Staff developers must help teachers and principals raise questions about data

An interview with Leslie Wilson

Districts all over the country are ramping up discussions about teachers’ and principals’ assessment competency. Staff developers are expected to cut through the resistance and help colleagues make meaning of student data generated by the assessments, value data enough to learn from it, and figure out how to use it in their daily work with students.

Savvy school districts are undertaking serious, in-depth professional development around topics such as designing and conducting useful student assessments, using standardized test results to improve student learning, and collaborative analysis of student results among teaching teams. Staff developers are trying to figure out the best designs for this professional development.

An expert on student assessments, standardized tests, and making good use of available data is Leslie A. Wilson, director of student assessment and program evaluation for Howard County (Md.) schools. Wilson has written What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Assessment (Eye on Education, in press). I asked her three key questions many staff developers have posed.

QUESTION 1:
Many principals and teachers don’t find standardized test data very useful in their daily work with students. By the time the data are released, the students have moved on to the next grade or even to another school. So what good are the data to the classroom teacher?

Wilson: I believe that, to a certain extent, it is healthy to view student test results with some skepticism. This is because for any given student, test results may not be valid. (Validity is a property of the score, not the test.) Threats to the validity of assessment results may be caused by any number of circumstances that interfere with the students being able to show what they know. Some of these threats can be addressed through instruction. The important thing to find out is what instruction is needed. A low mathematics computation score may result from a student being unfamiliar with item format. He may or may not need additional instruction in mathematics computation, but he surely needs experience with the item format.

The No Child Left Behind Act calls for students’ scores to be released by the end of the same school year of administration. This does shorten the turnaround time for receipt of scores, but may not be in time to address needs instructionally that year. In that case, score information should be forwarded to the next year’s teacher for that teacher to use in conjunction with classroom diagnostic testing to verify that weaknesses indicated by the standardized test do exist. (In Howard County, the student reporting system follows students to the next school.) Scores should also be reported to the teacher who taught the student because both individual and classroom information can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the instructional program and curriculum. The message to the teacher with many students scoring low is that the teacher should be doing something different in the classroom.

One of the most important uses of standardized test results is that they provide an outside indicator of student performance, based on a norm-referenced or criterion-referenced interpretation. For many students, standardized test results will mirror the observations made by the teacher (i.e., teachers can predict the performance of their students). However, much can be learned from students whose results are discrepant from teacher observations or assigned grades. Sometimes a student who exhibits behavior problems in the classroom will perform very well on the standardized test. Such a student could be bored and require more challenging work. Another common discrepancy is seen when standardized test results are below what teacher expected, or from what would be predicted based on teacher-assigned grades. This can be an opportunity for rich discussion about the rigor of teacher expectations as compared to the state (or whatever body chose the standardized test to assess student achievement.)

In summary, these tests can provide a wealth of information and topics for conversation between colleagues, but only if staff members are willing to be open and flexible.
concerning how the information can be used.

**QUESTION 2:**
What is the most critical information teachers need to know to use student assessments more effectively in their instruction?

**Wilson:** First, teachers must look at assessment as a way to obtain feedback about their students’ learning. This means they must be willing to adjust their instruction as well as reteach concepts and skills the students did not master. This makes assessment a fluid process instead of an end result with the purpose only to assign grades.

Next, they must know some specific assessment concepts such as reliability, validity (not the formulas — the concepts), item formats and when to use them, types of scores and how they are interpreted, limitations of test data, how to conduct and use an informal item analysis, etc.

When considering standardized tests that students must take, teachers need to know the purpose, content and difficulty level, item format, common pitfalls, and scoring. They must consider issues relative to assessing students with special needs.

With classroom assessments, teachers need to know how to construct and use a rubric, basic item analysis, learning styles and common errors, flexibility, and potential validity issues for each student.

**QUESTION 3:**
Assessment is such a huge area that it can feel overwhelming to many educators. What is absolutely essential for principals to know about assessment in order to lead school improvement?

**Wilson:** For a principal to be an effective instructional leader, he or she should know everything required of the teachers, although perhaps at a less detailed level. Principals need to know what their schools’ targets are, which students aren’t meeting the targets, and what is being done to assist those students. Principals need to ask the right questions and provide teachers with time to meet in groups and discuss student results. Discrepancies must be addressed, whether the discrepancies are between different measures of student results, between teachers, or between school-assigned and standardized results. It is the principal’s job to make sure the rich conversations mentioned in the first question take place regularly in the school, and to be a devil’s advocate to spark difficult but necessary discussions.

To do this effectively, principals must know the expected relationships between measures, score interpretation, and limitations of data. They need to be able to effectively communicate assessment results to the staff and community, and to model data-driven decision making.

**REFLECTIONS**
Wilson underscores what staff developers already know — assessment is complex. She makes it clear that schools must very purposefully select professional development content focus, ensuring that the most important concepts and skills are emphasized. One approach is dividing the content of assessment into realms — covering not just the what, the cognitive information teachers and principals need to know, but the how to, the behavioral changes and skills they need, and finally, the affective dimensions or the why involved in student assessments.

Wilson’s responses demonstrate the power of speaking about assessment using straightforward language from the perspective of teaching and learning. Unfortunately, some measurement experts know assessment well, but their use of jargon and their tone can be barriers. All experts need to use exemplary teaching practices, particularly when the participants are reluctant adult learners. They need to be methodical in teaching assessment terms and concepts — build the scaffolding, use synonyms, provide real classroom examples, graphic organizers, metaphors and comparisons, and incorporate hands-on practice using real student assessment data and case studies.

Wilson points out the need for another important ingredient in helping teachers and principals learn more about assessment — the need for them to raise their own questions. For that kind of inductive learning process, educators need the right context. The specific context may vary with each school faculty, but it often calls for periodic opportunities to meet without fear of being judged in informal, small groups of colleagues using their own student data (from past and current students) to talk and make meaning together. Asking questions in teams can lead to more attention to those students who are falling between the cracks and are not making progress.

Professional development that enables courageous conversations can help educators make the important connections between their classroom activities and assessment results.