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Empowering Colorado education leaders through advocacy, professional learning and networking to deliver on the promise of public education.

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Westminster Public Schools Superintendent Pam Swanson Named 2020 Colorado Superintendent of the Year

DENVER—The Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE) has named Westminster Public Schools’ Dr. Pamela Swanson the Colorado Superintendent of the Year for 2020. Swanson was selected by a committee of former award winners and superintendents through a competitive process, and she will represent Colorado in the 2020 American Association of School Administrators (AASA)’s National Superintendent of the Year Program.

Swanson has been with Westminster Public Schools (WPS) since 1995 and served in several positions, including principal, executive director of human resources, and deputy superintendent. She was named interim superintendent in 2011 and appointed superintendent in 2012.

WPS serves a diverse population in which approximately 80 percent of students qualify for free and reduced lunch and roughly half the students are English Language learners. At the time Swanson became district superintendent, WPS was on the Accountability Clock with a Turnaround label due to low student performance and lack of academic growth.

Under her tenure, Westminster Public Schools became the largest school district in the country to move to an entirely competency based system. This personalized model is rooted in the belief that every child learns differently, and it shifts the system from traditional grades and grade levels by instead requiring students to show mastery of topics before moving to the next level.

Reinventing the education model for the entire district was no small or easy feat. Efforts, which began district wide in the fall of 2009, were initially met with skepticism and resistance from some staff as well as the local community, who had greater familiarity and comfort with the previous traditional model. But her leadership and perseverance paid off in 2018, when WPS moved off the state Accountability Clock and bumped up into the “Improvement” category.

2019 CMAS and PSAT/SAT data further pointed to the significant gains in student achievement and growth: the district showed four consecutive years of improvement in both these areas, WPS had the highest ELA growth score of any metro area district, and the district was the only one in the metro area to show an increase in SAT scores.

“What’s especially unique and impressive about Pam is the unwavering commitment she demonstrated in transforming an entire district education system that impacts around 9,300 students,” said Brenda Krage, president of the Colorado Association of Superintendents and Senior School Administrators, one of seven CASE departments. “She really had to effectively lead this transformation at every single level of the organization, knowing that the CBS model is a major departure from our current system that emphasizes once a year, high stakes testing. WPS is now a national model for successful systemic change and the largest district in the country to be entirely competency-based.”

Collaboration and strong partnerships have been critical components in WPS’ journey of continuous improvement and growth. Swanson has created a series of district cabinets for the purpose of allowing families, staff, and the larger community to receive direct and regular updates from her, and to provide her with candid feedback about the direction of the district. These cabinets are diverse and include parents, outside community partners, education support professionals, and students. The transparency and increased stakeholder engagement has helped ensure greater buy-in to the work and priorities of WPS.

“As I continually remind my staff, nobody does it alone and we are all better when we strive together,” said Swanson. “This honor is an affirmation of the groundbreaking work being done by the Westminster Public Schools family who have championed Competency Based Learning for every student over the last decade.”

The 2020 AASA National Superintendent of the Year will be announced at the 2020 AASA National Conference on Education in February. Candidates will be evaluated on leadership for learning, communication, professionalism and community involvement.

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The Colorado Association of School Executives (www.co-case.org) is the preeminent professional association for public school administrators in Colorado. The organization’s mission is to empower Colorado education leaders through advocacy, professional learning and networking to deliver on the promise of public education.