



CAPTURE THE HUMAN SIDE OF LEARNING

DATA MAKEOVER PUTS STUDENTS FRONT AND CENTER

By Lyn Sharratt and Michael Fullan

We recently asked more than 500 teachers and administrators, “Why should we put faces on data?” That is, how do we capture the human side of learning? One teacher said playfully, “Because they are so cute.” While that’s true, the more compelling reason is because it is so important. Educators need to care for students, but they also need to help students get better in the one thing that can serve them for life — their day-to-day learning (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012).

Education is overloaded with programs and data. The growth of digital power has aided and abetted the spread of accountability-driven data — Adequate Yearly Progress, test results for every child in every grade, Common Core standards, formative and summative assessments. Technology accelerates the onslaught of data. All this information goes for naught unless educators can put faces on the data at all points on the learning continuum and know what to do to help the children behind the statistics.

With so much data available to those who want to improve student achievement, where do educators start? In the book *Realization* (Corwin, 2009), we spell out 14 key areas that we have found to be important for schools, districts, and states to become places where high student achievement is expected and delivered year after year by energized teams of professional educators.

These 14 parameters (see list at right) are, in effect, the nitty-gritty of deep and sustainable collective capacity building. Stemming from our work with more than 180 schools in York Region, Ontario, these parameters are the specific reform strategies that — in combination and over time, as the organization progresses to greater implementation of the parameters — cause classroom, school, district, and state improvement.

Within the 14 parameters, educators use several modes of assessment to identify and track performance. For example, attention to assessment practices that improve classroom instruction, inherent in

14 PARAMETERS TO INCREASE ALL STUDENTS’ ACHIEVEMENT

1. Shared beliefs and understandings.
 - a. Each student can achieve high standards given the right time and the right support.
 - b. Each teacher can teach to high standards given the right assistance.
 - c. High expectations and early and ongoing intervention are essential.
 - d. Teachers and administrators need to be able to articulate what they do and why they teach the way they do (adapted from Hill & Crévola, 1999).
2. Embedded literacy/instructional coaches.
3. Daily, sustained focus on literacy instruction.
4. Principal instructional leadership.
5. Early and ongoing intervention.
6. Case management approach: Data walls, case-by-case meetings.
7. Professional learning at school staff meetings.
8. In-school grade/subject meetings: Collaborative marking of student work.
9. Centralized resources.
10. Commitment of district and school budgets for literacy learning and resources.
11. Action research/collaborative inquiry.
12. Parental and community involvements
13. Cross-curricular literacy connections in each subject area.
14. Shared responsibility and accountability.

Source: Sharratt & Fullan, 2006, 2009, 2012.

the 14 parameters, enables everyone in the system to follow his or her collective progress in elevating student achievement quickly and sustaining it in the long term.

THE POWER OF FACES

In 2010-11, we asked professional educators in several countries for their views on three questions:

- Why put faces on the data?
- How do you put faces on the data?
- What are the top three leadership skills needed to do this?

The 507 respondents indicated that putting faces on the data helps them to:

- **Know the students:** Encourage colleagues to make the work personal;
- **Plan for students:** Align teaching strategies and specify strategies required for improvement;
- **Ensure responsibility for students:** Promote accountability; and
- **Assess progress:** Understand if the processes and strategies being used are having an impact.

We clustered the 14 parameters into four big ideas that we call improvement drivers: assessment, instruction, leadership, and ownership (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012). From this, we wanted to learn:

- Which practices are so effective that they should become nonnegotiable — that is, become the expected operating norms in every state, school, and classroom?
- How do educators ensure these practices are implemented?

For example, if educators believe that every child can learn and has the right to learn, then they need to determine not just if every child has learned, but also how to optimize teacher effectiveness. Educators need to know that every child is learning by making ongoing assessments and incorporating that information about each child's learning into daily instruction — a nonnegotiable practice.

PUTTING FACES ON THE DATA: WHAT GREAT LEADERS DO!

By Lyn Sharratt & Michael Fullan

The many benefits of personalizing data include increased student engagement and positive impact on school culture. This guide helps readers set goals, adjust lessons, identify students' strengths and weaknesses, and implement interventions. Included is a self-assessment framework for implementing improvement at the district and state levels. By focusing on connecting all the dots between students and data, educators can accomplish the ultimate goal of helping them learn. (Corwin Press, 2012)

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These four improvement drivers come to life in the following case study.

SANGER UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Sanger Unified School District, near Fresno, Calif., serves 10,915 students whose diversity mirrors the demographics of the region: high-minority, high-poverty, and high English language learner student population; 49% of students come from homes where English is not the primary language; 28% of parents did not graduate from high school; another 24% are high school graduates but never attended college.

In fall 2004, the California Department of Education put the district into program improvement status under No Child Left Behind. Failure to respond to the learning needs of all students placed the district in the bottom 10% of schools in California in overall achievement gains. District Superintendent Marc Johnson treated the program improvement status as a wake-up call for the district.

As district leaders dug deeper into the data, they found that, while state testing showed 50% of white students were proficient or advanced in English language arts, only 20% of Hispanic students, 19% of low-income students, and 10% of English language learners were scoring at proficient or advanced levels. Only 26% percent of the total student population was meeting standards. In several schools, the results were even worse.

That focused look at the very relevant data caused district leaders to develop an organizational sense of urgency about the need to improve.

After meeting with school principals, Johnson committed the district to becoming a professional learning community with a focus on instructional improvement that benefits all students in the district. The district also committed to organize and use data as a major tool for improvement. Leaders identified three guiding principles to focus the work:

- Hope is not a strategy;
- Don't blame the kids; and
- It's all about learning.

Their work aligns with our four improvement drivers: assessment, instruction, leadership, and ownership (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012).

ASSESSMENT

At each school site, professional learning communities developed and administered common formative assessments to give teachers real-time data about student learning.

Learning teams defined the responses and supports necessary to provide extra opportunities for learning that some students require to master the essential standards for their grade level and courses.

Teachers created data walls and met regularly to discuss what data told them about student learning needs. From this,

they developed support systems for students who needed precise instructional strategies to match their learning needs as evidenced by the data. By monitoring progress regularly and moving students along the data wall, teachers continue to discuss and adjust the instructional strategies to better meet student needs.

They were able to distinguish which students didn't require additional support. These students were given enrichment opportunities, using performance tasks focused on higher-order thinking.

Leaders learned to adopt a nonjudgmental attitude toward data in the early stages of reform, along with transparency of results and practice. A nonjudgmental stance essentially says, "We treat data as the basis for identifying actions for improvement." The nonjudgmental approach and transparency of results leads to greater accountability and greater improvement (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009).

INSTRUCTION

District leaders also realized that no amount of intervention compensates for poor instruction. They began a districtwide focus to develop high-quality instruction in every classroom. Every teacher and administrator in the district learned intentional, differentiated instructional practices and engaged in ongoing professional learning to improve practice.

The district required administrators to participate in all professional learning. District leaders believed that administrators must be expert practitioners in order to serve as learning leaders who can assist schools in implementing effective instruction.

English language learners became an important area of focus. Every classroom in the district had students who needed extra help in developing fluency in English. Meeting those needs required more than buying a program that supports language acquisition.

District leaders realized that supporting these learners as they develop fluency and proficiency must be a function of daily instruction. Using assessment to drive instruction deepened the district's understanding of the students behind the statistics and led the district to provide ongoing training and support at all levels.

LEADERSHIP

District leaders established clear expectations for each school while also providing support to guide schools in building programs that respond to student learning needs, including improving the staff's strengths and skill sets.

They also shifted the organizational culture from focusing on adult needs to focusing on students, knowing that, in order to do so, they needed to go deeper into the data.

To do this, the district launched principal summits. A principal summit is a one-hour presentation made by each principal in the district to senior staff and colleagues, detailing what the

school had done and is doing to ensure that all students are learning.

Principals gave an overview of achievement data for a minimum of a five-year period so that participants could focus on trends and patterns over time. This process quickly gave instructional leaders a deep understanding of the data, and they, in turn, led similar conversations with their school teams.

The district made clear that instructional leadership was a requirement of the principalship and underlined this by ensuring that job descriptions, criteria for hiring and promoting, and performance appraisal for school leaders focus on instructional leadership and collaborative work within and across schools.

OWNERSHIP

At Sanger, educators no longer labor as independent contractors in isolation. They work together to meet the needs of all students. They come together as teams, working interdependently (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009) to achieve a common goal while holding one another mutually accountable. Now the culture at Sanger is one of collaboration and a focus on learning for all students and for all staff.

To do this, leaders throughout the system realized that they needed to embrace the concept of reciprocal accountability, which means, "If I have an expectation of you, then I have an obligation to provide you with whatever you need to be successful in meeting that expectation" (Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). The district also began three leadership training cohorts that brought together leadership teams from system and school sites for ongoing conversations on improving student learning.

SUCCESS INDICATORS

In 2004, Sanger was one of the lowest-achieving and poorest-performing districts in the state. Within two years of starting this improvement process, the district had exceeded the state average for student achievement in all areas.

In spring 2011, The Education Trust-West released a study detailing the achievement gains of California's largest unified school districts (The Education Trust-West, 2011). The study showed that Sanger's achievement gains for the last five years ranked in the top three in California for districts of high-minority, high-poverty student populations. The number of students demonstrating high levels of proficiency increases each year.

Sanger Unified School District

Sanger, Calif.

Number of schools: **20**

Enrollment: **10,915**

Staff: **572** teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	17%
Black:	2.0%
Hispanic:	69%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	11%
Native American:	<1%
Other:	1%

Limited English proficient: **24%**

Languages spoken: **26**

Free/reduced lunch: **76%**

Special education: **6.8%**

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However, the win that matters most is recognizing the value of identifying the the students behind the statistics. Achievement gains have been consistent and districtwide:

- The district transitioned from one of the lowest-achieving districts in the state to a district that has seen some of the most dramatic achievement gains in California.
- In the last six years, 18 district schools were recognized as California State Distinguished Schools and 19 schools were named Title I Academic Achieving Schools.
- In the last four years, three schools were recognized as National Blue Ribbon Schools, and the middle school was named a National Middle School to Watch.
- This year, all three K-8 schools were added to the list.

Other signs may indicate even bigger wins. In conversations about their work, teachers no longer say “my kids.” Instead, teachers speak about “our kids,” demonstrating that they have transitioned to a collaborative culture focused on responding to the learning needs of all students.

The district has shifted from a collection of random acts of self-improvement to shared mission, vision, values, and goals with a focus on student learning driven by relevant data.

GETTING IT RIGHT

The district’s focus on quality instruction and coaching has helped establish a career ladder for teachers who want to transition into leadership roles as learning leaders. In the last three years, five new principals were hired from within the district, while the student growth rate continues to grow. Out of 11 comparable districts in the state, Sanger ranked ninth in funding but first in student achievement.

Sanger has successfully implemented the strategies and cultural shifts necessary for this remarkable turnaround and remains focused on its goal to increase achievement for all students. The foundation of the district’s reform model is building collaborative relationships. As part of this reform, school leaders are nurturing collaborative relationships with union leadership, state, and county personnel. Once in place, the reforms can

continue indefinitely without additional private or government funding. The district’s reform work functions within the parameters set by the California Department of Education and the local teachers union contract.

PERSISTENT LEADERSHIP

Our case study research helped us identify the improvement

drivers needed to capture the human side of learning. Putting these four drivers into practice requires sophisticated, persistent leadership at all levels:

1. **Assessment** training that supports daily and ongoing assessment practices to improve and differentiate instruction.
2. **Instruction** that is intentional to meet the needs of every student and teacher.
3. **Leadership** that embraces the ability to be knowledgeable, to mobilize others, and to create sustainable improvement.
4. **Ownership** of every student and every teacher every day (Sharratt & Fullan, 2012).

Sanger’s drive to increase all students’ achievement began with a soul-searching look at data. The overall picture shows a rural district that is changing the image of what can be expected of students living in poverty.

In the heart of California’s Central Valley, 10,915 students are performing at high levels, spurred by reform designed to break the cycles of poverty and poor educational outcomes that have plagued the region for generations. Despite living in a state that spends \$2,400 less per student than the national average and coming from homes with limited resources, Sanger’s students face a brighter future.

This process can be replicated anywhere. However, this will require shifting the role of data from an anemic list of statistics and punitive accountability to the daily learning that comes from informed and committed groups of leaders and learners understanding the students behind the statistics.

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