



# Success Spotlight



**COLORADO**  
Department of Education

STORIES OF PROMISING PRACTICE



## Student Data and Professional Learning Communities: How Tavelli Elementary School Created A High-Achieving School

### Overview

*Tavelli Elementary School sits in a quiet residential neighborhood in the northern section of Fort Collins, a stone's throw from scenic Lindenmeier Lake and the Fort Collins County Club. It is part of the Poudre School District.*

*Tavelli's student population is socioeconomically and racially diverse: 43 percent of its 595 students qualify for federally subsidized school lunches, 30 percent are minorities, and 22 percent are English learners.*

*In 2015, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) identified Tavelli as a high-achieving school. CDE based this designation on Tavelli's record of boosting student achievement of English learners, students with disabilities, minority students, and students experiencing poverty as measured by scores on reading and math state assessments for three consecutive years, and by achieving the highest level on the state School Performance Framework.*

*Not only did a large percentage of Tavelli students score proficient or advanced on tests, high percentages of key subgroups also performed well. For example, 65 percent of Tavelli's free and reduced-price lunch students, 68 percent of minority students, and 64 percent of English learners scored proficient or better on the 2013 Transitional Colorado Assessment Program (TCAP) reading test.*

*It wasn't long ago, however, that Tavelli was a very different kind of school.*

Colorado Department of Education surfaces and shares powerful stories from the field that get at the “why” and “how” behind the experiences and success stories teachers, students and administrators are having across the state so other districts can easily find models to apply in their own schools and foster positive learning environments for students. <http://getinspired.2revolutions.net>

## Objective

When Christine Hendricks became principal of [Tavelli](#) in 2009, the school was in trouble. It had failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress on state assessments for two consecutive years, which meant that under the federal No Child Left Behind law, Tavelli was on the cusp of a radical, federally-mandated overhaul. Hendricks had one school year to reverse the downward spiral.

The first thing she noticed was that the staff wasn't using data to "assemble a body of evidence" about where individual students needed help. She also noted that while grade-level teams did hold meetings, there were no structures in the building for [Professional Learning Communities](#) (PLCs) or high-performing teams, a practice Hendricks, who had been a principal in Wyoming for a dozen years before joining Tavelli, had used in earlier jobs.

Hendricks knew she had to move fast, even though to do so went against her experience. "I did everything you shouldn't do as a first-year principal," she said with a rueful grin.

Under normal circumstances, Hendricks said, a new principal should do a lot of listening, observing, moving slowly to get the lay of the land. But with a possible turnaround looming she didn't have that luxury.

Hendricks' first move was to work with teachers analyzing student achievement data.

"We identified kids who needed math and reading interventions (because they were lagging behind grade level)," Hendricks said. "We then implemented daily, 30-minute intervention/enrichment blocks. It helped the students receive the intervention and enrichment that was needed for success."

You have to look at the triangulation of data. It can't just be one source of data, because one source doesn't give you a true picture of the student."

*Christine Hendricks, Principal  
Tavelli Elementary School*

Under Hendricks, Tavelli became adept at using available resources to enhance instruction. For example, the school began using paraprofessionals to provide instructional support in the intervention/enrichment blocks. One reason Tavelli's small group instruction is so effective is that paraprofessionals receive professional development so that they can effectively work with the groups to which they are assigned.

The intervention/enrichment blocks helped pave the way for Tavelli's current, more refined approach of using data to meet students' needs. "We weren't as smart then as we are now, but it was a good start," Hendricks said.

Hendricks moved quickly that first year to create Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) at each grade level. “But it took time to know how it should look. We keep getting more refined,” Hendricks said.

Hendricks also worried that Tavelli could lose students due to restructuring boundaries and to neighboring schools that were “branding themselves” with special offerings like Core Knowledge and International Baccalaureate programs. So in 2011, the school, led by Hendricks and new assistant principal Shirley Woods, spent the second semester looking at various programs. As a school, Tavelli decided to become a STEAM school – focused on science, technology, engineering, arts, and math.

## Strategy

Early in Hendricks’ tenure, a state School Support Team (SST) paid a visit to Tavelli to assess the school’s strengths and needs. The following year a districtwide Comprehensive Appraisal for District Improvement (CADI) was conducted by the Colorado Department of Education. CDE considered Poudre School District at the time as in need of programmatic improvements and the CADI team visited schools to make recommendations.

The SST team was helpful, Hendricks said, in identifying “what we should and shouldn’t be doing.” Among the key recommendations was that the school begin closely examining state content standards: what exactly were the standards requiring teachers to teach and assess how staff were teaching the standards.

While undertaking that assessment, Tavelli staff uncovered a number of gaps. For example, Hendricks said “The math textbook had holes with what was being required from the standards, which helped explain why our students were struggling with number sense.”

In 2010, Hendricks, along with her leadership team, worked hard to get the teaching staff comfortable with analyzing data and using it to drive differentiated instruction.

It took teachers a while to get comfortable with this new approach, Hendricks and Woods said. At first they provided teachers with data reports and led data discussions, but over time the entire staff took ownership of using data on a daily basis.

In 2012, Hendricks hired J. Pearson, a math teacher who doubled as a coach for teachers. Together, Pearson and teachers identified “resources that could fill those holes,” Hendricks said.

The next step was to share that data ownership with students and their parents. Inspired by the work of John Hattie on [Visible Learning](#), the staff created data binders for all students, grades pre-kindergarten through five.

As with Hattie's findings, Tavelli experienced that by making students responsible for their own learning and tracking their own data, they experienced improved performance. Their learning became visible.



“Kids can learn from an early age to own their data, own their learning,” Hendricks said. Hattie’s work shows that “self-reporting gets the biggest bang for the buck and the highest effect size for student growth.”

This year, all Tavelli teachers took a short [True Colors](#) assessment to determine their teaching style. And students took a corresponding quiz to identify their learning style. Teachers use the information gleaned from the assessment

in their Professional Learning Communities to better understand why different students approach problems differently and to begin to recognize discrepancies between teachers’ teaching styles and students’ learning styles.

## Results

What’s remarkable at Tavelli today is the extent to which students at the earliest grades understand how to use data to chart their progress in all academic areas.

Kindergarten teacher Naomi Gomez had five-year-old Kira walk through her pink data binder for a visitor. Kira pointed to a sheet that showed, highlighted in pink, which letters of the alphabet she knew (all of them).

Another sheet showed which “magic words” – high-frequency words – she knew. “Those are words you can’t sound out, you just know them right away by looking at them,” Kira said. “The” was one such word.

Another sheet showed Kira’s progress recognizing numbers. In October, after six weeks of kindergarten, she could count to and recognize numbers 1-59. Now she can go to 100 and

beyond, and count by 10s. She also knows two-dimensional and three-dimensional shapes by name and sight: cone, sphere, cylinder.

“Does this make you proud of your learning?” Hendricks asked her.

The girl nodded. “And I like to take the binder home and use it for my pretend school,” she said.

Binders and uses of them get more sophisticated in the higher grades. Scott, a second-grader, showed a color-coded chart showing which concepts he knew well (green) and concepts where he needed help (red).

“I need help with these and it’s OK to say that, because then I’ll get help and know them,” the bespectacled boy said.

In addition to teaching students to own their learning and track their progress, school leaders and personnel hold regular data meetings during which they review and take ownership of the performance of the whole school.

Teachers use data to regroup their students every six weeks “as they need more support or more challenge,” said Deb Buggle, the school’s instructional coach and gifted and talented coordinator.

When a student is struggling, Buggle convenes the Multi-Tier Systems of Supports team to examine the situation more closely. Is there an underlying health issue? Problems at home? An undiscovered speech and language deficit?



“We monitor kids pretty closely,” Buggle said. “Students with the greatest needs receive the most amount of monitoring.”

The True Colors assessment has been reaping dividends in the school as well, both by strengthening PLCs and by helping students in grades 4 and 5 become more self-aware about their preferred learning styles.

“My orange (action-oriented) teachers are the ones who say ‘just give it to me and let me go do it,’” assistant principal Woods said. The other types are blue (student-oriented), green (subject-oriented) and gold (institution-oriented).

Hendricks and Woods said teachers of differing styles gain insights into the best teaching approaches to kids of various styles.

And students learn a lot about why some lessons may be more difficult for them than others.

“It makes kids reflective about learning, and it helps them push themselves out of the box if they need to,” Hendricks said. “It is fun to watch this develop. It also helps them to work together, because they understand how different they are from one another.”

Several major, positive changes at Tavelli have contributed to soaring achievement since Hendricks arrived in 2009, said Buggle, who has been at the school since 2003:

- The introduction of intervention/enrichment blocks for struggling students and students needing enrichment
- Students taking ownership of their learning through keeping track of their own progress
- Professional development in best practices and other tangible supports for the teaching staff
- Intensive work on math, incorporating “common training so we use common language”
- Work on standards and PLCs
- Distributed leadership, shared decision-making, and making student-centered decisions
- Tavelli has maximized the community and family support it receives. The school partners with Colorado State University and Healthy Kids Club, UCHHealth to provide additional supports to students and staff. This has contributed to the well-being of school personnel and students, and the genuine feeling among adults and children at Tavelli that they are cared for.

It takes a village. I know that sounds cliché, but it really is a village. We became an educational family.

*Christine Hendricks, Principal  
Tavelli Elementary School*

“We strive to be very transparent in our work,” Hendricks said. “And my job is to break down barriers for teachers so there’s nothing in the way of their reaching kids. We take on all the other stuff that gets in the way.”



# How to Do It: Tips for Implementing Professional Learning Communities and Using Student Data to Turnaround a School

## 1. Define your overall objective

- How can a school form effective Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to help teachers become more effective?
- How can school leadership help make staff and students alike eager to examine data to improve outcomes for kids?
  - \* How can teachers use data to plan tiered supports and interventions?

## 2. Preparation

- Read the [High Achieving Schools Study in-depth report](#) on Tavelli's success.
- Read up on [Visible Learning](#) from New Zealand educator John Hattie. Hattie's work provides the philosophical foundation for Tavelli's student data binders.
- Read background material on [Professional Learning Communities](#).
  - \* Information on [Solution Tree](#), the professional development firm Tavelli used for PLC work.
- Consider the [True Colors](#) assessment of teaching and learning styles, which all Tavelli students and teachers take, and which provides the school with common language for discussing teaching, learning, and how students and teachers relate to their peers.
- Put together a plan on how to present the lesson/project to students.

## 3. Implementation

- Data roll-out:
  1. First, evaluate whether your school is teaching to state standards and assessing students based on those standards.
    - \* Adjust curriculum and instruction as needed.
  2. Assess the school staff's comfort with using data to drive instruction and group and regroup students. Students that have acquired the standard or objective can move on to new knowledge and skills, while students still working with the concept can be retaught and provided with additional supports and opportunities.
  3. Depending on comfort level, start slowly, introducing basic elements and reports first, and walking teachers through how to use and interpret the data.



4. Monitor to ensure that teachers are using data regularly to regroup students in all key subject areas.
  5. Once staff is comfortable and enthusiastic about data, present the concept of data binders to parents and students.
  6. Design data binders that are appropriate for each grade level.
- PLC roll-out:
    1. Research PLC best practices in terms of ground rules, norms, etc.
    2. Ascertain best structure for PLCs in your school (By grade level? Subject area? Some other, unique grouping?).
    3. If budget allows, bring in outside trainers to help launch PLCs in your school.

#### **4. Assessment/reflection**

- What worked?
- What did not work?
- How can it be adjusted?