

Olathe Public Schools

Scaling Meaningful Assessment with Professional Development



 Olathe, KS  30,000 Students  Adopted Mastery Connect: 2017

With a focus on preparing students for their futures, Olathe Public Schools uses formative assessment to meet every student where they are so instruction can be adjusted and personalized to get them where they need to be. Learn why this growth-focused school district invested in professional development with the Center for Leadership & Learning at Instructure to lead a seamless implementation of Mastery Connect, expand standards-based instruction, and establish a data-driven culture where teachers work together to improve student outcomes.

THE CHALLENGE

In 2017, district leadership at Olathe Public Schools set out to level the playing field between assessment and instruction. Previously, they had focused most initiatives on teaching and instructional practices without a clear understanding of where students were. With a districtwide goal of narrowing the learning gap, the team knew they needed an assessment management system (AMS) with the following attributes:

- Instant & actionable data
- Teacher collaboration tools
- Flexible assessment options
- Benchmark & curriculum mapping tools
- Scalability & security

Aside from the technical requirements, the Olathe team believed that without a core philosophy about how assessment data should be used to improve student outcomes, the tool itself is meaningless. That's why the team approached the

Key Insights

- Olathe takes a top-down approach to professional development with the belief that all change must begin with supportive, engaged, and effective leaders.
- Olathe Public Schools partnered with the Center for Leadership & Learning at Instructure to train over 3,000 teachers and 60+ leaders over a two years period.
- Using Mastery Connect, Olathe creates and administers standards-based formative assessments to identify student levels of understanding, target students for intervention, and evaluate teacher efficacy.

buying process with one simple question: "Why do we need an assessment tool in the first place?" Upon answering this essential question, the team created what they call "The Big 3," which serves as a foundation for their assessment strategy:

1. Student Engagement: students engaged in class and tracking how they're progressing.
2. Standards-Based Instruction & Assessment: teachers must be able to identify what students know and don't know, standard by standard.
3. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs): teachers need to be able to discuss data so they can target interventions, personalize learning, and adjust instruction accordingly.

Combined, these needs led Olathe Public Schools to choose Mastery Connect as its comprehensive AMS.



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Brent Yeager, Assistant Superintendent for Learning Services at Olathe Public Schools

THE SOLUTION

As the second-largest school district in Kansas, the Olathe team knew that the Mastery Connect implementation process would be no easy feat. In the past, the district had tried several different adoption strategies—from a “train the trainer” model, to a phased rollout plan—and all were missing a key component: the presence of and support from school and district leaders.

To kick off the Mastery Connect implementation process, the Olathe team took an entirely different approach that began by sending principals and key district leaders to a Mastery Leadership Institute (MLI) by the Center for Leadership and Learning (CLL) at Instructure. The MLI, a two-day professional development retreat for leaders, differed from a traditional PD session in that it gave Olathe the opportunity to collaborate with other leaders, adopt tried-and-true implementation strategies, and build a plan with their team that could be put into action the moment they returned to their schools and districts.

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The team shared that the best part of the MLI was that it wasn't focused on the tool [Mastery Connect], but rather on the practice the tool supports and moving the district towards standards-based instruction and learning.

Upon attending the MLI, the Olathe team was asked a fundamental question that led to a paradigm shift in the way they view data: “Are you a data collector or a data user?” Educators have always invested a lot of time and energy into collecting and organizing student data; the challenge is being able to use that data to directly benefit the students it was collected from. Taking the time to focus on why data is being collected in the first place enabled Olathe leaders to return to their schools and district-level responsibilities and provide a clear view of why using Mastery Connect was essential to furthering the district's “Big 3” initiative.

The 48-Hour Challenge, a core exercise taught at the MLI, was instrumental in helping leaders get everyone using the tool in the same way. The Challenge provided teachers with clear instructions that enabled them to start using Mastery Connect to identify standards to teach, administer formative assessments, and discuss the data as a team.

The 48-Hour Challenge

Step One: Meet with Your Team(s)

- Agree on one standard to teach
- Create or find a common assessment tied to that standard

Step Two: Teach & Assess

- Teach students the concepts outlined in the standard
- Assess all students using the common assessment
- Carefully record student data

Step Three: Meet to Review Student Results

- Identify student levels of understanding
- Determine intervention and personalized learning strategies
- Use the data to self-evaluate your own practice and efficacy



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Brent Yeager, Assistant Superintendent for Learning Services at Olathe Public Schools

After the first team of leaders attended the MLI and implemented the 48-Hour Challenge, it was clear that this process would be a game-changer for the district. Olathe has since sent over 60 leaders to a CLL session to learn these same methods.

After that, Olathe worked with the CLL team to create a custom PD session that was delivered to 3,000+ teachers over the course of two days. Though teachers at Olathe were held to high expectations, school and district leaders have always been and continue to be heavily involved in the PD process so they can offer a high level of support every step of the way.

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THE RESULTS

The collaborative culture and ongoing PD made Olathe well equipped to make the transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of the learning model that was being used, Olathe could use Mastery Connect to inform all instruction and meet students where they are. Additionally, the strategies and methods learned at the MLI helped the team hone in on priority standards to ensure the standards that were most essential to students' understanding were being taught and assessed to a greater degree.

Using Mastery Connect's Item Authoring functionality, teachers could build their own items that were specific to a set of standards, rather than having to rely solely on third-party item banks.

Olathe values the ongoing partnership with Mastery Connect and the CLL because it allows them to build custom PD sessions and solutions that meet the unique needs of the district and shape a long-term vision for their assessment strategy.

A large part of this strategy has included working with Mastery Connect to explore breakthroughs in machine learning technology that will eventually provide an alternative to high-stakes summative assessments. After piloting this new assessment model, known as the Diagnostic Classification Model (DCM), with Mastery Connect, leaders at Olathe have continued to engage in ongoing conversations about how this revolutionary alternative is on track to become the next big thing—allowing educators to utilize regular assessment data in real-time to personalize learning and promote student growth.

As the Olathe team learned, the practice of using data to make timely decisions that will positively impact learning starts by pairing the right tools with strong pedagogical practices. Check out [A District Leader's Guide to Using Data](#) to learn more about key considerations for K-12 leaders striving to streamline data-driven instruction.