The role of professional development
Susan knew it would take more than a rigorous curriculum and assessment data to achieve excellence, though. All educators would need professional development to be able to truly connect the two.

Susan’s teaching of teachers wasn’t without trial and error. Initial training unintentionally kept principals out of the loop. To find ways to bring them into the conversation, Susan reached out to her partner at NWEA®, Jessica Knierim. “She was instrumental in really thinking through ‘How do we do this?’ ‘What are other schools doing?’ ‘How could we make this work?’”
Together they decided starting at the highest levels of administration was ideal. With more than 130 schools in the archdiocese, the task of aligning leadership can be complex. So they began by training regional superintendents on how to use data and had NWEA facilitators guide talks on how to set goals for principals. Principals, in turn, became in charge of training their own teachers.

**Working with teachers**

Professional development for teachers was, first and foremost, focused on the effectiveness of instruction, not on subjective ideas about what it means to be a good or bad teacher. Digging deep into data was the second fundamental piece, and one they are continuing to focus on.

“We do a lot of data analysis,” Susan says. “We look to see which students are growing, which aren’t, who we’re effective with, who we’re not effective with. And that drives how we’re doing our professional development.”

Data analysis begins with a bird’s eye view of every school. Susan and her team look at average proficiency and average growth, as measured by MAP Growth. They then look at every single class and determine whether growth is above NWEA norms, above the archdiocese average, or below both.

Then comes exploring student-level data. Seeing exactly how individual kids are performing makes it easier to explore teaching effectiveness—and create action plans. Another round of MAP Growth yields more data and answers the critical question: did the action plan work? Best practices are captured so that other teachers facing similar challenges can try the same thing. Action plans that don’t yield the desired results get revised until the instructional goals are met.

**It takes a village**

Documenting best teaching practices gives teachers access to effective teaching methods they can add to their teaching toolkit. It also led to changes in how the archdiocese approaches professional development, from providing more teacher coaches to having conference-type professional development days that give teachers more power to explore topics that would best inform their practice.

Working together for the children of the archdiocese was definitely a group effort, but Susan credits MAP Growth with proving that data can make it easier to identify problem areas—and begin the challenging work of tackling them. Susan also credits her teachers for doing the hardest work of all. “I have teachers who are really awesome, who are really willing to dig in and work with coaches and figure out ways to make it happen,” she says. “That’s where our success is coming from.”