

THE LEARNING Principal®

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

With the right strategies, **data analysis bears fruit**

BY JENNIFER L. STEELE AND KATHRYN PARKER BOUDETT

**8-step process
favors methods
that encourage
positive action
and ease anxiety
about assessment
results**

When delivering her opening-day speech to faculty at McKay K-8 School in Boston, second-year principal Almi Abeyta hoped that displaying recent state test results would “light a fire” among teachers and spark a powerful conversation about instructional improvement. Instead, teachers reacted with stunned silence, quickly followed by expressions of anger and frustration. It was the first they had heard about the prior year’s decline in language arts scores. Almi felt as if she “had dropped a bomb” on the room. Far from igniting collaborative energy, her presentation of achievement data seemed to have squelched it.

As schools respond to external pressure to raise student achievement, the perils of examining data loom large.

How, school leaders may wonder, do you convince colleagues that engaging in ongoing, collaborative data discussions is worthwhile? How do you discuss data and instruction without finger-pointing or leaping to conclusions? And how do you use insights gleaned from the data to make meaningful — and lasting — instructional improvements?

A few years ago, we collaborated with a team of professors, school administrators, and graduate students to write *Data Wise: A Step-by-Step Guide to Using Assessment Results to Improve Teach-*

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MALCOLM ADLER
Principal, George
Washington
Elementary School

District: Camden
(N.J.) City Public
Schools

Grades: Pre-K-4

Enrollment: 345
students

Staff: 38 teachers

About eight in 10
of Washington's
students receive
free and reduced
price lunch. Most
are Latino (about
70%) with the
remainder mainly
African-American.
The local newspaper
described the
school as one of the
neediest in a city it
termed among the
most destitute in
the country.

QUOTE I LIVE BY:
Higher expectations
for all

— School motto



Building community, empowering teachers brings higher achievement

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

Q. Tell us about your school.

The school is 100 years old. It has no auditorium, gym, multipurpose room, or cafeteria. Kids have physical education in the hallway of the third floor. When there's an assembly program, the whole school walks three blocks to a middle school to use their auditorium. When I got to Washington School, it didn't even have a library. It had shelves in a hallway and a clerk loaned out books. That was like sticking a knife in my back. How could an elementary school not have a library? I told the superintendent if they'd give me a trailer to put outside the school, I'd convert one of the classrooms to a library.

Q. You made AYP the last two years and were recognized in 2003 as a Governor's School of Excellence. How did you do it?

In 1999, I'd been there a year, thinking we were doing great. When I got the results of the state mandated test in June, I found that 15.9% of the children had passed the 4th-grade assessment in literacy. After I got over the shock, I evaluated what had to be done in the privacy of my office. Then I called a meeting of all the stakeholders in the school in July — a cross section of everybody who touched children. We sat down in a big circle in the library and came up with a plan of action. It caused people to become stakeholders who weren't. The following year, we achieved 68.7% of kids passing literacy. The year after, it was 79%.

Q. What other actions did you take in those years?

We changed the culture for literacy. We assessed every child in the school with the Development Reading Assessment and knew exactly what their instructional reading lev-

els were. We taught the students according to their instructional level, not their grade level. We started professional development on using leveled books and intervention books. We sent teachers to children's literacy sessions outside the district. We taught the gym teacher, the art teacher, the music teacher how to give the reading assessment. We hired coaches in math and literacy. We had professional development across the board.

Q. How did the culture change?

I became involved with the School Development Program at Yale University created by James Comer. Some of the guiding principals are building consensus, teamwork, parent involvement. That's the foundation — having a school leadership team make decisions and having stakeholders at the table.

Because I involved teachers in making decisions, they trusted me. We were on the same page. I admitted my mistakes. They'd never had a principal do that. When I started interviewing for new teachers, I created interview teams. I would not re-interview, so they felt I trusted their decisions. They made some awesome choices. That process was one reason the culture changed in the school.

Q. What does teamwork look like at Washington?

We have a common preparation period every day for every class for 45 minutes. There's a grade-level meeting once a week for every grade with a grade-level chairperson conducting the meeting. These are things we decided collectively that we would do. I believe in teamwork, collaboration, working together, and thinking out of the box. We're all stakeholders, in it together.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003).

Heroic efforts: Maintain a focus on priorities

One of the shocking realities in many low-achieving schools is the sheer number of goals which populate their school improvement plans. Their needs are great, and every specialist can recommend some program or initiative or change that needs to be implemented in order to improve student learning. Many of these recommendations remind me of the old story of the blind men and the elephant. While each was in touch with a single element, they never saw the entire animal. I'm afraid the same might be true of our well-intentioned recommendations to schools.

American curriculum has been accused of being a mile wide and an inch deep; the same seems to be true of our improvement goals. Educational researchers are exploring this reality and making the same recommendations — identify a *limited* number of improvement goals (Fullan, 2006; West, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). What is a limited number? Two or three priority goals (West, 1998). With a myriad of goals, the impact of any single goal is minimized because of the limited amount of time that can be spent on that goal. The irony is that educators are very busy with activities intended to pursue all these goals and yet little actually changes. One study found that the size of the planning document is inversely related to the amount and quality of implemented goals (Fullan, 2006, p. 59). The result, I found, is that educators begin to believe that their students *can't* learn — after all, they are doing everything possible and their calendars and stress levels prove it.

So, what is a principal to do? The principal needs to **focus resources on a small number of high-priority goals** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 70). First, the principal **works with faculty to**

identify a small number of high-priority goals. High-priority goals are not the *low-hanging fruit* — the easily-within-reach ones but the ones that will have the most wide-ranging impact on the largest number of students. For many schools, the priority goal focuses on reading; for others it might be writing.

Investigating research will help the principal and faculty identify their priorities. Next, the principal **provides resources to support the accomplishment** of that priority. This support includes financial resources but faculty time for collaborative professional development is more important.

Finally, the principal **ensures that resources are not diverted to other competing issues.** This final action may be a bigger challenge than the others. There always seems to be a new strategy waiting in the wings to take center stage. Maintaining a focus on a priority goal will take heroic efforts and enormous political capital but will pay off in greater trust for the principal among faculty members as well as results for students.

This unwavering focus helps faculty members make daily decisions, target their efforts, and accomplish student learning goals.

Resources: Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration.

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Learn more about NSDC's standards: www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

These observation sheets can be used in a school or in a district that wants to use classroom visits as a strategy for collecting information about practices throughout a school.

“**P**rotocols provide a predictable structure to the work. They define roles and responsibilities in discussions, they provide group norms, and they keep the work focused in a productive way,” wrote Richard Elmore in an April 2007 article in *The School Administrator* (p. 22).

Protocols, he said, serve an important function for educator discussions because they “depersonalize discussions of practice” (p. 22).

“Educators tend to confound and confuse the practice with the person. ... It is hard to change your practice when your practice is central to your personal identity. Every change becomes a challenge to who you are, in some basic sense. In general, professionals can’t afford this confusion of the practice with the person because they live in a world in which practices are changing rapidly in response



to new knowledge and new problems” (p. 22).

In his work with the Connecticut Superintendents Network, Elmore encourages the use of protocols as a way to provide structure for the group’s visits and the conversations that follow.

To use protocols most effectively for classroom observations, visitors should limit their notetaking to factual observations and avoid evaluative comments.

Time: Each classroom visit should last no more than 20 minutes.

Materials: The teachers whose classrooms are being observed should provide a seating chart to assist the observers. Customize the chart on Page 5 so that it is appropriate for your visits. Attach a seating chart to each observation sheet. Provide one observation sheet plus seating chart to each classroom visitor.

Directions: Before each set of classroom visits, identify the focus of the visit. Ensure that each teacher knows what is being observed. Ensure that visitors know what they will be observing.

Visitors should enter the room as quietly as possible. Teachers should be not pause the instruction in order to greet visitors.

Classroom observation sheet

Teacher _____

Grade level / subject _____

Date of visit _____

Focus question _____

Protocols help “depersonalize discussions of practice,” says Harvard University education professor Richard Elmore.

Time <i>Note the time the activity is occurring. Try to note something every few minutes.</i>	What is the teacher doing?	What are students doing?	What questions do you have about what you are observing?

With the right strategies, data analysis bears fruit

THE DATA WISE IMPROVEMENT PROCESS

Prepare

1. **Organize** for collaborative work.
2. **Build** assessment literacy.

Inquire

3. **Create** data overview.
4. **Dig** into student data.
5. **Examine** instruction.

Act

6. **Develop** action plan.
7. **Plan** to assess progress.
8. **Act** and assess.

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ing and Learning (Harvard Education Press, 2005). The book offers an eight-step approach to collaborative, evidence-based instructional improvement. Since then, schools all over the country have adopted the Data Wise approach. As we worked with many of them, we realized that teachers and administrators who are spearheading the Data Wise improvement process in their schools — as well as those pursuing other approaches — often encounter similar questions and obstacles. So we set out to develop case studies of eight of these schools, documenting the leadership challenges that school leaders typically face during each step of the improvement process, as well as the strategies they use to address them.

INVESTING IN PREPARATION

In the first phase of the Data Wise process, **Prepare**, school leaders typically face two critical challenges: communicating the need for a data initiative and creating data teams equipped to lead the work. The leaders we studied confront these challenges in two ways: by making data relevant, and by giving their data teams time to develop the skills and systems they need to be successful.

Make data relevant. As school leaders embark on the improvement process, they need to convince staff that looking at data will not be yet another distraction from their work but will help them do that work more efficiently. For instance, when taking the helm of Newton North High School in Newton, Mass., a school with a history of high academic achievement, first-time principal Jennifer Price found herself in a situation where test scores could easily be dismissed as beside the point. She decided to focus on a topic of longstanding concern to both faculty and the community: how to close the school's academic achievement gaps. This helped her recruit a large, diverse team of faculty members to gather and analyze data. Explaining her decision to make data relevant, Jen says, "Every department sees the achievement gap manifested in one way or another. By focusing the work of the data team

on the achievement gap, the use of data becomes connected to why people come to work."

Set aside time to build capacity. In addition to establishing data teams, school leaders need to give team members time to develop their knowledge and to create systems that support the team's efforts. Shortly before undertaking the Data Wise improvement process, Pond Cove Elementary School in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, had emerged from a cumbersome, externally imposed assessment initiative that was ultimately suspended. Principal Tom Eismeier knew that if the Data Wise approach was to be successful, he and his data team would have to think carefully about how to get the process right. As media specialist Shari Robinson recalls, "[We] didn't want it to end up as just another failed initiative." Consequently, Tom, Shari, and the rest of the data team spent a semester in preparation. They took inventory of data already in use at the school, developed a computer-based data analysis system that would be easy for teachers to use, and chose an instructional focus — literacy — that the faculty had already made a priority for the year. Although the team often felt they were losing a race against the clock as time wore on and the most recent test data grew stale, their patience paid off in the end, when their user-friendly approach to data analysis was well received by their colleagues.

FACILITATING LARGE-SCALE INQUIRY

In moving from the **Prepare** to the **Inquire** phase, school leaders often face another critical challenge: how to engage the entire faculty in honest conversations about data, particularly when, as Shari Robinson puts it, "Data can wound." This was the challenge Almi Abeyta encountered in presenting her data to the McKay School faculty. In addressing that challenge, Almi and other leaders we observed demonstrate two important lessons: Establish clear norms for looking at data, and conduct frequent, focused conversations about student learning.

Establish clear norms for data analysis. At McKay, Almi bounced back from her initial

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With the right strategies, data analysis bears fruit

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presentation and learned to lead productive data conversations by creating a transparent, nonthreatening discussion process. Adapting a protocol commonly used to analyze visual art, she and her data team now present test score data graphically during faculty meetings and ask teachers to ground their data interpretations in objective observations. With its focus on observation and objectivity, this approach facilitates rich conversations and minimizes the threat of finger-pointing or blame.

Conduct frequent, focused conversations about student learning. At Murphy K-8 School in Boston, principal Mary Russo and her staff also rely on clear norms to promote inquiry. They have developed a structured peer-observation protocol in which the teacher who is being observed chooses the lesson, briefs colleagues beforehand, and specifies the aspects of the lesson on which she would like feedback. This protocol puts teachers at ease during the potentially threatening experience of being observed by their colleagues and makes it easier to conduct peer observations on a regular basis. Murphy 2nd-grade teacher Tricia Lampron recalls the first time she participated in this process: “If there were no steps or predesigned process, I wouldn’t have known how to prepare or what my peers would be watching. But the structured process provided an opportunity to focus the observation. ... That made all the difference.”

TAKING MEANINGFUL ACTION

In moving into the **Act** phase, Data Wise leaders face the challenge of helping faculty choose, implement, and assess a viable action plan based on insights from the data they have gathered. Taking action can prove difficult; faculty members often have divergent ideas about how broad or narrow the action plan should be and what kinds of instructional improvements are likely to have the most impact. The schools we observed address this challenge by getting down to the “nitty-gritty” in their action planning and by helping teachers “keep the faith” when refinements are needed.

Get down to the “nitty-gritty.” When test scores at Mason Elementary School in Boston showed that students were struggling with writing about texts, teachers were shocked. After all, students wrote about texts all the time in their readers’ notebooks. However, when teachers examined the notebooks collaboratively, they realized that each teacher had different standards for evaluating students’ reading-response letters. As in many schools, a key challenge the teachers faced was defining consistent instructional expectations across grades. After much conversation and debate, they developed an action plan that described exactly how they would teach and assess reading-response letters at each grade level. Teacher and data coordinator Hilary Shea explains that this “nitty-gritty” focus was the key to the plan’s eventual success: “If you want improvement ... you can’t tackle everything at once. Getting people to choose small topics is so important.”

Keep the faith. The Data Wise improvement process is not a one-time event but a model of ongoing inquiry. The school leaders we observed in our case studies understand that the work of continual improvement is never done. At Community Academy, an alternative high school in Boston, principal Lindsa McIntyre and her faculty devised an action plan for assigning homework consistently across the school. However, in assessing the plan’s implementation and effectiveness, they realized that their initial success in raising teachers’ expectations and students’ engagement was being eroded by the ongoing transfer of new students into the school, with some classes doubling in size. Some new students resisted doing homework, while others found the requirement overwhelming and despaired of keeping up. Lindsa and her team realized they had to explore new alternatives: Establish a study hall? Require new students to start on Mondays, so teachers could plan orientation activities? The challenge for Lindsa and the leadership team — as for any school leader at this phase of the cycle — is to take heart from evidence of success while continuing to target areas for improvement. ■

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