigm shift, you have to give people the opportunity to digest it and to think about it right from the start, and those focus groups were fantastic for that purpose.” Roybal especially valued the opportunity to reflect on better approaches to professional development as a critical

**FIGURE 3. GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR APRIL 2010 FOCUS GROUPS**

### WEEK 1

- What about the current teacher performance and evaluation system plays an effective role in increasing student achievement and promoting teacher growth?
- What about the current system does not play an effective role in increasing student achievement and promoting teacher growth?
- Based on what is working and not working in the current system, what values do you see as most important in a more ideal system?

### WEEK 2

- What are your responses to the core values that we heard from participants in Week 1?
  - What jumps out at you?
  - What might be missing?
- Based on these values, what would you want the Design Teams to take into account as they build their individual element of the system?
  - What should it look like? What is your hope?
  - What shouldn’t it look like? What might be a concern?
  - Ideas/suggestions to help move it in the right direction.

### WEEK 3

- Based on your experiences with the current system—both positive and negative—is there anything you would want to be included in an ideal system that is not contained in the core values formulated during Weeks 1 and 2?
  - How important, on a scale of 1-5, do you think each of these values is?
- In Week 2, participants brainstormed what the Design Teams need to abide by as they build their component of the system so that they create something that teachers and principals can support (small groups reviewed these lists):
  - Are these the right parameters?
  - Is there anything missing? Does something need changing?
  - Offer your best set of “Design Principles” to pass off to the design teams.

component of the new system. “The facilitators would ask things like, ‘Do you think you have received useful coaching from instructional leaders?’ So it really got us thinking about a whole new model of evaluation and professional development, which was exciting for me.” Tracy Dorland, Denver’s Deputy CAO for Teaching and Learning, believes it was especially important for DPS to engage a strong, independent thought partner committed to transparency in the focus group process. She recalls attending one meeting about the written report where representatives from Civic

Canopy discussed including certain statements that she found potentially problematic. “I told them I wasn’t sure about putting that in the report, and they said, ‘Then we’re not giving you the report because you hired us to produce an honest report about what your stakeholders are telling you,’” recalls Dorland. “So they were an excellent thought partner, to the point of pushing us to be completely transparent even when it was uncomfortable.”

**FIGURE 4. GUIDING PRINCIPLES EMERGING FROM SPRING 2010 STAKEHOLDER FOCUS GROUPS**

#### **ROOTED IN PROFESSIONAL EXPERTISE**

The definition of effective teaching needs to be based on the best research and is co-constructed by teachers themselves. Administrators and other evaluators must have the background and expertise necessary to accurately and fairly assess the quality of the teaching they are charged with observing.

#### **MULTIPLE SOURCES OF DATA**

The system of assessment should bring together various points of data (including principal observation, peer observation, student growth, self-reflection, and other information) to identify areas of strength and to set clear, specific targets for growth.

#### **CONTINUOUS FEEDBACK**

The system should provide frequent and ongoing feedback about practice, rather than one-shot data points. Constructive feedback is the lifeblood of improvement, providing information about areas of strength and areas for growth, and it should flow through all aspects of the system to ensure each element—from classroom practice to professional development—is achieving the desired results.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH FLEXIBILITY**

The system should set clear standards of effective practice and apply them faithfully and fairly across the district, but allow enough flexibility to set goals for improvement and professional development based on the levels of experience and unique needs of each educator.

#### **ACCOUNTABILITY**

While the system should aspire to help everyone improve their practice, it must also distinguish between various levels of performance, and hold people accountable for reasonable results. Improvement plans must be followed and have consequences. The measurement system should change from a binary “satisfactory/unsatisfactory” to a continuum of performance with specifically defined levels of proficiency.

#### **A CULTURE OF LEARNING**

The system must support and encourage learning and innovation at all levels—in students, in educators, and in administrators—instead of being punitive or just rewarding compliance. Growth must be the end game for all members of the system. The district as a whole, as well as individual schools, must be intentional about fostering a culture that supports everyone to learn.

#### **REWARD EFFECTIVENESS**

The system should reward effectiveness, linking financial rewards to the evaluation system as well as non-financial rewards such as recognition and unique professional opportunities. It should reward effectiveness regardless of years of experience.

*Given that fewer than 50 of the district’s more than 5,000 teachers and school leaders could serve on a Design Team, DPS took care to craft an open, democratic, and competitive selection process that would confer a high degree of credibility to the teams.*

DPS next convened five practitioner-led “Design Teams” to make recommendations for fashioning several key components of the new system, guided by the focus group findings. (See Figure 5.) Given that fewer than 50 of the district’s more than 5,000 teachers and school leaders could serve on a Design Team, DPS took care to craft an open, democratic, and competitive selection process that would confer a high degree of credibility to the teams. First, all teachers and principals were openly invited to apply

via an online form asking applicants to answer several essay questions about why they wanted to participate and how they would improve the current system, as well as to provide a peer recommendation.

Then, from more than 100 applications received, DCTA proposed a teacher to co-chair each of the five teams while DPS proposed a principal to co-chair each team. Leaders from DCTA and DPS met to discuss their proposed co-chairs and to jointly approve the final selections. “Frankly, we were a little worried that there would be some tension about those decisions,” recalls Dorland. “And we did have some very honest conversations, but that ultimately helped us to continue to build the relationship moving forward.”

Finally, the new co-chairs met in pairs to collaboratively select several teachers and several principals (or assistant principals) for the remaining slots on each team. DPS provided a protocol to help co-chairs review the applications, but final selections rested with the co-chairs themselves. “I’ve seen Design Teams in some districts that didn’t have credibility because they appeared to be staffed with hand-picked teachers,” says Stern. “I think the process we used made clear that this was a serious effort to give a real voice to educators, and that really mattered.”

**FIGURE 5. LEAP’S PRACTITIONER-LED DESIGN TEAMS**

Design Team	Teacher Effectiveness	Peer Observation	Assessment & Student Outcomes	Professional Development	Principal Effectiveness
<b>Focus</b>	Definition of effective teaching embedded in a framework for observing classroom practice	Process for peer observation and feedback	Ways of aligning the district’s student assessment plan with LEAP	Ways to connect professional development opportunities to LEAP	Initial draft of School Leadership Framework; policies to enable principals to support effective teaching, including ways to evaluate school leaders

Another factor contributing to the success of the Design Teams came from following through on the commitment to be guided by the focus group findings. “Having that focus group data was really valuable, because there are times you feel outnumbered as a teacher,” recalls Spanish teacher Noah Geisel, who served on the Teacher Effectiveness team. “When disagreements arose, I was able to remind everyone that we were charged with being faithful to what teachers wanted in the system. So the focus group data were really valuable to me as a member of the team to make sure those voices were being represented.”

Lori Nazareno, the teacher co-chair for that team, strongly agrees that the focus group findings offered a critical foundation during the initial design phase. “The members of the Teacher Effectiveness team were always going back and rechecking to make sure we were staying true to what the original focus groups had said,” she says. “Had that not happened, it would have just been a waste of everybody’s time, an early point to drop the ball and lose credibility.”

According to Dorland, it also was important to establish a clear process and scope of responsibility for the Design Teams before they convened. Each team began by reviewing research and promising models from around the country and then worked toward making high-level recommendations for designing relevant components, along with a rationale for each recommendation. The central office LEAP Team then fleshed out design proposals based on those recommendations. After updating and consulting with the Steering Committee, the LEAP Leadership Team brought unresolved issues back to the Design Teams for further discussion. That division of labor permitted practitioners on Design Teams to substantively guide the work (the “what” and the “why”) without getting bogged down in technical nuances (the “how”) they would not have had sufficient time or expertise to tackle. And it enabled Dorland and her colleagues to coordinate across Design Team recommendations to ensure that the process resulted in a coherent system rather than a set of ill-matching components.

The Design Teams pushed the district to ensure that they were given the flexibility they needed to create a system that they believed met the intentions of

the focus groups. In July, the Teacher Effectiveness team strongly recommended that DPS develop its own framework describing effective teaching rather than simply recommending which nationally available classroom observation instrument the district should adopt, as had been the district’s original goal for that team.

*The Design Teams pushed the district to ensure that they were given the flexibility they needed to create a system that they believed met the intentions of the focus groups.*

The team presented a persuasive rationale for its recommendation, arguing that none of the instruments it had reviewed was sufficiently keyed to the specific needs of Denver’s teachers and students. First, none adequately addressed the needs of English Language Learners, who comprise 35 percent of Denver’s student population. Second, according to team members, no instrument focused enough attention on observing student behaviors during a classroom lesson in addition to teacher actions. Finally, none provided explicit and detailed enough performance descriptors to adequately specify and distinguish teacher and student behaviors across a broad spectrum of teacher development, particularly for teachers working in an urban context.

That unexpected recommendation presented district leaders with an extremely difficult decision. Designing a customized framework would require much more time and labor than they had originally anticipated, especially if educators were to continue to have considerable input, a real concern given the district’s plan to begin piloting classroom observations by early 2011. Moreover, given that the main purpose of LEAP is to enable teachers to improve their practice, the district had committed to providing professional

development resources aligned with whatever framework was adopted for the pilot. Delivering those resources in time would be much easier if DPS simply adopted a nationally available framework rather than developing a customized one.

But practitioners on the Design Team felt very strongly about the recommendation; for some, the district's response would signal whether leaders were truly serious about giving practitioners a meaningful voice in LEAP's design. "The teachers and administrators on the team agreed very strongly that we had signed up for a 'design team,' not an 'adoption team,'" recalls Nazareno. "This was a very, very hard decision for the district, but for us it carried a lot of water in terms of building trust."

Ultimately, district leaders agreed with the team's rationale for making the recommendation, even though it would entail extensive and intensive work at a breakneck pace to meet the deadline for the pilot. "You have to decide what you have the stomach for before you embark on this kind of process," says CAO Susana Cordova. "To what degree will you allow the system to evolve in unexpected directions versus adhering to a set of expectations that are non-negotiable? My most important advice for another district considering this would be not to go into a partnership with practitioners if you're not willing to partner."

As a result, Denver now has a homegrown DPS *Framework for Effective Teaching* informed by research-based tools but developed with extensive input and feedback from Denver's own teachers and principals through more than 80 revisions. "If this is really something a district wants to do with teachers, then you need to invite them to be a part of the process and empower them," says Design Team member Geisel. "Had the district not agreed with us, I think we'd be in a very different place right now in terms of teachers and even administrators feeling like they have had a real voice in this."

Although the central office LEAP Team took responsibility for the day-to-day work of drafting the *Framework*, teachers continued to be involved in many ways. Members of the Teacher Effectiveness Design Team reviewed and provided feedback on drafts through the team's regular meetings. As the full-

time DCTA Liaison on the LEAP Team, social studies teacher Pam Shamburg played an "elbows-deep" role in the drafting process and also reached out to other teachers for informal input on drafts, ensuring that teacher voice helped drive *Framework* development on a daily basis. Finally, during the fall of 2010, DPS conducted an informal "pre-pilot" of classroom observations by principals and peer observers in two schools, enabling 28 teachers to react to the draft *Framework* "in use" as an instrument for observing lessons and providing feedback to help teachers improve their practice.

By the end of the summer of 2010, the other four Design Teams also had submitted formal recommendations for designing various LEAP components, and their recommendations too showed a keen desire for the system to meet the needs of practitioners. For example, the Assessment and Student Outcomes team proposed multiple "buckets" of student assessments to comprise the student outcomes measure in LEAP, going well beyond standardized state and district tests to include assessments that would be designed by teachers themselves, both individually and in teams, at the building level. The Professional Development team recommended that classroom observations provide teachers with targeted feedback in two especially relevant "focus areas," a schoolwide growth area and an individual area selected by each teacher. The sidebar on page 11-12 describes the fundamental components of the LEAP system as it stands today following significant piloting and refinement beginning in 2011.

## Piloting and Refining LEAP

(January 2011 to Present)

By 2011 several components of LEAP were ready to be more formally piloted, including the draft *Framework*; a classroom observation and feedback process by principals and peer observers based on the *Framework*; the Student Perception Survey; and an initial set of online professional development resources aligned with the *Framework*. Based on applications from principals in Title I schools and a survey to gauge

the interest and support of teachers in those buildings, DPS selected 16 schools to take part in a pilot to be held during the spring semester, allowing more than 500 teachers to provide feedback based on first-hand experience with LEAP.

In addition to gathering feedback informally from those teachers throughout the spring pilot and encouraging them to submit comments via the LEAP website, DPS also engaged McREL, a national nonprofit research group headquartered in Denver, to conduct several formal surveys and focus groups. From February through May, McREL held three focus groups for teachers as well as one for principals and one for peer observers. It also surveyed teachers after their second classroom observations, using a mix of closed- and open-ended items to gather nuanced input to refine LEAP. For example, one teacher wrote, “The *Framework* and the process itself have been positive and have made me reflect on my practice. [However], I am concerned with the 100% of students engaged and 100% of students sitting on the edge of their seats types of comments on the framework. Engagement looks different in various situations.”

Using what it learned from the pilot, DPS immediately began to make significant revisions to all of the LEAP components. For example, the LEAP Team revised the *Framework* to remove language related to “100 percent of students” and added several indicators focused on English Language Acquisition. Given concerns from teachers that observers could not see everything necessary to assess the indicators in the *Framework* during classroom observations, DPS also decided to increase the length of observations and to provide more flexibility in scoring indicators using “N/A.” Moreover, after some teachers expressed concerns about the length and complexity of the Tripod student surveys, especially for younger students and English Language Learners, DPS also embarked on a project to streamline and customize the survey to work in the DPS context.

Elementary school teacher Ian McIntire says he appreciated the opportunity to learn about and pilot LEAP early in its development because he felt it gave him a significant voice in molding it. “It was really valuable to me to be involved early on with that pilot,” says McIntire. Given how useful the spring pilot turned out to be both for educators like McIntire and for

## UNDERSTANDING LEAP

Leading Effective Academic Practice (LEAP) is Denver’s new growth and accountability system for ensuring effective teaching in all of its schools. LEAP provides educators with a multiple-measure view of their teaching practice as well as with access to professional development resources to support continual growth.

### CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS.

Teachers receive observations and feedback multiple times per year from their school’s principal or another school leader. Most teachers also are assigned a peer observer, a fellow teacher working on full-time special assignment for the school district who has experience in the same content area. Both kinds of observers collect evidence and score the lessons they have observed using the DPS Framework for Effective Teaching, a customized observation instrument developed with input from thousands of Denver teachers. Based on extensive piloting and feedback from practitioners, Denver’s observation system now incorporates several different types of observations by school leaders, including full observations, partial observations, and walk-throughs. Following each full observation, the observer meets with the teacher to hold a reflective feedback conversation focused on improving classroom instruction and student learning. The conversation identifies areas of strength to amplify in future lessons and areas for growth in which the teacher can make focused efforts to improve. (DPS encourages school leaders to share feedback following partial and walk-through observations as well, either in person or via e-mail.)

### PROFESSIONALISM.

LEAP’s Professionalism measure, which is defined under its own domain in DPS Framework for Effective Teaching, examines how well teachers contribute to a positive school climate and culture that fosters student learning. The domain includes an additional indicator related to teacher leadership for those who have, or plan to, take on a formal leadership role in their school buildings.

### **STUDENT PERCEPTION SURVEY.**

Each year students take a short survey designed to collect information about their experiences in teachers' classrooms. For this measure, Denver uses a survey informed by the Tripod surveys originally developed by Ronald Ferguson at Harvard University. The surveys administered this school year examined four areas of teaching practice, including High Expectations for Effort, Classroom Management, Engages Students, and Challenges Students.

### **STUDENT OUTCOMES.**

Although these measures are still being fully developed and piloted, LEAP will collect information about students' academic growth using the following types of measures:

- State standardized assessments (when applicable for a given teacher) capturing longitudinal growth in student achievement;
- District and classroom measures capturing incremental growth and allowing for flexibility in the demonstration of student achievement;
- School-wide measures of growth in student achievement to capture collective responsibility for student learning.

### **ALIGNED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES.**

DPS has produced a wide-ranging set of professional development supports aligned with the Framework for Effective Teaching, including

- Classrooms in Action (videos of Denver teachers that illustrate effective- and distinguished-level classroom practices on the Framework for Effective Teaching);
- Planning Tools and Tips (primarily offered in e-book format);
- Self-directed courses;
- Facilitated courses;
- Lectures, webinars, and podcasts;
- Professional learning networks; and
- "Closer Looks" aligned with individual Framework indicators that offer in-person or online support to improve practice in that area.

### **MID-YEAR AND END-OF-YEAR CONVERSATIONS.**

During December and January, and then again in May, school leaders meet with every teacher to reflect on the body of evidence from the LEAP measures described above. The conversation allows teachers to identify areas of strength to build on, to set goals for growth areas, and to discuss how school leaders and peers can help them achieve their goals.

ongoing refinement of the LEAP components, DPS and DCTA decided to conduct a full-year pilot during 2011-12, with every school in the district invited to participate. That would give many more teachers an opportunity to learn about and experience LEAP first-hand prior to full rollout.

DPS designed the pilot year to function as a safe space for teachers to experience LEAP and develop a deeper understanding of their performance against the new growth system. Any teachers who participated in the LEAP 2011-12 pilot and who were scheduled to be evaluated under the old system would automatically receive a "Satisfactory" rating, an important consideration as teachers' compensation was partially tied to the outcomes of evaluation under ProComp. Non-probationary teachers with significant performance concerns would be pulled from LEAP and evaluated under the old system. Participating in the district wide pilot also gave thousands of teachers and principals the opportunity to provide feedback to continue to refine and improve LEAP based on their personal experiences.

Even though participation in the full-year pilot would automatically earn teachers a "satisfactory" rating, DCTA leaders believed it important for participation to be contingent on a majority vote in each school. Citing the value of voluntary participation from a "change management" perspective, Superintendent Boasberg agreed with the union. But the prospect of a vote raised concerns among some members of the LEAP Team, since the value of a yearlong pilot would be greatly curtailed if, for example, fewer than half of Denver's schools elected to take part.

With only two months left in the school year, the LEAP Team developed an aggressive outreach strategy to address teachers' concerns and to communicate the value of participating. The team began by conducting an informal online survey of principals to gauge how teachers in each school were likely to vote, and those responses were used to tag schools as "red," "yellow," "green." Then, as the cornerstone of the outreach strategy, the LEAP Team recruited more than 60 teachers from the original 16 pilot schools to visit teachers in other Denver schools in order to hold honest conversations about their experiences with LEAP, the value of the pilot experience, and the

importance of providing feedback on the new system. Importantly, rather than providing “messaging training” for the outreach teachers, the LEAP Team encouraged them to answer questions and to tell their own stories in their own words. Outreach teachers were paid a stipend for their time, and were asked to report back on the conversations they held at the schools and how they thought teachers were likely to vote. “I had outreach teachers e-mail me to say, ‘Wow, it was fire-engine red when I walked in that room, but I’m pretty sure after we talked they were yellow to green and see some value in the pilot,’” recalls Amy Skinner, who served as Senior Communications Manager on the LEAP Team until last year.

When the votes were tallied, fully 94 percent of schools had voted to participate. According to district leaders and educators, the outreach from pilot teachers contributed greatly to that very high rate of voluntary participation in the full-year pilot. Other factors included vocal support from most of the districts’ principals; clear communication about the value of participation from DCTA representatives; and tangible evidence that DPS already had begun to make major changes to the LEAP design based on feedback it had received from educators during the 16-school pilot.

### Expanding Practitioner Feedback to Improve LEAP

To ensure that LEAP would continue to be significantly shaped by the voices of educators during the yearlong pilot, Skinner and her colleagues drafted a 2011-12 LEAP Communication and Teacher Engagement plan, which outlined multiple vehicles for teachers and principals to provide input. To begin with, the district engaged McREL to continue to conduct formal surveys and focus groups of practitioners at key

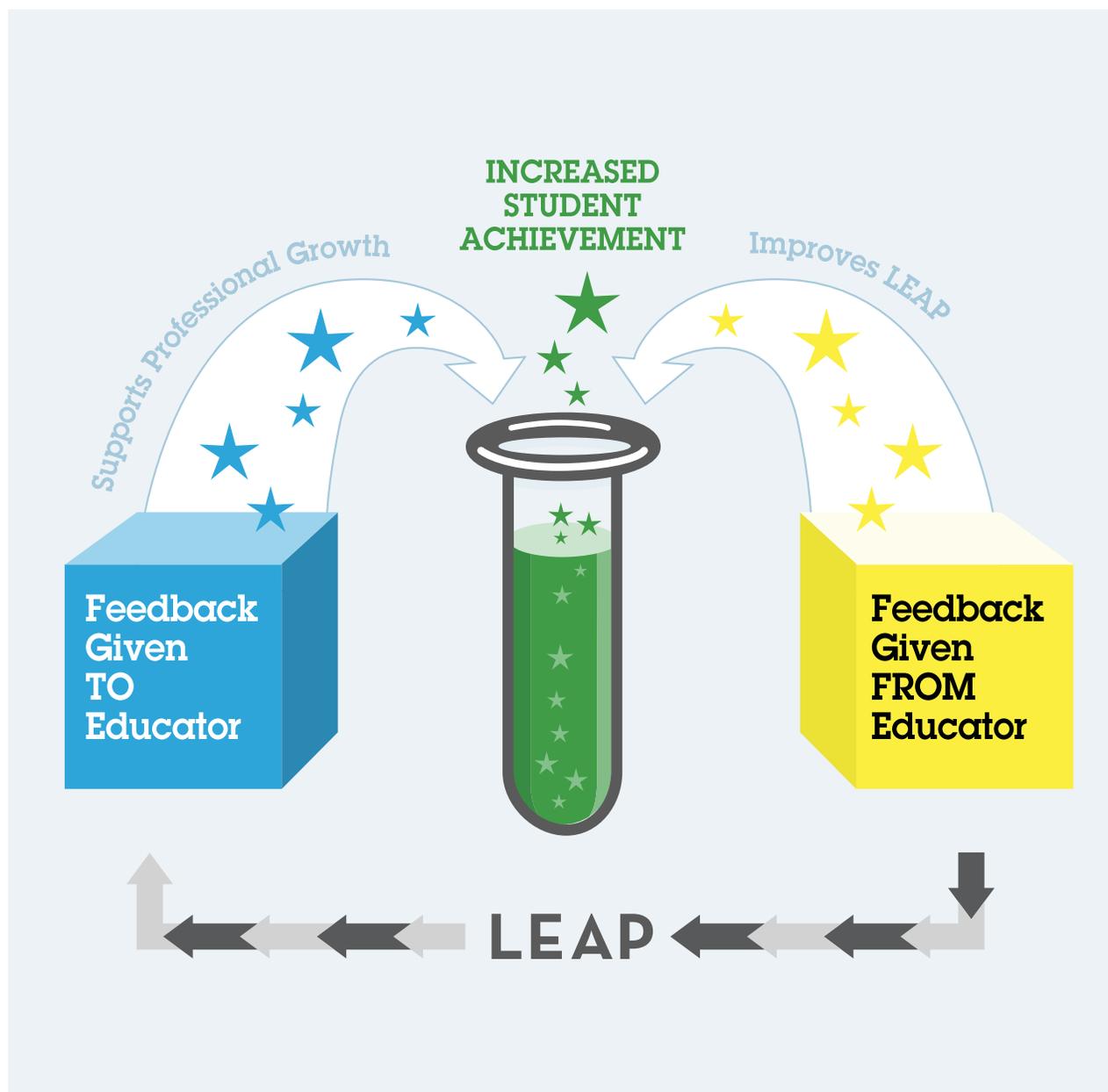
stages in the pilot. For example, following each of three “observation windows,” McREL sent e-mails to teachers inviting them to respond to an online survey, and McREL also surveyed teachers who participated in an informal observation using a heavily revised version of the *Framework*. The number of teachers responding to surveys conducted during each of the three observation windows ranged from 1,286 to 2,039, in some cases more than half of the teachers who were e-mailed a survey form.

DPS also strongly encouraged all teachers and principals to take advantage of other avenues for providing written or verbal feedback during the pilot, including an online feedback form, an e-mail address, and a phone number on the LEAP website. (See Figure 6.) During 2011-12, the LEAP Team logged more than 500 individual pieces of feedback provided over the website, and operational specialists on the team ensured that anyone who submitted a written comment received an acknowledgment along with answers to any questions asked. For Brenda Kazin, principal of Denver’s Place Bridge Academy, “the website was an important way for me to let the LEAP Team know when something wasn’t working, and I used it a lot. For example, I signaled when some aspects of the *Framework* didn’t make sense for observing teachers and students at an Early Childhood Education level.”

Leaders also had begun to realize the high value of face-to-face conversations with teachers about LEAP. Meeting with teachers in their own schools was proving to be more successful than asking them to travel to off-campus events. As the DCTA Liaison to the LEAP Team, Pam Shamburg was ideally positioned to reach out to teachers in their own buildings. However, by this time, Shamburg was playing far too significant a role in LEAP’s day-to-day development to begin spending a significant amount of time traveling to schools. Therefore, district and union leaders agreed to add a second full-time teacher liaison position to the LEAP Team, DCTA Outreach Manager, with an explicit goal of holding face-to-face meetings with teachers in all 128 pilot schools at least twice during the year. Zachary Rupp, a music teacher at Columbian Elementary and the Mathematics and Science Leadership Academy, agreed to take a leave of absence from the classroom to play the new role.

*Meeting with teachers in their own schools was proving to be more successful than asking them to travel to off-campus events.*

FIGURE 6. THEORY OF ACTION AND BUTTON FOR PROVIDING FEEDBACK ON LEAP WEBSITE



Finally, Superintendent Boasberg and CAO Cordova frequently discussed LEAP with teachers during the Superintendent Faculty Meetings they hold in each school every year. Rather than simply making a stock presentation and answering a few questions about LEAP, Boasberg and Cordova made an intentional effort to hold a frank two-way dialogue with teachers about district priorities, including LEAP, during those meetings. “Tom is not happy at a faculty meeting if somebody hasn’t complained about something,” says

Cordova. “When he says, ‘I want to hear what’s not working,’ he’s very authentic about that. That gives teachers a way to express concerns directly to senior leadership, though of course not every teacher is comfortable doing it.” Amy Skinner often attended the meetings to take notes on the conversations. She and other members of the LEAP Team ensured that feedback received via all channels was entered into a *LEAP Feedback Log*, managed via an Excel spreadsheet and now in Microsoft Sharepoint.

Taken together, these strategies resulted in an unprecedented amount of highly detailed feedback from practitioners during the 2011-12 pilot, which in turn informed a second round of major improvements to LEAP. For example, as early as November of 2011, it had become increasingly clear that teachers and principals considered the *Framework* too long, too repetitive, and simply too cumbersome to support accurate classroom observations and focused feedback to improve teaching practice. Therefore, working with the Teacher Effectiveness Design Team and other educators, the LEAP Team significantly revised the *Framework* in time to test a new version in a fourth round of classroom observations even before the pilot ended in spring 2012. The new version condensed the number of indicators from 21 to 12 and integrated English Language Acquisition, technology, and 21st century skills throughout the *Framework* rather than breaking them out as separate indicators.

Additionally, in response to concerns from many practitioners that the *Framework* did not sufficiently capture nuances of teaching practice in areas such as Early Childhood Education and the arts, DPS began developing appendices that offer supplemental guidance to principals and peer observers for accurately observing classroom lessons in specialized areas. The LEAP website now offers such appendices in 18 separate areas, five of them in specific areas of special education.

Practitioner feedback also prompted major changes to the observations of classroom practice component of LEAP. In 2011-12, school leaders were expected to conduct three “full” observation and feedback cycles for each teacher, with each classroom observation lasting 45 minutes. Teachers and school leaders expressed similar concerns with that model. Teachers wanted more frequent observations to support their growth over the course of the school year. Principals believed that shorter, more frequent observation and feedback cycles would better enable them to foster best practices in classrooms. As a result, in 2012-13, school leaders are using a combination of full observations, partial observations, and more informal “walkthroughs.”

Because of the major changes to LEAP based on the 2011-12 pilot, as well as the number of significant design decisions remaining, DPS decided to pilot LEAP again during 2012-13, this time with all schools participating automatically. Components being piloted

this year include the revised *Framework*, including an updated rubric and feedback process for the Professionalism domain; a new model for conducting observations by principals and peer observers; a refined Student Perception Survey; and several aspects of LEAP’s student outcome measures. In particular, the 2012-13 pilot has afforded DPS an opportunity to develop and refine student assessments in content areas for which such assessments were previously unavailable, as well as to collect data to inform how LEAP’s multiple measures will ultimately come together into a comprehensive system. The district also has continued to develop and pilot LEAP’s professional development resources, including a series of “Closer Looks” that provide teachers with in-person training and online tools aligned with specific *Framework* indicators.

Connie Casson, Denver’s former Executive Director of Accountability, Research, and Evaluation, says the 2012-13 pilot is especially critical for building out a fair and accurate set of student outcome measures. “We are starting from a place where there’s a lot we don’t know, and no district or state has got this nailed, so we have got to involve teachers in this process and figure it out together,” explains Casson. In addition to collecting continuing input from the Assessment and Student Outcomes Design Team, Casson has been convening open houses of practitioners to provide ongoing input. Moreover, she says Roybal was a great choice to be the LEAP Team’s DCTA Outreach Manager for 2012-13 given his background as a science teacher in a high-needs high school, especially given that science is not currently a subject tested in state-level assessments. “If we can measure the performance of his students fairly, we are getting most of the way toward our goal, so he is both a great advocate and a great partner for helping get from our theory of student outcomes to how they will actually work.”

However, even though 2012-13 is technically another pilot year, LEAP’s mandatory implementation in all schools this year marks a significant milestone in its establishment as the district’s official new teacher growth and evaluation system. With LEAP taking root and becoming more firmly established, the level of practitioner feedback has naturally tapered off, and DPS has adjusted its strategies for collecting such feedback. Educators are still encouraged to submit questions and comments via the LEAP website,

and the current DCTA Outreach Manager, Keith Roybal, is visiting schools on a regular basis to hold conversations with teachers about LEAP. DPS is now handling the feedback survey process internally and has phased out externally-managed focus groups. Boasberg and Cordova find they still get some questions and comments about LEAP during this year's Superintendent Faculty Meetings, but teachers do not bring up LEAP as a topic during those meetings as much as they did last year.

### **Benefits and Challenges of Diverse Feedback Streams**

Denver's experience offers valuable lessons for leveraging multiple streams of practitioner feedback for other school districts planning to implement new systems like LEAP. First and foremost, leaders and educators alike point to the value of offering practitioners a wide variety of avenues for communicating their feedback, even to the point of erring on the side of potential redundancy. "The idea that we could give feedback in a lot of different ways helped teachers feel like there really was an attempt by the district to make sure their voices were being heard," says elementary school teacher McIntire. "There would have been value to having lots of ways to give feedback even if only five teachers used one of those ways."

Remarkably, however, the multiple feedback channels did not prove to be redundant in practice. Asked whether, in hindsight, DPS might have forgone one of the feedback channels for the sake of cost-efficiency, Stern says she believes all of them yielded highly useful information, though teachers often said similar things about LEAP during the Superintendent Faculty Meetings and the McREL-facilitated focus groups.

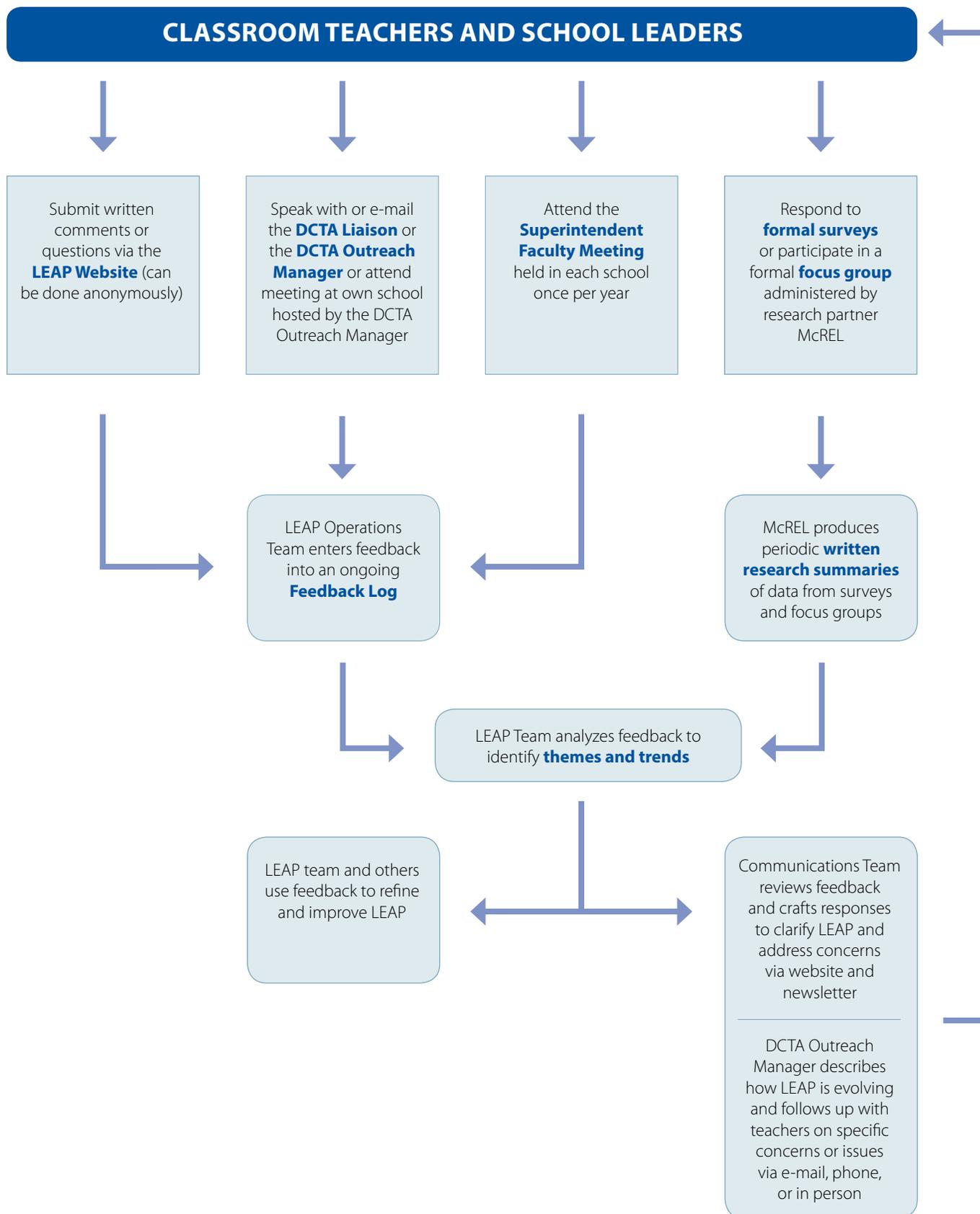
Teachers say it was especially important to offer ways of providing feedback that offered a credible guarantee of anonymity. While DPS enjoys an unusually productive relationship with its local teachers union, the school system is not immune to the kind of distrust between building-level educators and central office leaders that research shows to be endemic in urban school districts. For example, according to Molly Bendorf, a fourth grade teacher at Green Valley Elementary, some teachers worried that if they expressed concerns about LEAP they might receive lower results on future classroom observations.

*Denver's experience offers valuable lessons for leveraging multiple streams of practitioner feedback for other school districts planning to implement new systems like LEAP.*

Moreover, some teachers were skeptical that their feedback would remain anonymous as promised if they responded to McREL's online surveys or submitted unsigned comments to the LEAP website. "I still hear teachers say, no, they can trace your IP address," Bendorf explains.

Geisel, the teacher who served on the Teacher Effectiveness Design Team, points to such concerns as one of the many benefits of having a DCTA Liaison and a DCTA Outreach Manager on the LEAP Team. "To the district's credit, having those positions gave every teacher a way to give feedback in a very safe environment, which was really smart," says Geisel. "I don't know how many people took advantage of it, but I knew that if I had something that I didn't feel like putting in a survey, I could just e-mail Pam or Zach." Another clear lesson cited by DPS and DCTA leaders alike is the importance of holding live, face-to-face conversations with educators. "Real-time conversations back and forth, with questions and explanations and more questions, have been what's really useful in the pilots," says Roman, the DCTA president. He believes that while technology can be useful for collecting feedback, "it's more powerful when you have a face-to-face conversation." A corollary to that lesson is that more teachers engage in such conversations when they take place in their own buildings rather than in another location requiring travel. While they were time and labor intensive, the school visits by DCTA liaisons like Rupp and Roybal and district leaders like Boasberg and Cordova proved well worth the effort.

FIGURE 7. FLOW AND PROCESSING OF PRACTITIONER FEEDBACK DURING 2011-12 PILOT



*Roybal says that he always takes extra time now to drill down to that root cause in his conversations with teachers about their concerns, even if it takes an extra 20 minutes to get there.*

Collecting and attending to practitioner feedback can also pose challenges. First is the sheer volume of comments and questions in a large district like Denver. “You can drown in it,” warns Keith Roybal, the DCTA Outreach Manager for 2012-13. “How do you take all of this information and tease out themes that are applicable to these larger systematic issues, on the one hand, and still bring all of it to the LEAP Leadership Team so that people all feel like their voices are heard?” In Denver, members of the LEAP staff logged and analyzed all feedback using low-cost tools such as Excel spreadsheets and, more recently, SharePoint tracking software. They offer one piece of tactical advice that can save staff time on the back end: When commenters submit written feedback via a website, ask them to select a topical category from a pull-down menu before submitting their comment or question.

Roybal, Rupp, and Shamburg all point to another challenge in their efforts to collect face-to-face feedback from teachers, which they call “drilling down to the root cause of the problem.” They have learned that interpreting negative feedback from practitioners about LEAP merely at face value can often be misleading. “I think of one teacher in particular who expressed strong concerns about the student survey,” recalls Shamburg. “But after we talked it through, it became clear that she didn’t trust the results because of the way the survey had been administered, not the survey itself, and if it had been administered differently she wouldn’t have had any problem with it.” Roybal says that he always takes extra time now to drill down to that root cause in his conversations with teachers

about their concerns, even if it takes an extra 20 minutes to get there.

A third challenge has to do with accurately interpreting feedback being heard through different channels. For example, during the Superintendent Faculty Meetings held in fall 2011, teachers seemed so focused on ratings and scores, Boasberg became concerned that they may not have been hearing the valuable feedback shared; it became about “numbers” instead of growth. Therefore, Boasberg suggested that DPS suspend scoring during the second observation window so the conversations could focus on growth rather than ratings. During and following that window, some teachers said they had missed hearing about how they had scored as this information greatly enhanced their feedback conversations, which prompted a return to scoring for the third window. Stern says that in hindsight she and other members of the LEAP Team could have done a better job providing Boasberg with data from other feedback streams to help contextualize what he was hearing from individual teachers during his school visits.

Finally, leaders also have learned important lessons about how to communicate with educators regarding the tangible impact of their feedback. From the beginning, DPS made an intentional effort to broadly communicate trends in the feedback, both positive and negative, as well as how feedback was leading to improvements in LEAP. In August 2011, the LEAP Team began publishing a monthly LEAP e-newsletter that discusses trends in the feedback and how feedback is being used to refine LEAP, even reprinting verbatim examples of written comments teachers had submitted. The e-newsletter is distributed via e-mail and posted on the LEAP website. Moreover, educators certainly could see for themselves how significantly the *Framework* and the LEAP measures had been revised over time.

Yet, in a McREL survey conducted in spring 2012, while about 80 percent of teachers reported that they had provided feedback on LEAP, only 47 percent agreed with the statement that “teacher voice was heard throughout the pilot process.” That finding generated much conversation among DPS and DCTA leaders and is still the subject of considerable analysis and debate. On the one hand, the figure might be much higher than how teachers in other school

districts designing systems similar to LEAP might respond; without comparative data there is no way to know for sure. On the other hand, it is undeniably lower than what leaders had hoped to see in response to that question. Asked to explain the figure, leaders and educators point to two possible reasons.

First, despite the vigorous efforts of the LEAP Team to communicate how feedback was shaping LEAP's development, central offices in large districts face real obstacles in communicating such information to teachers. For example, in interviews conducted for this case study, many teachers were unaware that DPS had revised and significantly streamlined its Student Perception Survey in direct response to educators' feedback. Roybal points to data from a McREL survey question asking where teachers get information about LEAP, which showed that far fewer teachers used the website (50 percent) compared with talking to peer observers (60 percent) and school leaders (65 percent) or relying on in-school professional development (75 percent). Shamburg believes that the only way to be absolutely sure that teachers understand how changes have been informed by educators' feedback is to make such connections completely explicit for them, change by change, though she acknowledges that is difficult to accomplish outside of face-to-face conversations.

Second, some teachers who disagreed that "teacher voice was heard throughout the pilot process" might personally have provided feedback that could not lead to changes in LEAP for any number of legitimate legal, technical, financial, or other reasons. For example, Colorado's Senate Bill 10-191, a state law passed in May 2010, mandates that local teacher evaluation systems include certain non-negotiable features such as basing 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation on measures of students' academic growth and learning. Moreover, some feedback conflicted with the guiding principles that emerged from the stakeholder focus groups or would have undermined the technical integrity of a LEAP component for measuring teaching effectiveness. Finally, on a purely practical basis, DPS cannot respond to every individual request to change LEAP because "teacher voice" is far from monolithic.

"We did a good job explicitly communicating back to teachers, 'You told us this, so we did this,' and that was hugely important," says Kalpana Rao, who served as senior manager for Teacher Performance Assessment during 2010 to 2012 before becoming an assistant principal at a Denver turnaround school. "But now that I'm a practitioner, I realize we didn't communicate as much about feedback that we couldn't respond to with changes for some good reason. Being more intentional about that might not

## FIGURE 8. HANDLING FEEDBACK FROM MULTIPLE SOURCES: MAJOR LESSONS LEARNED

1. Provide multiple avenues for educators to offer feedback, including ones that offer an unquestionable guarantee of anonymity. Understand that no single communications mechanism will reach all educators.
2. Hold face-to-face conversations with educators in addition to collecting written feedback, visiting educators in their own schools if possible rather than asking them to travel to another location.
3. Invest in a process to track and analyze feedback on an ongoing basis.
4. If collecting written feedback through a website, ask commenters to select a topical category from a pull-down menu when they submit a question or comment, as that can save staff time on the back end.
5. Feedback can sometimes be misleading if interpreted at face value, so take extra time to dig deeper and get to the "root cause" of educators' concerns.
6. Communicate regularly with educators about trends and themes in the feedback the district is receiving from them and how the district is responding by making improvements.
7. Clearly communicate when feedback cannot lead to changes, explaining any legal, technical, or practical barriers the district faces in responding to educators' concerns or requests.

necessarily make people feel better, but it would help them know they were heard.”

DPS already has begun to act on that important “lesson learned.” For example, this year, LEAP staff recognized that some of the feedback from practitioners suggested changes to LEAP based on misunderstandings about the system. In response, the Communications Team incorporated content into the LEAP e-newsletter that addresses such misunderstanding and helps to clarify important aspects of LEAP, including a new section called “Keith’s Report Card” and another called “Myth Busters.”

## Leveraging Teacher Leadership

Denver’s experience also illustrates the value of giving practitioners opportunities to play authentic leadership roles in the process of designing and piloting a new system for teacher development and evaluation. “Yes, educators had lots of ways to weigh in on LEAP through everything from surveys to focus groups,” explains Stern, “but it also was important to us to intentionally look for ways that teachers could become owners and advocates of the LEAP work.” Denver accomplished that goal in two ways. First, the district leveraged its existing commitment to fostering teacher leadership by enabling teachers who already were playing formal leadership roles to take ownership of critical aspects of the LEAP pilots. Second, DPS created several entirely new kinds of positions through which teachers could play formal leadership roles in LEAP’s ongoing design and development.

In 2010 Denver launched a new initiative called the Teacher Leadership Academy (TLA) with the ambitious goal of training and empowering accomplished teachers to take on critical aspects of instructional leadership in every school. By the time the LEAP work was launched, the TLA already had trained hundreds of teachers to take on such leadership roles. District leaders recognized that TLA-trained teachers would be an important resource for ensuring that LEAP helped teachers develop their practice rather than simply measuring their performance, especially as experts in the vision for effective teaching at the heart of the

*Denver’s experience also illustrates the value of giving practitioners opportunities to play authentic leadership roles in the process of designing and piloting a new system for teacher development and valuation*

new *Framework*. Moreover, because TLA-trained teachers would be central to the district’s Common Core State Standards strategy, they also could provide a critical linchpin for ensuring that teachers understood how the Common Core and LEAP should function as complementary supports for great teaching rather than as competing demands on teachers’ valuable time.

Therefore, early in 2011, the district organized a series of “Get to Know the *Framework*” sessions for TLA teachers to help them learn about the draft *Framework* and to solicit their feedback for improving it. Debbie Hearty, Denver’s Executive Director of CAO School Supports, recalls carefully planning and facilitating those sessions to align with the vision for teacher leadership in the TLA initiative. “The key message in the TLA was that this wasn’t about implementing a district initiative or being a mouthpiece for the district,” she says. “So when it came to the sessions on the *Framework*, we told them, ‘You are our leaders, so we want you to be at the forefront of this and also to give us your feedback on it.’ Then later we made sure to go back and show them how their feedback was informing the process.”

Those sessions laid the groundwork for TLA teachers to play an especially important leadership role when the time came to conduct LEAP training for teachers in the 128 Denver schools that voted to participate in the full-year pilot. “When 94 percent of schools decided to participate, all of the sudden we reached a point where the LEAP Team couldn’t be responsible for every aspect of rolling out the pilot,” recalls

Cordova. “We were using the RACI [Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed] model, which helped us recognize that opportunity, too. It was really, really, really important for us to think across the phases of large-scale implementation and how to build ownership across the different parts of the system that needed to own it.” As a consequence, district leaders decided to ask the TLA-trained teacher leaders and their principals to conduct the LEAP training for their own buildings.

Over the summer, the LEAP Team held a three-day session for principals and teacher leaders from participating schools, both to help them learn about the *Framework* and LEAP and to prepare them to deliver the training for rollout. Principals and teacher leaders then spent two days planning the LEAP training for their buildings and deciding how best to fit that training into the rest of their kick-off work for the new school year, and they submitted their plans to the district’s Instructional Superintendents for input and final approval. The LEAP Team also made sure to be available to answer any questions and provide advice, though not every school needed additional help.

To ensure a baseline level of consistency in the training teachers received across the 128 pilot schools, the LEAP Team developed a set of adaptable turnkey materials for principals and teacher leaders to use, including Word documents, PowerPoint decks, and video segments. The video segments ensured that teachers would receive some information expressed in exactly the same ways, while the PowerPoint slides and Word documents allowed principals and teacher leaders to adapt the training to suit the specific needs of their own colleagues. “That worked out to be a nice way to ensure teachers were getting consistent and reliable information,” says Hearty, “while also being able to hear from people they knew and already trusted as opposed to someone from ‘downtown’ whom they had never met. I really think we were able to deliver the best of both worlds.”

Principals and teacher leaders say they appreciated the opportunity to adapt the training for their own school contexts rather than simply delivering it in a mechanical way. At Skinner Middle School, which had participated in the earlier 16-school pilot, principal Nicole Veltze and her team decided the training needed to go a step deeper in helping teachers reach

a more sophisticated understanding of the *Framework* at that point in their experience with LEAP. The training protocols included an opportunity for teachers to observe and score a video-recorded lesson using the *Framework*, but Veltze and her team built in greater opportunities for the kind of formal inter-rater reliability “calibration” training that DPS was providing for principals and peer observers. While it was a lot of work, says Veltze, “My teacher leaders enjoyed taking ownership of driving LEAP and not just having the administrators presenting it.”

DPS leaders say the strategy was highly successful overall and demonstrated a powerful approach for rolling out similar large-scale initiatives in the future. In particular, it gave the TLA-trained teachers a chance to establish themselves as knowledgeable about the *Framework* in order to be credible sources of expertise on LEAP’s vision of teaching effectiveness for their peers moving forward. “We ended up inviting principals and teachers to speak to the school board about that experience,” recalls Dorland. “They said they had never felt so much a part of something that we were rolling out across the district. They told the board, ‘We felt very empowered.’”

*To ensure a baseline level of consistency in the training teachers received across the 128 pilot schools, the LEAP Team developed a set of adaptable turnkey materials for principals and teacher leaders to use*

In addition to leveraging its existing Teacher Leadership Academy strategy, DPS also created several new kinds of leadership roles for teachers to play in LEAP’s ongoing design and development, including the teacher co-chair position on the five LEAP Design Teams and the full-time DCTA Liaison and DCTA Outreach Manager positions. Even though the LEAP

# COST CONSIDERATIONS

Some of the strategies Denver used to engage practitioners might appear cost-prohibitive for other school systems, especially smaller districts with fewer dedicated resources. However, many of the strategies were not as expensive as they might seem, and others can be adapted to be more affordable in different local contexts. In fact, there are many ways to involve practitioners without breaking a district's budget.

## INITIAL FOCUS GROUPS.

For Denver, engaging an experienced outside organization to facilitate and analyze input from focus groups was a worthwhile investment. However, districts that lack resources to hire an external facilitator could still use the same kind of iterative process and guiding questions that resulted in a set of useful guiding principles to inform LEAP's design. (See Figure 3 for the guiding questions from Denver's April 2010 focus groups.)

## DESIGN TEAMS.

This strategy offers a high payoff in terms of practitioner engagement without requiring significant expenditures. In fact, the main cost is not money but time—the time that practitioners willingly volunteer to serve on such teams plus a smaller investment of central office staff time to facilitate the teams improve practice in that area.

Team provided substantial staff support for the Design Teams, the co-chairs had a great deal of responsibility for ensuring their teams' success.

In the two DCTA liaison positions, Denver has created a truly new and exciting kind of leadership role for educators. The positions are truly hybrid in nature, since the teachers in them must formally represent both the teachers union and the school district in their day-to-day work. "Every day I need to be sure I'm bringing teachers' voices to the table and representing union and teacher interests," explains Roybal, "But I'm also a DPS employee working out of the central office administration building, and I need to be able to credibly represent that perspective to teachers so that myths about LEAP aren't perpetuated." Shamburg's colleagues on the LEAP Team say that her contributions cannot be underestimated and go far beyond what the title "liaison" might suggest. Over the past several years Shamburg has worked elbow-to-elbow with central office leaders on nearly every aspect of LEAP's development, from helping to draft and revise *Framework for Effective Teaching* to managing the spring 2011 pilot in 16 schools.

Rupp recalls some initial tension in defining the role of DCTA Outreach Manager after he began the job. "When Henry approached me about it, I saw a need for a teacher to be able to talk with other teachers in a really authentic way but not to be seen as 'selling' something, and I will admit that was a hard thing for some people to understand," he recalls. "Sometimes there was an assumption that I could just help the teachers realize that this is a better thing. And I would say, 'Wait, no, that's not what I do. But I can help them understand how it works and why it's being done so they can make that decision for themselves. And I can take their concerns back to the team to make sure they're being supported in every way possible.' Evaluation is naturally going to be a contentious issue in any industry, so if you walk in saying, 'This is the best thing ever,' it comes across as hollow salesmanship."

Roman knew that to fill those positions, he would need to recruit teachers with a powerful combination of skills and experiences that ensured credibility with DCTA members as well as with district leaders. For example, Rupp had taken part in national and state-level conversations about reforming teacher evaluation.

He also had taught in a school that conducted peer observations, a LEAP component about which many teachers had questions and concerns, and he had called on that experience as a member of LEAP's Peer Observation Design Team. Just as important, Rupp also had served on the DCTA bargaining team that hammered out an agreement with the district for formally piloting LEAP. "That gave me a lot of credibility in terms of establishing a safe environment for teachers to give me authentic feedback on their experiences," says Rupp, who also always made sure to wear a shirt or pin sporting the DCTA logo whenever he visited a school.

As Outreach Managers, Rupp and Roybal have had to find time to visit schools while also spending enough time in the central office to become extremely familiar with LEAP as the system is being continuously refined. "One of the things we found out early on is that an answer of, 'We don't know,' doesn't go over very well when teacher have questions about LEAP," says Shamburg. "You can tell them, 'We haven't decided yet, and here are the things we're talking about based on what we've heard from the field.' But not just that, 'We don't know.' So Zach and Keith have had to make sure to attend enough internal meetings to understand the strategic decisions being made."

Shamburg believes the two positions have offered a critical leverage point for making DCTA's role in LEAP's development truly collaborative rather than merely reactive. "Henry was the genius behind this," she recalls. "He said the union should be working on this day in and day out, as opposed to the district building something and then coming to the union for a 'yes' or 'no' reaction." They also functioned as a powerful vehicle for continuously strengthening the collaborative relationship between the union and the district. "That's the value of actually being on staff so you can work together," Shamburg explains. "You get to know each other as people and to understand each other as people, which builds trust. You move beyond 'we're the district' and 'we're the union' and start to solve problems together."

Even so, maintaining that good working relationship requires ongoing and very deliberate work. "Sometimes the district would forget that it's supposed to be a partnership, and they had to be reminded," recalls Shamburg. She says it's important for both

### **PRACTITIONER FEEDBACK.**

The cost of an outside research contractor to conduct surveys and focus groups can be considerable, but a district could use free online software such as Survey Monkey, or conduct its own focus groups, to collect similar targeted feedback during piloting. In fact, DPS has adopted both of those lower-cost alternatives during the current school year. When it came to logging and analyzing feedback from multiple sources, DPS used low-cost tools such as Excel spreadsheets and, more recently, SharePoint software. LEAP Operations Team members advise districts to include a pull-down menu of topical categories when soliciting Web-based comments or questions from practitioners, as that can greatly reduce staff time on the back end.

### **TEACHER LEADERSHIP.**

Like Denver, districts already investing in a teacher-leadership strategy can ask teachers who already hold such positions to play important roles in piloting and implementing a system such as LEAP. Moreover, the cost of funding a position such as DCTA Liaison equates only to salary and benefits for one replacement teacher for each year the Liaison serves on special assignment; smaller districts might consider making the position a part-time one.

### **TRAINING VIDEOS.**

While Denver initially produced LEAP training and professional development videos with assistance from an external contractor, the district has since begun to develop videos entirely in-house using Adobe Captivate—a software package costing only several hundred dollars.

organizations to assume good intentions and to focus on shared values when discussing or debating detailed design decisions. “Sometimes you need to very intentionally take that step and say, ‘Here is the real value or the real concern behind what we’re saying.’ As we’ve done this work we’ve often discovered that we’re closer together than we had originally assumed.”

Roybal for one would like to see more leadership positions that enable teachers to serve other teachers through such temporary assignments in the central office, perhaps on future large-scale initiatives like LEAP. “Historically, there always seems to have existed this disconnect leading to an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality between people who work in school buildings and people who work downtown,” Royball says. “But this job has really taught me that it doesn’t have to be that way. I’ve also learned a lot about how the central office works that I would never have been able to in a school building, and that knowledge gives me an even stronger voice as a teacher.”

## Conclusion

Denver’s experience offers valuable lessons for other school systems interested in engaging educators more deeply in the design and rollout of major initiatives such as LEAP.

### **Involve the union from the outset and make its role collaborative rather than merely reactive.**

DPS took deliberate steps to ensure that DCTA’s role in LEAP’s development would be collaborative (“we design it together”) rather than merely reactive (“you respond to our proposals”). First, the district ensured strong DCTA participation on the Steering Committee established to provide high-level guidance on LEAP’s development and to facilitate strategic alignment with other district policies. Second, it included Pam Shamburg, a highly respected middle school teacher, as a key member of its cross-functional LEAP Leadership Team. In the formal role of DCTA Liaison, Shamburg works closely with central office leaders to solve problems of LEAP design and development on a day-to-day basis. Finally, the district included a second teacher on its broader LEAP staff to play the dedicated role of DCTA Outreach Manager, establishing an important bridge between building-level

educators and central office leaders responsible for designing and refining LEAP.

### **Engage educators early and often through a wide variety of avenues.**

DPS ensured that practitioners had many different kinds of opportunities to participate in LEAP’s design and ongoing development. More than 150 teachers participated in an early series of stakeholder focus groups that produced “guiding principles” for LEAP’s design. Several dozen educators served on Design Teams that fleshed out key proposals for designing LEAP. Hundreds of teachers participated in an initial, 16-school pilot during the spring of 2011. Sixty teachers from those pilot schools conducted outreach to colleagues in other schools to share their experiences and answer questions prior to a school-by-school vote determining participation in a second yearlong pilot. Hundreds of teachers who had received training through the district’s Teacher Leadership Academy partnered with their principals to conduct training on LEAP in the 128 schools volunteering to pilot LEAP in 2011-12. Finally, thousands of teachers and principals provided focused input and feedback on LEAP during that 2011-12 pilot.

### **Solicit feedback from practitioners through multiple channels during piloting.**

During the yearlong pilot in 2011-12, DPS used multiple channels to ensure it captured feedback on critical aspects of LEAP from as many practitioners as possible. Teachers could submit written comments via the LEAP website, e-mail address or phone line; respond to formal surveys or participate in formal focus groups; participate in webinars to hear updates or share input; attend the school faculty meeting during which Denver’s superintendent and CAO visited to talk about LEAP; meet with the DCTA Outreach Manager when he visited the building; or reach out to the DCTA Liaison or DCTA Outreach Manager directly. Engagement continues this year as the LEAP Team collects feedback, shares new information, responds to questions, and provides clarification as needed.

These multiple channels allowed DPS to collect feedback that was both open-ended (e.g., through comments submitted to the website) and feedback focused on particular aspects of LEAP’s design and

*Any school system that plans to seek educator input should anticipate hearing from practitioners that they want the system to be designed to support teachers' growth and development over time, not merely to measure their current performance.*

functioning (e.g., through formal surveys). Just as importantly, the multiple channels gave teachers and principals options for submitting feedback according to their own preferences and comfort levels. Denver's teachers say they especially appreciated that DPS offered several channels to provide feedback anonymously, including online surveys, a feedback form on the LEAP website, and speaking with or e-mailing the DCTA Liaison or Outreach Manager.

#### **Focus on professional growth and development from the outset.**

Any school system that plans to seek educator input should anticipate hearing from practitioners that they want the system to be designed to support teachers' growth and development over time, not merely to measure their current performance. As a result, districts should plan to focus on that goal immediately and continuously throughout the design and development process, rather than simply promising educators that such concerns will be addressed at some later point.

Denver focused on teacher growth and development at every single stage of the process described in this case study, from the initial focus groups held in April 2010 all the way through LEAP piloting and refinement. Dedicating one of the five LEAP design teams to the topic of professional development sent a strong early signal to educators that LEAP would take that goal

very seriously, and it provided a way to obtain critical practitioner advice about how to make it happen. Given time constraints, DPS leaders had to work very hard to create aligned professional development resources in time for the spring 2011 pilot, but failing to do so was never even considered to be an option. As a result, LEAP offers a wide variety of resources and opportunities to help teachers analyze and improve their practice guided by the vision for effective teaching at the heart of LEAP—a set of supports developed with significant input from educators to ensure that they work for educators. (See the sidebar on page 11-12 for examples.)

#### **Communicate clearly with practitioners about what can and cannot be changed, and why.**

DPS has taken pains to fulfill its promise to take practitioners' input seriously, even when the advice proved to be unexpected and logistically challenging, such as the recommendation by the Teacher Effectiveness Design Team that Denver develop its own Framework for Effective Teaching rather than adopting or adapting a nationally available one. Along the way, the district has made efforts to communicate with educators about how LEAP was being shaped and refined in response to educator feedback. However, DPS also has found that in many cases it could not change LEAP in response to practitioner feedback for very compelling legal, technical, or practical reasons. The district is evolving how it communicates with educators about updates and feedback—which aspects of LEAP can and cannot be changed and what to anticipate on the horizon—and balancing that with the information practitioners need to know now to take action.

#### **Leverage teacher leadership in design and rollout.**

DPS intentionally looked for ways that teachers could go beyond providing advice on LEAP and take on leadership roles that allowed them to become "owners and advocates" of the new system. When it came time to roll out LEAP in 128 schools for the yearlong 2011-12 pilot, DPS trained principals and teacher leaders in each school to conduct faculty training rather than relying on central office staff to provide it. As a result, building-level educators are now seen as the experts on LEAP and the vision for effective instruction embodied by the new Framework. In

addition, DPS worked with the teachers union to create specialized new leadership roles such as DCTA Liaison and DCTA Outreach Manager that have proven to be critical lynchpins for ensuring strong teacher voice in LEAP's ongoing development.

Above all, Denver's experience with LEAP shows that it is possible for school systems to design and implement major initiatives with significant involvement from teachers and school leaders. If Denver is any indication, educators are hungry for opportunities to be meaningfully involved in large-scale reform initiatives, and many will gladly spend significant amounts of time and energy on such efforts if they believe their contributions will be taken seriously.



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[EducationInfo@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:EducationInfo@aspeninstitute.org)

One Dupont Circle • Suite 700 • Washington, D.C. • 20036