

“Effective Learning Communities” Collaborative Project

You are invited to participate in a research-supported technical assistance project for school improvement. This unique project is focused on reviewing, analyzing, and interpreting school performance and process data (both quantitative and qualitative) and helping to bring research capacity to your local-site improvement efforts. Participation with this project will simultaneously help your school learn with and from other sites engaged in similar work. Led by the Center for Practice Engaged Education Research (C-PEER) at the CU Denver School of Education & Human Development, this project brings research expertise and technical assistance to support school improvement efforts. It will help fill gaps in local staff time, bridge challenges accessing performance and process data, and provide access to additional resources and learning from other school sites.

Focus of the *Effective Learning Communities* Collaborative Project

We’ve organized a project that will help you look at your school and your classrooms within your school as a complete system. The goal is to better understand how various elements of these complex systems—e.g., time, resources, culture and climate, curriculum, people in the system—interact in ways that support and/or hinder student and school success. We take a “whole child” and “whole system” view which, unlike many research approaches, allows us to identify potential levers for change. We will work with your school team to help you make the best use of the project findings near the end of the school year, in time to be helpful for your strategic planning and UIP process.

What’s different about the C-PEER approach?

We have no doubt that you have been asked to participate in many studies—dissertations, grant projects, district improvement projects, state initiatives—but the C-PEER approach is different in a number of very important ways:

- **We are committed to generating usable knowledge in a short-term window that can be helpful to schools on an annual innovation and improvement cycle.** As part of this project, you will receive a customized report focused on your school in February 2016, to help in planning for the next year.
- **We support meaningful change by looking at various aspects of the school system at the same time.** Deep organizational learning for improvement—such as closing achievement gaps, supporting a stronger school culture, and supporting links between a school and its community—require deep understanding of many data sources. This kind of change also requires clarity regarding how a particular school context compares to other school sites and to the research. This can be difficult for local school staff to accomplish on their own because of lack of time, challenges with available data, limited access to research or other school sites, and accountability pressures.
- **We are not evaluators; we are a third party “reflective friend.”** In today’s policy and practice environment, schools are in a “Catch-22”: the same systems pressuring school personnel to examine practice deeply and innovate to improve, are *also* the systems that ultimately judge success and failure. This makes change a threatening prospect for even the most well-intentioned, secure staff. C-PEER works with local personnel on “in-house” improvement efforts, supporting analysis and research and helping schools learn across varied sites, but keeps student, personnel, and school identities confidential. How much you reveal is your choice.¹
- **Our technical expertise enables better learning from stronger data.** Developing even a simple survey can be time-consuming and technically challenging. Our measurement expertise will help ensure that data are useful for the topic(s) at hand. By providing aligned data options across multiple school sites focused on common topics, we make it possible to learn from other schools more effectively—including better understanding when and how adapting another site’s innovation may be helpful to your local work.
- **You will receive a customized report, with straight-forward explanation and opportunity to discuss findings and your ideas with C-PEER researchers.** This report will provide information about your school as well as comparisons to similar and different schools in the learning community. We leave decisions about what to do about your findings

¹ Findings from various classrooms, schools, and districts may be shared in reports, but always in such a way as to protect the identity of all participants (even school and district identities). This will be the case for every type of report or presentation, both formal and informal.

to you, as you are in a better position to think about how to adjust daily practice. We focus on providing a clear and accessible report and discussion of the findings so that your team can make good research-based choices.

- **We will support your follow up needs.** If your report identifies some areas that you choose to focus on changing, C-PEER can support you with reviews of research and in planning research for the coming year so that you can ensure subsequent improvements that you implement are research-driven and data-validated.

What will the 2015 *Effective Learning Communities Collaborative Project* help us address?

This year we focus on understanding “effective learning community” systems. Effective school learning communities (in the classroom, among the staff, and in relationship to school leadership and to district supports) work together to support or hinder student learning growth and social-emotional growth. We will collect data to help schools understand how school structures and resources (e.g., time, curriculum/instructional programs, access, procedures), climate (e.g., trust, leadership systems), and personal aspects (e.g., teachers’ efficacy, student persistence and motivation) intersect. In the initial phase of the project, a special focus will be on identifying effective supports for professional learning, creative and critical thinking (essential for new standards as well as for student intrinsic motivation), coaching for equity, and supporting English language learners. Some Denver Public Schools may also opt-in to a deeper study of teachers’ use of time, investigating ways to support teachers in being able to focus on the most important aspects of their jobs.

Benefits of participation

Schools that participate will receive their data trend analysis, created specifically in formats to help with the required completion of the state Unified Improvement Plan and to aid in annual strategic planning. At the conclusion of the project (February 2016), schools will receive a custom report of the project findings, which we will review with the leadership team to help ensure the information is useful to continued improvement planning.

What will the project require of us if we participate?

Schools that join the project will be asked to:

- Provide some documents that should be easy to access, such as school calendars, committees, a list of core curriculum—we’ll connect you with a researcher who will work closely with you to make this as easy as possible.
- Respond to some short anonymous surveys: one 20-minute survey for teachers (which will be shorter if your school did either TELL or CollaboRATE surveys); one 15-minute survey for leaders, and one 10-minute survey for students.
- We may ask some personnel in some schools to permit us to visit classrooms; this will be very limited, will not change classroom activities, and will be scheduled with each teacher’s consent and at his/her convenience.

Is this Project going to just reinforce the status quo? What if our school is a very different model, or we value evidence beyond state tests and district accountability systems?

We are looking at a wide range of measures and trend data, NOT only standardized tests and standard policy requirements. Our view is “whole-school” and “whole-child”. Different school models are welcomed and needed, so that we can understand the wide array of options and contexts.

How can we learn more, and join the study?

Learn more, including a timeline, specifics about data we will collect and access, and how to join at:

<http://c-peer.org/resources-for/>

Or by contacting C-PEER at c-peer@ucdenver.edu. You can also contact the project leader, Dr. Kent Seidel, at Kent.Seidel@ucdenver.edu or by phone at 303-315-0117.