Your choice: Minor course corrections or getting lost?

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Principals place **implementation** at the top of the list of nagging issues related to professional development. These administrators recognize that they cannot expect a change in student learning unless there are concomitant changes in classroom practices. Yet, they are baffled by the lack of use of new strategies that would help students learn more.

I ask them to compare learning new classroom (or leadership) practices to a cross-country journey that probably includes lots of detours and construction zones without the use of a GPS. Minimally, they all admit they would need to know key points along the way where they could check to make sure they were on the right track. Those benchmarks would allow them to make minor course corrections early in the process rather than waiting to find out they made the wrong turn in Kankakee and are now wildly off course.

Many of the changes in practice we ask educators to make are also without detailed maps and filled with detours and construction. They also need checkpoints along the way to determine whether they are on course. They can also determine whether they need to make small course corrections as well.

The principal **needs to collect, use, and disseminate data that monitor the accomplishment of schoolwide goals** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 75). First, an action plan should ensure that **student and teacher data are collected and analyzed at least four times a year to monitor the accomplishment of schoolwide goals.** Many districts and schools are using formal or informal interim assessments each nine weeks to determine whether appropriate progress is being

Data-Driven: Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.

made in student learning. Teacher data would include observation of classroom practices collected by classroom walk-throughs or self-assessments to determine barriers preventing the use of new practices.

Kanter (2002) advises administrators and staff to create and publicize mileposts so that staff members can check their own journey toward improved practice. This requires that the school **uses baseline data to monitor improvements within the school year.** Every staff member needs to know where the starting line is in order to judge individual and collective progress. This kind of monitoring allows the administrator and staff also to **celebrate improvements and accomplishments based on data**.

These data can also provide the evidence that students are making progress. The data need to be **reported to parents and the community throughout the year, as well as results required by the state or district.** One school I worked with wrote articles for the school newsletter using longitudinal data they had collected to provide evidence to parents that student learning was improving in their school as a result of educators' efforts. The newsletter was also sent to staff members and became the basis of a staff celebration of progress — complete with sparkling apple juice and a beautifully decorated sheet cake!

Monitoring progress has been identified as one of six essential practices required for any school improvement effort (Tobia & Hord, 2001). Regular, consistent monitoring of student and teacher change can determine whether a school will be able to make minor course corrections or get lost in a morass of confusion.

REFERENCES

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