

Case Study: Englewood Schools



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Striving for Excellence in Colorado

Englewood School District's Transformation Journey from State Watch to
Systemwide Improvement

Englewood School District

University of Virginia Partnership for Leaders in Education

With gratitude to Englewood Schools leaders who participated in interviews that informed this study, including Joanna Polzin, Ryan Cowell, Jenny Buster, and Becky Jones. We also thank the Englewood community members and educators who shared insights during PLE site visits.

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Englewood Schools, a small district of about 2400 students located just south of Denver, Colorado has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent years. This progress is rooted in a bold vision for change first championed by former superintendent Wendy Rubin and carried forward by current superintendent Joanna Polzin – leaders who rejected the status-quo and committed to dramatic, district-wide improvement. Englewood has experienced a remarkable transformation in student achievement, leadership capacity, and overall school performance. At the heart of this transformation is a strategic partnership initiated by Englewood’s executive leadership team engaged with the University of Virginia’s Partnership for Leaders in Education (PLE). What began as a focused effort to rethink how the leaders in Englewood could make meaningful change - to increase student achievement and growth has evolved into a sustained model for excellence, powered by a dedicated team across Englewood that remains deeply committed to district-wide improvement.

About Englewood

Englewood’s students attend one of seven schools: An early childhood center, four elementary schools, a middle school, and two high schools.¹ A second middle school, Englewood Leadership Academy, merged with Englewood Middle at the start of the 2025-2026 school year. While the four Elementary Schools are spread throughout the district,

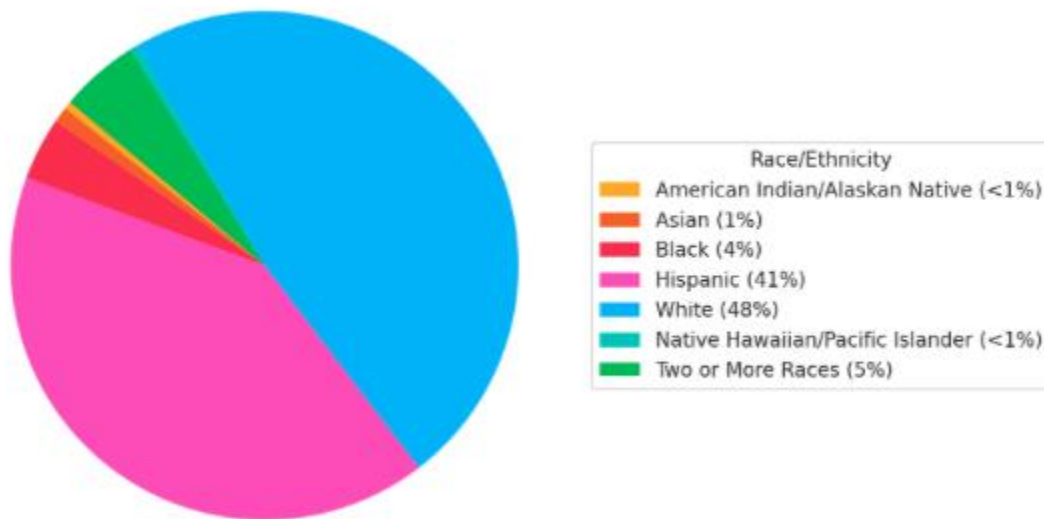
¹ Demographic information found at <https://www.engagewoodschools.net/who-we-are/about>.

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Source: <https://www.engagewoodschools.net/who-we-are/about/district-map>

Englewood’s schools serve a diverse student population. Close to two-thirds of the students receive free or reduced lunch. About 17% of students receive special education services, and about 10% of the population are English Language Learners (ELLs).

Figure 2: Englewood Student Enrollment



Source: <https://www.engagewoodschools.net/who-we-are/about>

Table 1

Performance Status of Englewood Schools: 2017 & 2024

School	Level	2017 Performance Status	2024 Performance Status
Bishop Elementary School	K-6	Priority Improvement	Performance
Charles Hay World School	K-6	Priority Improvement	Performance

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Cherrelyn Elementary School	K-6	Priority Improvement	Performance
Clayton Elementary School	K-6	Performance	Performance
Colorado’s Finest High School of Choice	9-12	Improvement	Performance
Englewood High School	9-12	Improvement	Improvement
Englewood Leadership Academy	6-9	Performance	Performance
Englewood Middle School	7-8	Turnaround	Turnaround

Source: <https://www.cde.state.co.us/schoolview/explore/official/0120>

The 2024 state performance ratings show Englewood Schools have made notable progress, with the majority of schools in the district now holding an overall “Performance” rating. This designation means the district is meeting expectations on the majority of performance ² is no longer under state watch or oversight.² However, the table above that includes performance data from 2017 tells a different story. Three elementary schools: Bishop, Charles Hay, and Cherrelyn were designated as “Priority Improvement”. On the secondary level, Colorado’s Finest High School of Choice and Englewood High School were both rated as “Improvement”, meaning they were performing slightly better than the elementary schools, but still fell short of meeting state benchmarks. Most concerning was Englewood Middle School, which received the lowest possible rating of “Turnaround”. These designations triggered state oversight, signaling an urgent need for systemic change across the district.

The Decision to Partner With PLE

² From Colorado Department of Education Insufficient State Data Ratings: <https://www.cde.state.co.us/accountability/insufficientstatedatafactsheet>

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Before connecting with PLE, Englewood Schools faced a series of critical challenges. State ratings of the district's schools hovered in the lowest performance categories, and instructional practices across schools were inconsistent. Joanna Polzin³, Englewood's current superintendent shared in an interview for this case study that "teachers were doing the best they could with the resources provided". Further, high staff turnover and limited opportunities for leadership development compounded the difficulty of establishing systems for progress-monitoring and maintaining accountability across departments and schools. Englewood's instructional leadership team led by superintendent Wendy Rubin at the time knew they needed a thought partner to help them address the most urgent challenges and at the same time establish a systems-based approach to provide much needed structure, motivation and inspiration. After meeting with the Colorado Department of Education in 2017, the team explored several options and following a call with PLE's executive director William Robinson, recognized that the Partners for Leadership in Education was the right fit. Soon after, the PLE team conducted a readiness assessment to determine Englewood's strengths and most pressing needs.

Englewood's "Big Rocks"

Joanna Polzin had been serving as Chief Academic Officer at the time and recalled that the instructional infrastructure was "broken or non-existent" and that evidence-based practices were not in place. As a building principal at the time, deputy superintendent

³ Information attributed to Joanna Polzin is taken from a Zoom interview conducted 4 March 2025.

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Ryan Cowell⁴ recalls frustration from a lack of curriculum resources. Englewood’s partnership with PLE resulted in forming a set of focused, evidence-based strategies built upon “Big Rocks” or high-priority areas of focus designed to empower leaders and elevate instructional quality across the district. District leaders knew they needed to establish a clear vision for instruction while at the same time building the capacity of teachers and building-level leaders. These strategies aligned with PLE’s four key levers for lasting transformation: Leadership, Differentiated Support and Accountability, Talent Management, and Effective Instructional Infrastructure.

Table 2:

Summary of PLE’s Four Key Levers

Lever	Key Focus
System Leadership	Creating bold systems-level change, integrating strategies for equitable learning, building urgency and commitment.
Support & Accountability	Providing tailored capacity-building, flexibility, and accountability structures to empower schools’ success.
Talent Management	Ensuring the right leaders and staff are selected, developed, and retained to sustain transformation efforts.
Instructional Infrastructure	Implementing coherent, data-driven instructional systems—including assessments and high-quality curriculum—to support learning.

Source: UVA Partners for Leadership in Education

⁴ Information attributed to Ryan Cowell is taken from a Zoom interview conducted 11 March 2025.

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Over the five years following the initial readiness assessment, the Englewood team leaned deeply into these levers to drive meaningful systemic change. The district made coherence and capacity building a priority, beginning with a distributed leadership approach that fostered shared ownership and aligned practices across schools and departments. Instructional infrastructure was strengthened through the adoption of centralized evidence-based curriculum and common assessments, and the Professional Learning Community (PLC) framework was applied to support teacher development and collaboration. Support and accountability structures were scaffolded to ensure alignment across departments, and leaders received coaching tailored to their individual needs. Talent management efforts focused on recruiting and retaining high-quality educators, establishing induction processes, and creating internal pipelines for leadership development. Throughout, PLE partners collaborated with multiple cohorts of Englewood schools and teams prior to and following the pandemic, providing interconnected executive education, site visits, and thought partnership to help them advance the shifts Englewood's team committed to in each lever. The result: A district-wide shift from isolated efforts to a unified system focused on intentional, strategic improvement for all students.

System Leadership

Both Ryan Cowell and Jenny Buster, who were building principals at the time the PLE partnership began, had come from other school districts, and could recognize the lack

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of systems in place to enact change. In their readiness assessment, the PLE team emphasized the need for strong, committed leadership at both the district and school levels. Englewood was wholeheartedly willing to lean into system leadership; not just at the school level, but across the entire district. This resulted in a noticeable shift toward using practices system-wide, rather than keeping them siloed. A distributed leadership model was put into place, bringing more voices to the table and in turn more buy-in when changes needed to be made. Stakeholders began to communicate a shared sense of urgency about the work that needed to be done. Even with a small core team, there began a real focus on building leadership capacity to support sustained change. There was also a clear recognition that the system needs to be ready to support and adapt to new plans, not the other way around. PLE partners helped Englewood's leaders think more strategically and supported them with the right training and protocols to grow their confidence. One of the biggest takeaways was how the learning from PLE sessions and site visits wasn't just sitting in binders; it was actively informing how decisions were now being made across the system. Deputy Superintendent Cowell could see Englewood becoming a school system rather than just a "system of schools". There was also a strong sense of intentionality among stakeholders around staying focused on what matters most. Leaders admitted that narrowing the focus wasn't always easy, but it was necessary to keep everyone aligned. Englewood didn't just adopt a program. They committed to a mindset shift, leaning in with the willingness and bandwidth to do what it takes to drive real transformation for all students.

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Instructional Infrastructure

Previously, Englewood Schools did not have access to a common curriculum, nor did they administer common assessments. The instructional materials in use were often below grade level, impacting students' ability to grow and progress academically. With support from the PLE team, the leadership team used the Instructional Infrastructure Framework to determine gaps in the system. To address this, Englewood leaders adopted a centralized, evidence-based curriculum with accompanying pacing guides for each content area. They also invested in supplementary materials to ensure teachers had the resources they needed to deliver high-quality instruction the students deserved. Additionally, common assessments were developed to be administered three times a year to help determine areas of growth and need. Additionally, in her deputy role, superintendent Polzin felt it important that any changes should be made “with the staff versus to the staff”. Knowing teachers would need a great deal of support in teaching the new content, the establishment of Professional Learning Communities became a system level priority for Englewood. The method helped to provide an outlet for newly hired coaches to develop relationships with teachers and administrators while helping to drive the work toward intended outcomes. Coaches also received support from Englewood’s Learning and Assessment Coordinator who would attend PLC meetings, calibrate classroom walkthroughs, and model instructional coaching best practices. The district developed a common rubric PLCs could use for progress monitoring that also helped to clarify expectations for PLCs. Building-level leaders could also use the rubric to monitor

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needs that are specific to their own building. This newly established infrastructure paved the way for a much-needed accountability system.

Support and Accountability

Because Englewood previously lacked the infrastructure for differentiated support and accountability, school leaders operated in silos with limited resources to support student and teacher development. At the same time Ryan Cowell recalls “navigating policies that appeared to be passed down by word of mouth”. The leadership team began to scaffold these structures by establishing alignment across district departments and hiring instructional coaches and staff to support the transformational work. Given that Englewood’s schools were in various stages of improvement, district leaders partnered with building principals to develop and implement 90-day plans that included supports specifically designed to meet each school’s stage of development.

Principal supervisors provided principals with coaching and support around their school-level priorities while at the same time holding them accountable for expectations. In her principal role, Jenny Buster recalls the weekly meetings she had with principal supervisors while in her role as principal. “The shepherd protocol used in the meetings was incredibly helpful as a principal. It was an accountability check”. Rather than using top-down mandates, district leadership worked in close partnership with principals to co-create clarity surrounding expectations. Together, they shared understanding of how curriculum should be implemented, how district assessments would be administered, and

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how Professional Learning Communities should function. This collaborative approach fostered a sense of ownership among school leaders, who felt empowered to lead with purpose rather than simply comply with directives. With support from PLE, Becky Jones reflected that Englewood's district team now had "a clear vision of what the principal needs to be an instructional leader". As a result, principals were able to guide their teams with confidence, aligning instructional priorities and professional learning efforts in ways that reflected both district-level goals and school-level needs. This shift from compliance to mutual responsibility helped build coherence across the system while strengthening the capacity of educators at every level.

Talent Management

Englewood leaders understood the importance of and were willing to invest in the development of a high-quality workforce of teachers and leaders. Staffing decisions were deliberate in that they prioritized a commitment to Englewood's vision and readiness to engage in their turnaround work. To increase the number and impact of high-quality teachers and leaders, a new induction process was established that helped to ensure those new to Englewood had the support they needed from day one. Also, in addition to site-based professional learning opportunities, teachers now had opportunities to attend after-school professional development while being compensated for their time. Over time, a pipeline had been developed. Employees were given opportunities to advance, and district leaders could confidently hire new leaders from within who understood the

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transformational work that had taken place in recent years. Englewood's director of learning services, Jenny Buster⁵, was a building principal at the time and remembered how principal support changed as well. Visits from principal supervisors occurred on a regular basis and had an "intentional focus". As a result, both teacher and leader turnover began to stabilize, and Englewood began to experience a stronger sense of continuity, shared purpose and investment among educators throughout the transformational process.

Addressing Implementation Challenges

Transformational change isn't easy, and Englewood wasn't immune to the pain points that occur in the process. The most significant obstacles they faced were financial constraints, the long-term effects of working in silos, and the extensive scope of the change process itself.

Implementation and Focus

Englewood's District Core Change Team and building principals left the week-long summer session at the Darden School of Business feeling both energized and overwhelmed. While they had a plan in place to address the gaps identified, the team was also well aware of the laundry list of issues that needed to be addressed to help move Englewood schools to performance. Several "big rocks" had been identified as critical to improving student outcomes, and the team began putting systems in place to address

⁵ All information attributed to Jenny Buster is taken from an interview conducted March 18, 2025.

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them. However, they quickly realized there wasn't the capacity within the system to tackle and monitor all of the challenges effectively. Even though Englewood's teachers and leaders were being asked to do new things, they didn't know what they could let go of.

"What can we actually deliver on, implement, and monitor intentionally, especially when everything is on fire?" said Jenny Buster. Part of the struggle stemmed from the fact that the organization wasn't yet accustomed to operating from a structured plan—many systems were new, and strategic goal setting felt unfamiliar.

With the realization that the changes being implemented weren't being done well, the team narrowed their focus to fewer, more manageable priorities. Initially, the elements that were scaled back were reduced out of necessity rather than intentionality. Over time, however, the team began to embrace strategy as a "big rock" in and of itself. One ongoing challenge was building a shared understanding of Englewood's instructional core—leaders questioned whether their definition of high-quality instruction was consistently communicated, seen, and understood across schools. Joanna Polzin shared, "If you are trying to roll something out that doesn't have to do with the big rock, we aren't doing it." From that point forward, every goal had to include specific, actionable steps that could be monitored and supported. The core team also learned that even well-intentioned accountability structures needed to be responsive to context; for example, walkthroughs and check-ins were appreciated by some principals but overwhelming to others. Moving forward, big rocks were determined and shared at the district kickoff each year—a meeting

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that brought together all stakeholders, from custodians to district leaders—to ensure alignment, coherence, and collective ownership of the work.

Leadership and Siloed Operations

For years, Englewood Schools operated in silos that limited collaboration, innovation, and system-wide coherence. Departments and school sites had been used to working in isolation, leading to fragmented efforts and inconsistent instructional practices. According to Deputy Superintendent Ryan Cowell, school leaders were more focused on protecting their own areas than building shared momentum. This isolation made it difficult to sustain progress, align resources, or establish a unified vision for teaching and learning. Over time, these siloed operations created deep-rooted habits that were hard to disrupt—but the partnership with PLE provided the structure and urgency needed to begin breaking them down. Through common leadership protocols, shared planning tools, and a renewed focus on alignment, district and school leaders began working together more intentionally. Weekly principal meetings fostered open dialogue and a culture of mutual accountability, allowing ideas and strategies to flow across school boundaries. The shift wasn't immediate, but the commitment to shared goals and transparent systems has gradually replaced isolation with collaboration.

Financial Constraints and Turnover

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Englewood is a small school district with a small budget. As Ryan Cowell explained, “Fiscally, it has always been a challenge. We’ve had some lean years and were behind other districts with salary”. With neighboring school districts offering more competitive pay, Englewood was not only losing strong candidates to other districts, but personnel with leadership potential were also leaving in pursuit of higher pay. This made it difficult for Englewood’s leadership team to establish a pipeline of leaders to maintain momentum from the good work that had been done. While many of the systems put in place as a result of the PLE partnership helped to develop a sustainable pipeline of personnel within Englewood, Superintendent Polzin and her team recognized the need for long-term financial stability. They studied Colorado’s fiscal outlook and worked closely with stakeholders to safeguard the district’s future.

Like many states, Colorado uses a funding formula that hasn’t been adjusted much since the great recession of 2008 to fund K-12 schools. With inflation driving up the costs of resources, Englewood’s general fund was reaching a breaking point. The school system decided to leverage Colorado’s Debt-Free Schools Act⁶, which “Authorizes a school district, with voter approval, to impose an additional mill levy for the sole purpose of funding its capital construction, new technology, existing technology upgrade, and facility maintenance needs without borrowing money”. In 2023, the Englewood leadership team partnered with the school board and the Englewood Educators Association to advocate for

⁶ <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb16-1354>

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a new ballot initiative: the *Debt-Free Schools Mill Levy*⁷. The measure was designed to fund large-scale capital projects without the long-term financial burden of bond repayment. Voters approved the measure, enabling the district to create a separate fund dedicated to infrastructure and technology improvements. This freed up general fund dollars to offer more competitive salaries, helping retain high-quality educators and maintain small class sizes for students.

Englewood’s passage of the Debt-Free Schools Mill Levy reflects strategic leadership and a community-driven approach to overcoming financial limitations. By creatively leveraging policy and engaging stakeholders, district leaders ensured that both the physical and instructional infrastructure of their schools could thrive—without compromising fiscal responsibility.

Looking Ahead

Looking ahead, Englewood’s challenge is no longer launching improvement systems—it’s deepening, refining, and sustaining them. PLE’s district support chief for Englewood, Biaze Houston shared that Englewood is “a district that leaned into the partnership with PLE, and maximized what they could. The district continues to interrogate what the “instructional core” means in practice and whether it is visible and consistent across classrooms. Professional development is intentionally aligned across principals,

⁷ “Debt Free Schools Mill Levy” <https://www.inglewoodschools.net/who-we-are/debt-freeschools>

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instructional coaches, and assistant principals, but leaders remain focused on strengthening rigor and real-time feedback. Structures such as 90-day plans, interim analyses, weekly walkthroughs, and targeted professional development have become ingrained in how the district operates. These are no longer seen as initiatives but as foundational systems that guide continuous improvement. At the same time, Superintendent Polzin and her team, acknowledge the work that still needs to be done.

While many Englewood schools have moved into “Performance” status, Englewood Middle School and Englewood High School remain below that threshold, underscoring the need for continued focus and support. District leaders recognize that improvement in these schools will require deeper engagement with the instructional core, ensuring that rigorous, grade-level instruction is consistently visible across classrooms. Superintendent Polzin and her team are actively tiering support based on school context, strengthening real-time feedback loops, and investing in change management strategies to build capacity within a small but committed core team. Since then, the Englewood community made the decision to merge Englewood Leadership Academy with Englewood Middle School to “enhance academic programming and expand opportunities for all students”.⁸ The work is ongoing, and while the district has made significant strides, Englewood’s

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Quote from Superintendent Polzin to Colorado Community Media, March 2025:
https://www.coloradocommunitymedia.com/archives/digital-south/news/article_f7d3f2e9-4c27-528b-ac27-87734f3cfacd.html

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leadership remains focused on ensuring that every school benefits from the coherence, clarity, and instructional rigor that define the district's vision for excellence.

The systems and supports that once felt out of reach for Englewood Schools are now firmly in place, making a significant shift from where the district began when its partnership with PLE first launched. At that time, schools operated with limited infrastructure, unclear expectations, and inconsistent support. Today, these conditions have been replaced by foundational systems designed to guide continuous improvement across the district. Jenny Buster reflected, "because we've been at it so long, processes and learning are now how we operate and think about things". Succession planning, change management, and data-driven collaboration are emerging as essential next steps. The leadership team remains committed to maintaining urgency and coherence, asking with each initiative: "Does this align with our big rock?" If not, it doesn't move forward. This disciplined focus ensures that every school, not just a few, is positioned to benefit from Englewood's systems-level transformation.