

PEDAL Forums

Westminster Public Schools

Westminster, CO



Westminster Public Schools (WPS) serves a diverse group of approximately 9,000 students in 18 schools, including three Early Learning Centers, five elementary schools, two middle schools, four innovation PK-8 schools, four magnet PK-8 schools, one comprehensive high school, and one alternative high school. The district also houses the Westminster Virtual Academy (K-12) and a day treatment program. Students are characterized by significant socioeconomic challenges, a high rate of mobility, homelessness, and English language barriers. The majority of students are Hispanic (76%), most qualify for free or reduced lunch (78%), 39% are English learners, and 12% identified with special needs.

In the 2009-10 school year, WPS elected to move from a traditional system of schooling toward an innovative approach referred to as *competency-based education*. The entire school district from preschool through grade 12, including the innovation and magnet schools, is organized around engaging learners with skills necessary for today's workforce, instructing students at their developmental instructional levels, and advancing *only* when they have demonstrated competency--or mastery--of each concept and skill.

The PEDAL—Programming for Every Driven and Accelerated Learner—Leadership Team implemented weekly virtual *PEDAL Forums* (one for parents and another separate one for students) during the final 10 weeks of spring 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Forum participants represented schools across the district and students from primary to the high school level.

The main purpose of these forums was to engage families in helping children with high abilities to remain engaged, motivated, and successful in their learning, regardless of the learning environment. Topics include but are not limited to: social-emotional learning, using the district's Empower platform to enhance student learning of specific interests and aptitudes, post-secondary options, and sharing other relevant topics related to gifted education (e.g., PEDAL identification, perfectionism, summer and other community offerings). Discussion topics were largely determined by what the parents and students wanted to discuss, so it was truly owned by them, though facilitated by staff.

Through these forums, valuable relationships formed between families, students, and WPS staff.

Westminster's PEDAL Coordinator shared: "We believe parents can support their children better because of this work. We also feel students have become more knowledgeable and stronger advocates for their needs."

The PEDAL Coordinator continued: "If I were to offer advice to those wishing to replicate this practice, I would suggest the following: (a) stick with consistent meeting times, (b) use the same video conference (Zoom) link weekly, (c) send a reminder to both parents and students the night before to enhance participation consistency and (d) be creative in how content stays fresh and interesting through guest speakers, home projects, discussion topics on current affairs, break-out sessions, and so on. Also, due to the time it takes to plan high-quality sessions (including coordination of guest speakers), it might also be helpful to consider a bi-weekly schedule. For the 2020-21 school year, consider offering the same sessions in the evening and in-person to provide flexible options for families. These forums take some work, but it's very well worth it!"