

LOOKING FOR THE REAL WIN
LEARNING SERVICES DIRECTOR
ART DROTAR COACHES COLORADO'S DISTRICT 50
TOWARD MATHEMATICS EXCELLENCE

When Art Drotar was hired to join the Learning Services team in Colorado's District 50 six years ago, it faced enormous challenges. Dramatic changes in student demographics, a requirement to create 21st century learners, and instructional pressure from new educational standards were on a collision course. Five schools in the district were deemed turnaround schools; the whole district tottered on the brink of becoming subject to state turnaround mandates. Math instruction was a particular problem; traditional approaches were just not working. Today, PMI is becoming a key tool in resolving those tensions.

Drotar's background is in teaching math and coaching athletics. Both those experiences shape his approach to leadership. "As a former math teacher, I had



experienced how the lack of alignment between elementary, middle, and high school instruction undercut our efforts to teach and our kids' ability to learn." He added, "Not a single textbook publisher offers fully aligned K-12 math instruction."

With his background as an award-winning coach, Drotar approaches education as an integrated process that leads to proficiency. At the heart of this process is the relationship between teacher and student. With that in mind, Drotar and his colleagues set about identifying criteria for selecting a program of mathematics instruction that would provide a framework within which teachers could lead students to become effective 21st century learners.

Once finalized, those criteria became the basis of District 50's selection of PMI. Taken together, the criteria required full alignment to Colorado's Academic Standards (which are closely toggled to Common Core standards) and the ability to be easily adapted to any future adjustments to those standards. They also called for a digitalized format, both to support necessary adaptability and to allow for instructional flexibility.

The criteria sought a system that is fully aligned from K-12, has the capacity to

offer instructional content both vertically (by grade) and horizontally (by domain) to accommodate a wide variety of learners, and offers common formative and summative assessment practices across all instructional levels (elementary, middle and high).

From a teaching perspective, District 50's criteria demanded a system that is highly engaging for students and staff, provides common resources and practices for all teachers while allowing for teacher customization, and is adaptable to the District's instructional practice model, which balances direct instruction, cooperative learning, and work on individual learning goals.

Finally, District 50's criteria called for a system that provides a mechanism to hold students, teachers, and schools accountable in the context of a fiscally responsible investment both at the front end, for adoption, and over time, in terms of sustainability.

For two years, teams of classroom teachers, school administrators, and Learning Services team members applied those criteria to screen and narrow the field of curricular options as they became available. After careful consideration, Drotar and his team selected and piloted PMI at all three District 50 middle schools and in several elementary and some high school classrooms.

The next academic year, PMI was adopted by the Board of Education and implemented district-wide. Drotar, a veteran of many education reform efforts, describes the importance of gaining support from teachers, administrators, elected officials, and the teachers' association. Still, in his view, "The biggest challenge is not board adoption; it is the transformation of classroom instruction. We need to create 21st century learners, so we need to cultivate 21st century teaching."

With his deep appreciation for the role of the teacher, Drotar is quick to add, "PMI is not the teacher; it is the framework." As a result, much of his engagement with PMI is around related professional development. While initial District 50 training was provided by the New Jersey Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL), today training is offered by teachers who participated in the initial CTL training. "The Train-the-Trainer model works for us because our teachers trust their colleagues and like to learn from someone who has shared the trenches with them." District 50 has seen the number of local teacher-trainers grow from 7 to thirty-seven in a single year.

"PMI has made me our Chief Financial Officer's hero," Drotar noted. He estimates that implementing PMI across all grades has cost the district approximately 12% of what a traditional textbook-based program adoption would have cost. District 50 has invested approximately \$400,000 in its PMI implementation. Costs were reduced in part by grant support made available to the district by CTL and the Morgridge Foundation.

As a veteran of many educational reform experiences, Drotar is convinced that implementing across all grade levels in a single year makes sense. “If you do a standard reform adoption, moving the reform into a grade each year, by the time you get to full implementation leaders have changed before district-wide results are available.” This, he explains, can undermine the sustainability of positive efforts to transform education. “While we have already made good strides this year, it will likely take another two years to see PMI’s full impact. It takes time for teachers to development confidence with new methods and content.”

Rosanna Satterfield, CTL’s Program Manager for District 50’s implementation has only the highest praise for Drotar, “He is the kind of leader who makes a real difference for both the teachers he supports and the students for whom he is responsible. If we could clone Art, we would.”