

Building Knowledge Together: Impact and Insights from the Minnesota Data and Assessment Literacy (MnDAL) Community of Practice for School Leaders

Learning Journey Journal

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The Minnesota Data and Assessment Literacy (MnDAL) course is a series of on-demand learning modules aimed at supporting educators and leaders to use data and assessment to transform teaching and learning. The modules are designed to support professional learning of both individuals and groups of learners.

The MnDAL course is differentiated through two paths: one for teachers, and one for building/district leaders. The modules within the course are grouped into strands by topic: Systems Thinking, Assessment Literacy, Formative Assessment, and Data Use. The modules within the course were developed in partnership with WestEd and made available to educators and school and district leaders across Minnesota in the fall of 2023. They can be accessed through MDE's [Testing 1 2 3](#) website.

The MnDAL course was developed based on survey results that indicated a need for improving assessment system and practice across the state.

During the 2023-24 academic year, the COMPASS team offered an optional statewide Community of Practice (CoP) designed to support school leaders in capacity-building to implement MnDAL. The CoP was designed support school and district leaders as they engaged in exploring, applying, and building shared knowledge around data and assessment literacy. The CoP was made up of district assessment coordinators and school leaders from across the state who met virtually once a month throughout the school year. Participants developed local theories of action and action plans for the use of balanced, equitable local assessment systems to improve student outcomes at their sites.

The CoP's structure was one of its critical success factors. Monthly meetings, led by the MDE COMPASS staff, fostered a collaborative environment where school leaders could engage with the content of 18 modules over six months. Based on the feedback from CoP participants, the CoP's structure, which provided opportunity to exchange ideas with peers from different districts, not only fostered innovation but also built a collective knowledge base that benefited all participants. The CoP enhanced internal coherence for school and district leaders and prepared them to expand influence across local data and assessment literacy policy and practice.

Though each participant came to the CoP with a different purpose, the results were clear. Participating in the COMPASS team CoP resulted in:

- Bringing together leaders from across Minnesota who had a common goal in developing knowledge and practice in data and assessment literacy.
- Developing a common language and shared approach to taking action in participants' respective districts.

- Increased participant ability to choose MnDAL content appropriate to purpose based on needs in each district/school's unique context.
- Providing an opportunity for leaders to preview MnDAL materials with one another, using expertise across district sites to make sense of content.

This case study showcases three different leaders' experiences with the CoP as they engage with the MnDAL modules in order to deepen data and assessment literacy design to align with local context and goals.

Three districts' experiences show how the CoP deepened district data and assessment literacy practice across Minnesota.

Learning Journey #1: Collaborative Learning

District: 196, Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan Public Schools

Type: Urban, K–12

Size: Large

Region: Twin Cities

In the southern suburbs of the Twin Cities, District 196 has implemented a model of professional development that has transformed the way school leaders approach data and assessment literacy. This transformation began with an expansion of the district's assessment department, shifting its focus to encompass research, assessment, and analytics. This strategic move aimed to elevate the department from supporting the administration and fulfilling data

requests to becoming an integral part of the district's teaching and learning decision-making processes.

MDE's Community of Practice played a pivotal role in the learning and transformation thinking of the Research, Assessment & Analytics team. The CoP provided a space for learning, collaboration with other leaders across the state, and building a shared understanding that helped catalyze the district's shift toward a data-informed culture. The three-member team from District 196 decided on an approach to learning that worked well for them: complete the modules individually and then meet to engage in discussion prior to joining the monthly CoP to discuss their thinking with other leaders across the state. This gave the team enough time to fit the learning into their own schedules in order to be ready by their internal meeting dates and be prepared to engage fully in the CoP.

The CoP's value for the district team lay in its ability to ground the team in common language and processes. Through robust discussions, the leaders in District 196 examined their infrastructure, historical data use, and potential for new applications. The modules guided them to consider their mission and long-term goals, iterating a strategic plan to achieve them. The team reflected on the collaborative and introspective nature of the CoP, highlighting how the CoP served as a catalyst for defining the department's new role and broader district goals.

"Our district made a conscious decision to expand the resources within our assessment department to shift us from being assessment focused to being a department that's based around research, assessment, and analytics." - Nandi R.

One of the most significant lessons the team learned was the importance of developing a new model for data use. Their Structured Assessment Model was drafted to articulate the relationship between various data points and their application to instruction and intervention decisions. The model helped the team develop a visual tool that mapped data points across the academic year, demonstrating their connection to core instruction or intervention cycles. As a result, the District 196 Research, Assessment & Analytics Department is partnering with content specialists to align assessments with the district's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MnMTSS) model and new curriculum implementations.

The Research, Assessment & Analytics team reports that the impact thus far has been significant. The CoP experience equipped the team with a deep understanding of data literacy, enabling them to better support teachers and district leaders in their data-driven endeavors. It

fostered a culture where data was not only rich but also actionable, guiding educators to become savvy consumers of data and empowering them with the tools to effect change in their classrooms. The team noted,

"We decided to engage in the training modules to help us define what this shift really meant in terms of practice and where does our work intersect with other people's work." – Nandi R.

Learning Journey #2: Expanding Professional Development Capacity

District: Ada-Borup-West School District

Type: Rural, K–12

Size: Small

Region: Northwest

In the Ada-Borup-West School District, an educational leader with multiple roles found herself at a crossroads, seeking to establish a comprehensive, balanced, and equitable assessment system in a school that had yet to embrace such a model. Serving as the District Assessment Coordinator and Curriculum Coordinator, among other titles, Deanne joined the CoP as a way to strengthen her own understanding of data and assessment literacy in order to be well-positioned to effectively enact change. Deanne's goal for engaging with the MnDAL modules was clear: to equip teachers with the understanding and tools necessary to create effective, student-centered assessments aligned with curriculum and instruction that yield data that was regularly analyzed and interpreted to improve student outcomes. However, the challenge of navigating the MnDAL modules alone was a daunting endeavor that required more than just knowledge—it demanded vision, dedication, and time; activities that are better suited for group thinking rather than in isolation.

Deanne envisioned a future where data literacy was not merely a concept but a shared language among educators—a future where assessments were not one-size-fits-all, but tailored to meet the diverse needs of every student. Deanne sought not just to lead but to empower and foster an environment where teachers could discover for themselves the power of data-informed instruction. Since Deanne did not have a site team to collaborate with, the CoP

provided an opportunity to engage in shared learning and discussion with other leaders across Minnesota. The CoP meetings, which were built around collaborative time with colleagues across the state, provided a clear pathway through MnDAL with focused study on one or two modules each meeting. These meetings helped Deanne identify a clear starting point for work within the district and formulate a clear roadmap to help guide the Ada-Borup-West toward this new horizon, inclusive of targeting specific modules for use with teachers in the district.

"I want to make sure we're all at the same level of understanding... [That] we're all on the same page of what does data literacy mean? What does comprehensive mean? I want us all on that same page." – Deanne F.

With each CoP session and opportunities for guided reflection, Deanne plotted a course toward a more data-literate, assessment-savvy staff that could make informed decisions leading to improved equitable educational experience for all students. Her story serves as an example to other educators navigating similar contexts, reminding them that in smaller districts with "teams of one", progress can be made, with the support of a statewide network for learning, reflection, and exploration.

Learning Journey #3: Support Systems Transformation

District: Austin Public Schools

Type: Urban, K–12

Size: Small-Medium

Region: Southern

With a history steeped in 20 years of data-driven decision-making practice, Austin Public Schools (APS) possesses robust data structures, yet reports that each academic year feels like a reset to revamp or refine assessment system structures and supports. Corey Haugen, APS Assessment Director, had a clear mission—equip new staff with the district's data mindset while reorienting seasoned educators to the district assessment tools. With the release of the MnDAL modules, APS saw them as a potential substitute for annual in-person district-led

trainings. Corey joined the 2023-24 CoP with a goal of engaging in the modules to streamline the district's training approach.

Corey saw the modules as a repository of knowledge, a resource to tap into for future endeavors. He had hoped for a fast track, a Data and Assessment 101 pathway for educators that could be seamlessly integrated into Austin's existing professional learning landscape. Seeing how MDE had developed a non-sequential roadmap through the modules for their CoP illuminated new possibilities—a chance to offer educators bite-sized, voluntary professional learning opportunities.

Corey emphasized the value of the CoP—the importance it placed on collaborative district-to-district sharing, where leaders exchanged practical strategies and offered mutual support. The CoP, he reflected, was not about creating model districts, but rather supporting understanding each district's unique context and learning from shared experiences.

"The MnDAL modules are a great resource for ensuring all staff have a solid foundation of data and assessment literacy. I love the Community of Practice aspect, because collaborating with other districts provides valuable insights into improving your own practice." - Corey

Corey underscores the significance of collaboration and shared learning experiences within the CoP.

In the end, the modules were not a quick fix for professional learning, but a treasure trove of knowledge Austin Public Schools could explore over time. With the Minnesota Read Act on the horizon, mandating extensive training on the science of reading, Corey knew the ensuing years would leave little room for additional professional development. APS's involvement in the CoP supported their solutions to sustainable assessment training, balancing the pursuit of data literacy with the realities of an educator's time and the changing assessment policies and systems.

Conclusion

MDE's statewide COMPASS CoP had a meaningful impact on participants. It helped to support each participant to set a vision and accomplish important actions in districts across Minnesota. The CoP offered a learning space in which education leaders with common goal and needs came together to reach individual school and district goals related to data and assessment literacy. The CoP allowed exploration of ideas together that served to further individual goals and strengthen assessment leadership practice.

MDE's statewide CoP for leaders can serve as a model for establishing a local CoP for leaders or for educators to help in collaborative knowledge building, exploration, and application. MDE's [Testing 1 2 3](#) website includes several resources, including roadmaps that describe recommended modules for leaders and for educators to engage with specific topics, and facilitator guides for each educator (teacher) module which can be adapted for establishing a CoP at local sites.

For more information about the Minnesota Data and Assessment Literacy Modules, visit MDE's [Testing 1 2 3](#) website. For more information on the COMPASS Community of Practice, or to register for the CoP, contact MDE at compass.mde@state.mn.us.